

ACTS

Introduction:

J. Sidlow Baxter, in his book *Explore the Book*, introduces his study of Acts with the following: “Twenty-eight thrilling chapters lie before us! Any one of them we can read a dozen times, only to find its fascination growing with each reading. Never since writing began was a more gripping record penned. If the epochal events here narrated do not electrify the imagination and stir the emotions of any serious reader, nothing ever could. Yet even the sheer interest of the book is quite eclipsed by its historical and dispensational importance. It is the sequel to the mighty events of the Gospels, and the gateway to the glorious doctrines of the Epistles. It marks, in fact, one of the greatest turning-points in history.”

A good question for one to ask when beginning the study of any book in the Bible is what difference it would make in our understanding of truth if the book were left out of the Canon of Scriptures. In his book *Explore the Book*, J. Sidlow Baxter quotes two scholars, Farrar and Howson, who have made the following observation: “The preciousness of a book may sometimes best be estimated if we consider the loss which we should experience if we did not possess it. If so, we can hardly value the Acts of the Apostles too much. If it had not come down to us there would have been a blank in our knowledge which scarcely anything else could have filled up” (Farrar). And Howson states: “If the Book of Acts were gone, there would be nothing to replace it; and we may go further, that the Christian Scriptures would then lie before us in two disjointed fragments; the complete arch would not be built.”

- The first point that comes to mind is that we would be largely ignorant about the Person and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- Secondly, Acts gives us a blueprint of the practical application of the great commission.
- Thirdly, Acts demonstrates that the Gospel has its roots in Judaism but yet is quite distinct from it.
- Fourthly, the preaching of the Apostles centers upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the core of the Gospel message.
- Fifthly, God allows persecution and opposition against the Gospel. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”¹

The author:

The name Luke is the English translation of the Greek name Loukas, which is an abbreviation of the Latin Loukanos.

Very little is known about Luke. Most of the biblical information comes from the apostle Paul who mentions Luke several times in his epistles. Paul calls him: “Our dear friend Luke, the doctor.”² Luke was evidently with Paul until the end of the apostle’s life. Shortly before his execution, Paul wrote to Timothy: “I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. Only Luke is with me.”³ Paul also mentions Luke in his letter to Philemon.⁴

There exists a good deal of tradition in early church history about Luke. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Among the more interesting and important of these, *Irenæus*, writing in Southern Gaul circa A.D. 180, says, ‘Luke, the companion of Paul, put down in a book the gospel preached by him (Paul); and again, ‘That Luke was inseparable from Paul, his fellow-worker in the gospel, is shown by himself. ... Thus the apostles, simply and without envying any one, handed down to all these things which they themselves had learned from the Lord; thus, therefore, Luke also ... has handed down to us the things which he had learned from them, as he witnesses when he says, ‘Even as they delivered them to us which from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word.’ *Tertullian*, who lived and wrote in Proconsular Africa in the last years of the second century, tells us how ‘Luke’s digest was usually ascribed to Paul.’ Eusebius, the Church historian, writing a little more than a century later, and who spent much of his life in collecting and editing the records of the first beginnings of Christianity, relates that ‘Luke, who was a native of Antioch, and by profession a physician, for the most part a companion of Paul, and who was not slightly acquainted with the rest of the apostles, has left us two books divinely inspired.’”

In its *Introduction to the Book of Acts*, the same *Commentary* states: “If, then, the Gospel was the work of St. Luke, the Acts of the Apostles was so likewise. That the Gospel was the work of St. Luke is the unanimous testimony of antiquity; and the internal evidence agrees with all that we know of St. Luke that he was not of the

¹ Acts 14:22

² Col. 4:14

³ II Tim. 4:6, 11

⁴ Philemon vs. 24

circumcision (Colossians 4:10-14); that he was a physician (Colossians 4:14), and consequently a man of liberal education. Indeed, even modern hypercriticism generally admits St. Luke's authorship. It may be added that the internal evidence of the Acts of the Apostles is also strongly in favor of it. His companionship of St. Paul, who styles him "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14); his presence with St. Paul at Rome (2 Timothy 4:17), compared with the fact that the writer of the Acts sailed with St. Paul from Caesarea to Italy (Acts 27:1) and arrived at Rome (Acts 28:16), and the utter failure of the attempts to identify the author with Timothy (see especially Acts 20:4, 5) or Silas, or any other of St. Paul's companions; are of themselves strong if not decisive testimonies in favor of Luke's authorship. Taken in conjunction with the other arguments, they leave the question, as Renan says, 'beyond doubt.' "

The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary observes about Luke: "Luke apparently was a humble man, with no desire to sound his own horn. More than one-fourth of the New Testament comes from his pen, but not once does he mention himself by name. He had a greater command of the Greek language and was probably more broad-minded and urbane than any New Testament writer. He was a careful historian, both by his own admission (Luke 1:1-4), and by the judgment of later history."

It is very interesting to observe that Luke, evidently, introduces himself in Acts by suddenly switching from the personal pronoun "they" to "we." Speaking about Paul and his travel companions, Luke writes: "So *they* passed by Mysia and went down to Troas."⁵ Immediately following this, we read: "After Paul had seen the vision, *we* got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." And later in the story: "This girl followed Paul and the rest of *us*, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' "⁶

The Pulpit Commentary further comments on the relationship between Luke and Paul: "The intimacy between Paul and Luke, we confidently believe, began much earlier. A very general and absolutely uncontradicted tradition, which dates from the early days of Christianity, ascribes the authorship of Acts to St. Luke. Now, in this very writing, in three passages, two of considerable length, the author of the Acts passes abruptly from the third person to the first person plural. Thus the narrative changes from 'and as *they* went through the cities,' etc. (Acts xvi. 11), to 'loosing from Troas, *we* came with a straight course to Samothracia,' etc. (Acts xvi. 11), as though *the writer*—universally, as we have seen, acknowledged to be *St. Luke*—had joined the little band of missionaries who accompanied St. Paul at Troas (Acts xvi. 10). If this be, as is most probable, the case, then he must—having at some *previous* (unknown) date become acquainted with St. Paul—as early certainly as A.D. 53, having joined to St. Paul's company when the apostle was at Troas. With Paul, still following the Acts narrative, St. Luke journeyed as far as Philippi. Then, in Acts xvii. 1, when the apostle leaves Philippi, the third person is again used in the narrative, as though St. Luke was left behind at Philippi. After some six or seven years, again at Philippi, where we lost sight of him, in the course of what is termed the third missionary journey, the use of the first person plural—'These going before tarried for *us* at Troas, and *we* sailed away from Philippi'—indicates that the writer, St. Luke, had again joined St. Paul (Acts xx. 5). With the apostle he passed through Miletus, Tyre, and Caesarea to Jerusalem (Acts xx. 5; xxi. 18). During the two years or more of St. Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea (whither he was sent from Jerusalem after his arrival at that city with St. Luke), St. Luke was probably with or near him, for when the apostle was sent under guard as a prisoner of the state from Caesarea to Rome, St. Luke again evidently was with him; for throughout the voyage which ended in the memorable shipwreck and the subsequent stay at Melita, and on the voyage from Melita in the ship of Alexandria, we find the forms 'we' and 'us' used: 'Then when *we* came to Rome;' 'when the brethren hear of *us*.' "

The Title of the Book:

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia suggests that the book originally may not have had a title. One of the sources of the Greek manuscript has merely *Praxeis*, "Acts." Another source has *Praxeis ton Apostolon*, "Acts of the Apostles." *The Encyclopaedia* state: "Several fathers (Clement of Alex, Origen, Dionysius of Alex, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom) quote it as 'The Acts of the Apostles' (*Hai Praxeis ton Apostolon*).

Some commentators observe that the title Acts of the Apostles is misleading. Marshall's *Commentary on Acts* asserts that Acts is the record of some acts of certain apostles, and of some who were not apostles, a statement that J. Sidlow Baxter contests.

G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, states: "The title of the book is an unfortunate one. To one taking up the book for the first time, that title, "The Acts of the Apostles," would seem to

⁵ ch. 16:8

⁶ ch. 16:10, 17

suggest that in the book we should find a chronicle of all the doings of all the apostles. We know that this is not so. As a matter of fact the Greek title of the manuscript is "Acts of Apostles." That is more indefinite, suggesting only that it records some acts of some apostles, which comes far nearer the truth. Some of the apostles are never named beyond their inclusion in the list given before the account of the Pentecostal effusion. Further, not all the acts of any one apostle are recorded. The book as history is merely a fragment, and in some senses a disappointing fragment; but the incompleteness of the story is part of the method of the Spirit. When we come to its last sentences, we inevitably put it down, feeling that there are a hundred questions we want to ask. The last picture we have in the book is that of Paul in his own hired house in Rome, receiving all that came to him; teaching them the things concerning Jesus; and preaching to them the Kingdom of God. Before he went to Rome he wrote to the Romans that he hoped to go on by them unto Spain, for his eyes were ever fixed on regions beyond. We should like to know if he ever did pass on to Spain; yes, and more, whether the feet of the intrepid apostle ever actually stood on the soil of Britain. These things the book does not tell us. It is an unfinished fragment." Campbell Morgan suggests as title: "The book of the continued doing and teaching of the living Christ by the Holy Spirit through His Body which is the Church."

The Place of Acts in the Canon of Scripture:

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the Canonicity of Acts: "The use of the Acts does not appear so early or so frequently as is true of the gospels and the Pauline epistles. The reason is obvious. The epistles had a special field and the gospels appealed to all. Only gradually would Acts circulate. At first we find literary allusions without the name of book or author. But Holtzmann ... admits the use of Acts by Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Polycarp. The use of the Gospel according to Luke by Tatian and Marcion really [in]volves knowledge of the Acts. But in Irenaeus frequently ... the Acts is credited to Luke and regarded as Scripture. The Canon of Muratori lists it as Scripture. Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria attribute the book to Luke and treat it as Scripture. By the times of Eusebius the book is generally acknowledged as part of the canon. Certain of the heretical parties reject it (like the Ebionites, Marcionites, Manichaeans). But by this time the Christians had come to lay stress on history (Gregory, Canon and Text of the New Testament, 1907, 184), and the place of Acts is now secure in the canon. ... By the end of the 2nd century the authority of the Acts is as well established as that of the Gospel Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, all call Luke the author of the book."

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary provides us with the following outline on the Book of Acts:

THE ESTABLISHMENT AND GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

- I. The beginnings of the church. 1:1-2:47.
 - A. Preparation: The post-resurrection ministry and ascension of Jesus. 1:1-14.
 - B. Choice of Matthias. 1:15-26.
 - C. Coming of the Holy Spirit. 2:1-41.
 - D. Life of the primitive church. 2:42-47.
- II. The church in Jerusalem. 3:1-5:42.
 - A. A typical miracle and sermon. 3:1-26.
 - B. First opposition from Jewish leaders. 4:1-37.
 - C. Death of Ananias and Sapphira. 5:1-16,
 - D. Second opposition from Jewish leaders. 5:17-42.
- III. Extension of the church in Palestine through dispersion. 6:1-12:25.
 - A. Choice of the seven. 6:1-7.
 - B. Occasion of the dispersion: Ministry and martyrdom of Stephen. 6:8-8:3.
 - C. The Gospel in Samaria. 8:4-25.
 - D. Conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. 8:26-40.
 - E. Conversion of Saul. 9:1-31.
 - F. Peter's ministry in Palestine and the first Gentile converts. 9:32-11:18.
 - G. Establishment of a Gentile church at Antioch. 11:19-30.
 - H. Persecution by Herod Agrippa I. 12:1-25.
- IV. Extension of the church in Asia Minor and Europe. 13:1-21:17.
 - A. First mission, Galatia. 13:1-14:28.
 - B. Problem of the Gentile church, and council in Jerusalem. 15:1-35,

- C. Second mission, Asia Minor and Europe. 15:36-18:22.
- D. Third mission, Asia Minor and Europe. 18:23-21:17.
- V. Extension of the church to Rome. 21:18-28:31.
 - A. Rejection of the Gospel by Jerusalem. 21:18-26:32.
 - B. Reception of the Gospel in Rome. 27:1-28:31

Analysis of the Text:

I. The beginnings of the church. 1:1-2:47.

A. Preparation: The post-resurrection ministry and ascension of Jesus. 1:1-14.

The opening words of the book establish a clear link with the Gospel of Luke: *“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”* Luke had introduced his Gospel with: *“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”*⁷

Both books are addressed to Theophilus, a name that means in Greek: “friend of God.” *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* writes about Theophilus: “There is a considerable number and variety of theories concerning him. The traditional connection of Luke with Antioch has disposed some to look upon Antioch as the residence of Theophilus and possibly as the seat of his government. We may safely reject the patristic notion that Theophilus was either a fictitious person or a mere personification of Christian love. The epithet *kratiste* (‘most excellent’) is sufficient evidence of his historical existence. It does not, indeed, prove that he was a governor, but it makes most probable that he was a person of high rank. All that can be conjectured with any degree of safety concerning him comes to this, that he was a Gentile of rank and consideration who came under the influence of Luke, or under that of Paul at Rome, and was converted to the Christian faith. ... The only traditional information we possess about this person is that found in the ‘Clementine Recognitions’ (10.71), about the middle of the 2nd century: ‘So that Theophilus, who was at the head of all the men in power at the city [of Antioch], consecrated, under the name of a church, the great basilica [the palace] in which he resided.’ According to this, Theophilus was a great lord residing in the capital of Syria (Godet, Com., on Luke).” The possibility that Theophilus is a nickname cannot be excluded.

The Book of Acts takes up what Luke’s Gospel said in its closing verses. Luke’s last words were a condensation of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples on the day of His resurrection to the moment of His ascension. We read: “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.”⁸

In Acts Luke picks up the thread, repeating in greater detail what he had stated at the end of his Gospel. Acts is a continuation of the Gospel in more than one way. When Luke states that, in his Gospel, he related what “Jesus began to do and to teach,” he clearly suggests that the Book of Acts is about what Jesus continues to do and to teach through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and through the apostles He had chosen. The Acts of the Apostles, therefore, is not about the acts of the apostles but about the acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. This explains why there is no detailed account of everything all the apostles did; they do not occupy the central place in the book. The Holy Spirit is mentioned 57 times in the book.

It is interesting to observe that Luke does not use the word “resurrection.” He mentions Jesus’ suffering, not even the fact of His death, and proceeds to emphasize that there is ample proof that Jesus is alive today. In his Gospel, the details of Jesus’ suffering and death had been recorded sufficiently; there was no need to repeat any of

⁷ Luke 1:1-4

⁸ Luke 24:44-53

this. Luke had written: “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last.”⁹ He had also mentioned the burial in the tomb of Joseph. Then we read the announcement of the angel to the women: “He is not here; he has risen!”¹⁰ The point made in Acts is that the resurrection had been proved in a convincing way.

We do not know exactly how many times the disciples and other groups of people saw Jesus after His resurrection. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* quotes a certain Dr. Pearce, who enumerated the appearances of Jesus during the forty days mentioned by Luke:

1. The first was to Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, Matt 28:1-9.
2. The second, to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, Luke 24:15.
3. The third, to Simon Peter, Luke 24:34.
4. The fourth, to ten of the apostles, Thomas being absent, Luke 24:36, and John 20:19. (All these four appearances took place on the day of his resurrection.)
5. The fifth was to the eleven disciples, Thomas being then with them, John 20:26.
6. The sixth, to seven of the apostles in Galilee, at the sea of Tiberius, John 21:4.
7. The seventh, to James, 1 Cor 15:7, most probably in Jerusalem, and when Jesus gave an order for all his apostles to assemble together, as in Acts 1:4.
8. The eighth, when they were assembled together, and when he led them unto Bethany, Luke 24:50, from whence he ascended to heaven.” There may have been other appearances that are not recorded in the Scriptures.

Reading the last verses of Luke’s Gospel, one would get the impression that Jesus ascended to heaven on the day of His resurrection. In Acts, Luke states clearly that there was period of almost six weeks during which time Jesus was still on earth.

In vs. 4, Luke mentions: “On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.’ ” This occasion may have been the day of ascension but since this is not specifically stated, it may have been during any other day in the forty-day period. The fact that the command was given during a meal suggests that the group was in a house in the city and not on the Mount of Olives. The Gospel clarifies that Jesus led His disciples out of the city to the mountain prior to His ascension. We read: “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.”¹¹

During this meal, Jesus commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit: “the gift my Father promised.” This promise is found in the Old Testament prophecy of Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”¹² Peter’s quotation of these verses in his sermon on the day of Pentecost confirms that this is the promise Jesus refers to here.

It is important for us to understand how the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and His ministry in this present dispensation is all tied together with Old Testament prophecy. We know very little about the life Jesus lived as a human being. We seldom realize that, living on earth, within the framework of human limitations, He had to grow and learn as we all do. The baby that was born in Bethlehem had to learn to walk, to speak, to think and understand. Jesus may have received some help from His mother who must have told Him the circumstances of the annunciation of His birth, and the supernatural events that surrounded His coming. But the main source of His understanding, and probably also of His vocation as the Messiah, must have been the Old Testament Scriptures. That was the knowledge He searched for as a twelve-year-old boy while He stayed behind in the temple. Luke records this event: “After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ ”¹³ One of the key passages that completed the blueprint of God’s plan for His life was probably David’s words in the Psalm Forty: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come--it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’ ”¹⁴ Or as the Septuagint translates it, as we find it quoted in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,

⁹ Luke 23:46

¹⁰ Luke 24:6

¹¹ Luke 24:50,51

¹² Joel 2:28,29

¹³ Luke 2:46,49

¹⁴ Ps. 40:6-8

but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am-it is written about me in the scroll-I have come to do your will, O God.'"¹⁵

So, as Jesus' human mind had grasped the significance of the Old Testament as the design for His own life and ministry, so His understanding of the need for the baptism with the Holy Spirit originated in the Old Testament prophecy. Thus, He could speak about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples even before His death and resurrection. He had said to them: "But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."¹⁶ At His resurrection, of course, the full possession of His divine faculties was returned to Him and He could state before His disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."¹⁷

Interestingly, some of these truths that Jesus must have discovered in His study of the Old Testament Scriptures had also been imparted to John the Baptist, because Jesus' statement about the baptism with the Holy Spirit is a direct quote from John's words: "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."¹⁸

In John's Gospel, Jesus had told His disciples: "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."¹⁹ Those words, probably, refer to more than to Jesus' appearances during the forty-day period Luke describes for us here. They speak about the baptism with the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, the disciples would see Jesus in a way they had never seen Him before. They would understand the mind of Christ and the teaching Jesus had given them in the few years they had traveled with Him would come to life for them.

For us, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us means that we can see and understand our Lord Jesus Christ in a better and more real way than those who saw Him in the flesh and heard the sound of His voice while He lived on earth. Many of those who heard Him never experienced any transformation of their life. But for us, the words of the apostle Paul apply: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."²⁰ The baptism with the Holy Spirit would introduce a new dispensation in the history of the universe that had never existed before. The Spirit of Him who had lived on earth as a human being would enter the hearts of other human beings and communicate with them an intimate way as had never been possible before. In the words of the apostle Paul: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."²¹

This mystery is the key to the understanding of the Book of Acts. The Spirit of Christ to whom they had surrendered the control of their lives had transformed the apostles. This explains how Peter, who denied knowing Jesus when a girl in the high priest's court asked him,²² could stand before the Sanhedrin and proclaim: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."²³ And when Peter and John performed the miracle of the healing of the crippled man, they demonstrated what the presence of Christ in their hearts through the Holy Spirit could do. This is obvious from their testimony: "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see."²⁴

The disciples' question about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel has caused divers reactions among interpreters. G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, speaks about "the narrowness of their outlook." J. Sidlow Baxter, however, in *Exploring the Book*, comments: "This question, we say, was the quite natural outcome of our Lord's instruction—an intelligent, pertinent question such as we ourselves would have asked if we had been in their places. Yet, strangely enough, most writers on the Acts fail to see this. Confounding the

¹⁵ Heb. 10:5-7

¹⁶ John 16:7

¹⁷ Matt. 28:18

¹⁸ Matt. 3:11,12

¹⁹ John 16:16

²⁰ II Cor. 3:17,18

²¹ Col. 1:27^b

²² See Matt. 26:69-74

²³ ch. 4:19,20

²⁴ ch. 3:16

'kingdom of God' with the 'Church' (and thus completely spiritualizing it, to say nothing of divorcing it from Old Testament prophecy) they charge the apostles with incorrigible unintelligence and self-centered ambitions."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary focuses more interestingly on the Greek word used here. The word is *apokathistemi*, which is usually interpreted to mean: "to reconstitute (in health, home or organization)." Clarke observes that: "it has also another meaning ... namely, of ending, abolishing, blotting out... And Hippocrates...uses it to signify the termination of a disease. On this interpretation the disciples may be supposed to ask, having recollected our Lord's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the whole Jewish commonwealth, Lord, Wilt thou at this time destroy the Jewish commonwealth, which opposes thy truth, that thy kingdom may be set up over all the land? This interpretation agrees well with all the parts of our Lord's answer, and with all circumstances of the disciples, of time, and of place; but, still, the first is most probable."

Barnes' Notes opposes this view by stating: "Lightfoot thinks that this question was asked in indignation against the Jews. 'Wilt thou confer dominion on a nation which has just put thee to death?' But the answer of the Savior shows that this was not the design of the question."

It is nigh to impossible to determine whether the disciples had in mind the destruction of the opposition against the Messiah or the establishment of His kingdom. They had sufficient Old Testament prophecy to fall back on to suppose that their Lord would rule in this earth in some way or another. There was, first of all, Jacob's prophecy: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."²⁵ And Isaiah had prophesied about Jerusalem: "I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City."²⁶ The angel had told Daniel in his vision: "Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him."²⁷ But they must also have been familiar with Jesus' *good confession before Pontius Pilate*:²⁸ "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."²⁹ It seems logical to assume that the apostles, as children of their time, had foremost in mind the expulsion of the Roman presence from the land of Israel and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.

They were also familiar with Jesus' prophetic utterances regarding the destruction of the temple and His second coming to earth. He had told them: "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." They had asked Him: "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" And He had answered: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."³⁰ It doesn't appear that their question at that time is identical to the one they ask here. Neither is Jesus' answer. The two conversations probably took place on the same spot on the Mount of Olives, but they were separated by the dramatic events of Jesus' death and resurrection. Having witnessed the destruction of the Kingdom of Death, the disciples drew the conclusion that the overthrow of the Roman Empire was a trifle.

It is worth our while to compare Jesus' answers in both situations. In the first instance, He pleads ignorance. The Second Person of the Trinity came to earth as a human being who had left behind His divine attributes, which included His omniscience. When He said: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father,"³¹ He spoke from within the framework of the limitations of His humanity. Only after His resurrection could He proclaim: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."³² From that moment on, Jesus was no longer a restricted human mortal but a Man to whom had been returned all the divine attributes of the Son. We read, therefore, on this day of His ascension to heaven not that He says that He doesn't know but that it is not for His disciples "to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." He also does not correct that disciples' "misconception" that the kingdom of Israel ought to be restored. His answer actually seems to confirm that such a restoration would be in order. In the annunciation of His birth, the angel had said to Mary: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David."³³ That throne is still vacant

²⁵ Gen 49:10

²⁶ Isa. 1:26

²⁷ Dan. 7:27

²⁸ See I Tim 6:13

²⁹ John 18:36

³⁰ Matt. 24:2,3,36

³¹ Matt. 24:36

³² Matt. 28:18

³³ Luke 1:32

today. Awaiting the fulfillment of that prophecy, another momentous promise would be fulfilled, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Explore the Book*, makes some interesting observations in regards to Peter's address to the population of Jerusalem in chapter 3 of Acts. Peter implies there "that the Lord Jesus Christ would return then, if the people of Israel repented and received Him." Peter said: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Baxter observes: "It was no part of Divine predetermination that the Messianic reign and Israel's restoration should be delayed another two millennia after the Incarnation; but God *did* foreknow Israel's disobedience, and overruled accordingly." As always, man's disobedience did not obliterate the glory of God but it emphasized it. We are not told what would have happened had Israel as a whole repented and crowned Jesus Christ as their Lord and King. We do know what happened when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles. And that is what the Book of Acts is all about.

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. The verses 7 and 8 are linked together with the word "but." This means that instead of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon man. The phrasing is interesting. The disciples had not asked whether Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel but to Israel. In other words, the kingdom had not disappeared but it did no longer belong to Israel as a nation. When God called Israel out of Egypt, He said to them: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."³⁴ Except for short periods in Israel's history, when David and some other pious kings led the theocracy, this never fully became a reality. God's kingdom had not vanished but Israel was no longer its steward.

Jesus had warned the nation of Israel and its leaders in the Parable of the Tenants and the Vineyard: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."³⁵ It had never been a matter of evicting the Romans from the country. After the return of the captives from Babylon, the worldly authorities had opposed the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah had prophesied at that time: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty." The representatives of the Persian Empire were not chased out. They were eventually replaced by the Macedonians and later by the Romans. The Spirit of the Lord would deal with the superpowers at the appropriate time. God has more important things to do in the meantime.

The Holy Spirit would enable the disciples to witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. His resurrection from the dead is proof of the fact that the power that is behind all the superpowers of this world has been broken. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that Jesus became a human being: "so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil."³⁶ And Jesus Himself testified to the apostle John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."³⁷ The resurrection of Jesus means that the foundation that underlies all human empires has been destroyed. Everyone who builds an empire builds on sand.

The disciples are called "witnesses." *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the word "witness" as: "one who has personal knowledge or experience of something." Peter correctly interpreted the concept when he addressed the issue of Judas' disappearance: "Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." The core of the Gospel message is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the ultimate proof of the atonement of the sin of the world which the Lamb of God has carried away.

The Greek words used in vs. 8 are worth a closer look. The Greek word rendered "power" is *dunamis*, from which the English words "dynamic," and "dynamite" are derived. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "We must not understand *dunamis*... which we translate power in this verse, as we do *exousia*... translated by the same word in the preceding verse. In the one, God's infinite authority over all times and seasons, and his uncompellable liberty of acting or not acting in any given case, are particularly pointed out: in the other, the energy communicated by him to his disciples, through which they were enabled to work miracles, is particularly intended; and *dunamis*... in general, signifies such power, and is sometimes put for that of which it is the cause, namely, a miracle. See Matt

³⁴ Ex. 19:5,6

³⁵ Matt. 21:43

³⁶ Heb. 2:14

³⁷ Rev. 1:18

7:22; 11:20-23; 13:54,58; Mark 6:5; Luke 10:13; and Acts 2:22. The disciples were to be made instruments in the establishment of the kingdom of Christ; but this must be by the energy of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven; nevertheless, this energy would be given in such times and seasons, and in such measures, as should appear best to the infinite wisdom of God.”

The Greek word rendered “witnesses” is *martures* or *martus* from which the word “martyr” is derived. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “martyr” as: “A person who dies rather than renounce a religion; also: a person who makes a great sacrifice for the sake of principle.” *Barnes’ Notes* states: “The reason why this name was given to them was that they bore witness to the life, instructions, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, even in the midst of persecution and death. It is commonly supposed that nearly all of the apostles bore witness as martyrs in this sense to the truths of the Christian religion, but of this there is not clear proof.”

The contrast between the power of the powerful on earth and the power of the Holy Spirit is the leitmotif of the Book of Acts. As we saw above in Zechariah’s prophecy, the two are irreconcilable. “ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”³⁸ God’s answer to the demonstrations of power by King Herod, Pontius Pilate, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem was not a greater measure of the same kind of power, but the Spirit’s power that enabled the apostles to speak fearlessly at the risk of their lives and perform miracles of healing. We will have a closer look at this as we penetrate deeper into this book. Victory over the power of darkness is brought about by those who “[overcome Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; [who do] not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”³⁹ The ultimate victory, the strongest power belongs to the martyrs.

It has been said that verse 8 of the first chapter of Acts is pivotal to the understanding of the whole book. J. Sidlow Baxter comments on this in his book *Exploring the Book*: “In this eighth verse we have the Divine appointment, the spiritual equipment, and the geographical commitment of Christ’s witnesses. But besides this, the geographical development of the whole book is here anticipated: ‘Jerusalem and all Judæa and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.’ ” Matthew’s quotation of Jesus’ words does not contradict what is stated in Acts: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”⁴⁰ Mark recorded Jesus’ commission in a more concise form: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”⁴¹ And Luke had stated the same in the last chapter of his Gospel: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised.”⁴² Even before His death and resurrection, Jesus had mentioned that the scope of the Gospel witness is the whole world. He had said to His disciples: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”⁴³ That prophecy has become the driving force of many a mission movement that has set out to push back the horizon. The Gospel has now gone from Jerusalem to Irian Jaya but the vision for Unreached People Groups has not yet died.

Then follows the moment of Jesus’ ascension, witnessed by the small group that had gathered on the Mount of Olives. In his Gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus blessed His disciples as He began His ascension. We read: “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.”⁴⁴ We can hardly imagine how overwhelming the sight must have been for the disciples. They had barely gotten used to the fact that their Master had died and risen from the grave. He had appeared to them in the same body He possessed while trekking around with them through Palestine, yet a body that was fundamentally different. He had come and gone without any previous warning. His final departure, however, would remain in their memory as an unforgettable experience. His hands stretched out over them, pronouncing blessing on them, He began to rise from the ground, defying the law of gravity, to go back to the home He had left some thirty-three years earlier. Before going to the cross, Jesus had prayed: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”⁴⁵

Jesus’ ascension had been foreshadowed in the departure from this world of the prophet Elijah, but in essence it was quite different. Elijah’s apprentice, Elisha accompanied his master and witnessed the moment.

³⁸ Zech. 4:6

³⁹ Rev. 12:11

⁴⁰ Matt. 28:19

⁴¹ Mark 16:15

⁴² Luke 24:47-49

⁴³ Matt. 24:14

⁴⁴ Luke 24:50-52

⁴⁵ John 17:4,5

Scripture records for us: “As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, ‘My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!’ And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.”⁴⁶ Nothing as dramatic as that happened at Jesus’ ascension. The glory of it was not visible on earth.

David had seen prophetically what would happen on the other side of the ascension and he wrote a psalm about it:

“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory.”⁴⁷

This was the moment at which the High Priest entered the sanctuary and the blood was applied to the throne of God. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains the significance of this moment. We read: “But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”⁴⁸

This does not mean, of course, that it took forty days for the atonement to take effect. The moment Christ cried out: “It is finished,” the Lamb of God had finished carrying away the sin of the world. What seems a delay within the framework of time, in which we live, happens instantaneously in eternity.

Evidently, the ascension was also a necessary preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told His disciples: “I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”⁴⁹

The last the disciples saw was a cloud that covered Jesus’ departure. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* suggests: “The cloud that received Christ upon his ascension was not merely a cloud of condensed vapor but was a symbol of the Shekinah glory which represents the glorious presence of God (Ex 33:7-11; 40:34; Mark 9:7). The ascension of Christ meant that he had broken off visible fellowship with his disciples on earth, and, still bearing his resurrected body, had entered into the invisible world of God’s dwelling.” As far as we know, this was the last time any of these disciples saw their Master until they themselves went to heaven. Stephen saw Christ in His glory moments before he died, and Paul was held in his trek by a vision of Jesus on his way to Damascus, but we read of none of the others that they ever had such visions.

As the disciples were still staring at the sky, the appearance of two angels draws their gaze back to earth. The angels’ question seems rather strange: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?” What else did the angels expect the disciples to do? They could not have ignored what happened! G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, suggests that these “two men dressed in white” could be other than angels. He writes: “We nearly always say angels, but the Bible says ‘Men.’ Perhaps they were Moses and Elijah, the men who appeared on the mount of transfiguration.” This, of course, is mere speculation.

The angels’ question (if angels they were) rather is a marching order. In one of His Parables, Jesus had told the story of a businessman who traveled abroad and entrusted his goods to his servants, with the words: “Do business till I come.”⁵⁰ That is the marching order here. “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” As there had been an ascension there will be a descending of the Lord of glory.

Standing before the Sanhedrin, Jesus had proclaimed His return, using the words of Daniel’s prophecy: “I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”⁵¹ Daniel had recorded his vision centuries earlier: “In my vision at night I looked, and

⁴⁶ II Kings 2:11,12

⁴⁷ Ps. 24:7-10

⁴⁸ Heb. 9: 7-9,11,12

⁴⁹ John 16:7

⁵⁰ Luke 19:13 (NKJV)

⁵¹ Matt. 26:64

there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”⁵²

The angels’ announcement was not the first instance in which the apostles learned about Jesus’ return in glory. Jesus had spoken several times about this. Sitting on the Mount of Olives, and speaking about the future destruction of Jerusalem, He said: “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”⁵³ On the eve of His crucifixion, He had told His disciples: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”⁵⁴

The hope of Jesus’ second coming was an essential part of the preaching of the apostle. Paul could therefore write to the Thessalonians: “They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”⁵⁵

And John opens and closes the Book of Revelation with the mention of Christ’s return: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” And, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”⁵⁶

We are living in the dispensation of this “blessed hope,” as the apostle Paul calls it. He wrote to Titus: “We wait for the blessed hope-the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”⁵⁷

Luke proceeds to mention that the disciples returned from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem and that in doing so they traveled a distance of a Sabbath’s journey, which is approximately one mile. This statement has caused some confusion among interpreters because in Luke’s Gospel, the evangelist stated: “He led them out as far as Bethany.”⁵⁸ The NIV circumvents the problem by stating that Christ went “to the vicinity of Bethany.” The Greek word used is *heos*, which can be rendered “until” indication either time or place. *Barnes’ Notes* probably gives the most plausible explanation by stating: “Mount Olivet was only 5 furlongs from Jerusalem, and Bethany was 15 furlongs. But on the eastern declivity of the mountain the tract of country was called, for a considerable space, *the region of Bethany*; and it was from this place that the Lord Jesus ascended.” Whether Luke wants to indicate that the ascension took place on a Sabbath is uncertain. If there are exactly forty days between the day of resurrection and the day of ascension, the ascension would have occurred on a Friday. If, however, forty days is a rounded off figure, it may well have happened on a Sabbath.

Luke proceeds to describe the return of the disciples to Jerusalem, where they gather in an upstairs room, probably the same room where Jesus had appeared to them several times after His resurrection. He mentions the names of the eleven remaining disciples, obviously as an introduction to the following report of the replacement of Judas Iscariot. It is impossible to ascertain how many people were present at that first prayer meeting, since the number of women and of Jesus’ brothers is not mentioned. The “about hundred and twenty” in vs. 15 is no indicator, since this does not refer to the meeting on the day of Jesus’ ascension. Special mention is made of Jesus’ brothers, Mary and “the women.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes about this: “His brethren. Jesus’ half-brothers (Matt 13:55), who did not believe in him before his death (John 7:5) but who were brought to faith by his resurrection. A resurrection appearance to James is recorded in 1 Cor 15:7. The women may designate either the wives of the disciples or the women mentioned in Luke 8:2; 24:10.”

“They all joined together constantly in prayer” reads literally: “These all continued with one accord in prayer.” There are some Greek words in this sentence that deserve a closer look. The words “with one accord” are the translation of the Greek *homothumadon*. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on this: “The word *homothumadon* ... ‘with one accord,’ is worthy of notice as a characteristic of Luke’s diction, and of this book; being used by no other New Testament writer, except his own associate Paul, and by him only once (Rom

⁵² Dan. 7:13,14

⁵³ Matt. 24:30,31

⁵⁴ John 14:2,3

⁵⁵ I Thess. 1:9,10

⁵⁶ Rev. 1:7; 22:20

⁵⁷ Titus 2:13

⁵⁸ Luke 24:50 (NKJV)

15:6); but by Luke eleven times, and all in the Acts.” The Greek word rendered “constantly” is *proskartereo*, which has the meaning of “being earnest towards something,” as well as “to persevere.”

These people had received the promise from the Lord that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Yet, they felt deeply convicted that the Holy Spirit would not come upon them without their earnest and persistent prayer. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had said: “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”⁵⁹ These words came to life on the day of Jesus’ ascension. The disciples understood that, if they did not open their hands in prayer to receive, the promise would pass them by.

God will take us seriously, if we take Him seriously. There are several illustrations of this principle in Scripture. It was obvious that God wanted Israel to defeat Amalek in the desert. Yet, without Moses’ intercessory prayer, the victory would not have been won. We read: “As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.”⁶⁰ The same principle is demonstrated in the prayer of Daniel at the end of Israel’s captivity. Had Daniel not poured out his heart in prayer before the Lord, the captivity would not have ended, although Jeremiah had prophetically foretold it. We read: “I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”⁶¹ Without the disciples’ persistent prayer the Holy Spirit would not have come down upon them. Without our prayer: “Our Father in heaven ... your kingdom come,”⁶² the Kingdom may never come!

Several of those prayer meetings must have been held during the days between Jesus’ ascension and the day of Pentecost. During one of those meetings, Matthias was elected as a replacement for Judas Iscariot. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes about the number 120: “It is remarkable that this was the number which the Jews required to form a council in any city; and it is likely that in reference to this the disciples had gathered together, with themselves, the number of one hundred and twenty, chosen out of the many who had been already converted by the ministry of our Lord, the twelve disciples, and the seventy-two whom he had sent forth to preach, Luke 10:1, etc, thus they formed a complete council in presence of which the important business of electing a person in the place of Judas was to be transacted.”

B. Choice of Matthias.

1:15-26.

Much has been written about the validity of this election. G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, asserts that the election was a mistake. We read: “This is a debated point in interpretation—but my own conviction is that we have a revelation of their inefficiency for organization; that the election of Matthias was wrong. Their idea of what was necessary as a witness to the resurrection was wrong. They said that a witness must have been with them from the baptism of John. They thought a witness must be one who had seen Jesus prior to His ascension. As a matter of fact, the most powerful incentive to witness was the seeing of Christ after resurrection, as when He arrested Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus. So their principle of selection was wrong. Their method of selection was also wrong. The method of casting lots was no longer necessary. Thus we have the wrong appointment of Matthias. He was a good man, but the wrong man for this position, and he passed out of sight; and when presently we come to the final glory of the city of God, we see twelve foundation stones, and twelve apostles’ names, and I am not prepared to omit Paul from the twelve, believing that he was God’s man for the filling of the gap.” Without wanting to enter too deeply into this argument, we should observe that Mr. Morgan’s opinion finds little basis in Scripture. The fact that Mathias “passed out of sight” can hardly be used as an argument against his election. Nine of the eleven remaining apostles pass out of sight also in the Book of Acts.

There is also some ambiguity about the number twelve in the Scriptures. The twelve tribes of Israel, for instance, actually consisted of thirteen. In the division of the Promised Land, Ephraim and Manasseh were counted as two separated tribes and the number twelve was artificially maintained by eliminating the tribe of Levi in the allotment of parcels of land. The fact that Paul’s role in the early church receives so much emphasis in the Book of

⁵⁹ Luke 11:9-13

⁶⁰ Ex. 17:11,12

⁶¹ Dan. 9:2,3

⁶² Matt. 6:9,10

Acts may have much to do with the fact that the author, Luke, was intimately acquainted with him, more than with the other apostles.

There are in this passage two points that draw our attention. First, there is the fact that Peter, as in the Gospels, remained the spokesman of the college of apostles, and second, there is the mystery of Jesus' election of Judas to the group. In Matthew's Gospel alone we read at least six times that Peter speaks in behalf of the whole group.⁶³ Peter was, obviously, a natural leader for whom taking the initiative was the normal thing to do.

Jesus' choice of Judas Iscariot as one of the disciples is one of the great mysteries in the New Testament. Mark records that, after a night of prayer, Jesus called some of His followers to Him. "He appointed twelve-designating them apostles-that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons ... and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him."⁶⁴ We may assume that, at that point, Jesus did not know that Judas would end up as a spy of Satan in the circle of disciples.

To maintain that Jesus, when He chose His disciples, could exercise His divine foreknowledge, leads into all kinds of contradictions. While our Lord lived on earth, He lived as a prophet to whom the Father revealed certain things. He had left behind the use of His divine omniscience when He "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."⁶⁵ The Holy Spirit led Jesus when He chose His disciples, but the knowledge of the role Judas would play in His ministry must have been kept from Him initially. There came, obviously, a point in Jesus' ministry, when He understood that Judas was an enemy plant. John records for us that Jesus said: "'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!' (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)"⁶⁶ To suppose that Jesus knew from the beginning who Judas was, would make his election to the group either a tragic mistake or a dishonest ploy. It would have meant knowingly inviting Satan himself into the inner circle. It would also have made Judas into a puppet who was programmed to play the role prepared for him; thus depriving him of all personal responsibility for his dastardly act. As the Father revealed more to the Son about the way He would "fulfill all righteousness," the part Judas would play in this must have become more and more clear to our Lord also.

Peter opens the meeting with a short statement about the necessity to keep the number of apostles to twelve. Everyone present was, of course, familiar with the fact of Judas' betrayal. The new element in Peter's speech is the revelation that Judas' act had been prophetically foretold in the Old Testament. In the conclusion of his Gospel, Luke had already stated: "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."⁶⁷ Even before the baptism with the Holy Spirit, the light of the Scriptures had begun to shine in the hearts of the apostles. Jesus' numerous references to the Old Testament prophecies must have helped them also to see more clearly how the plan of God had developed in the circumstances that led up to the crucifixion. While the disciples were celebrating the Passover with Jesus, He had quoted from the Psalms and said: "But this is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.'"⁶⁸ This quotation was from one of David's psalms: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."⁶⁹ This very quote is proof of the fact that Jesus had initially trusted Judas Iscariot.

Peter continues in the same vein by quoting two of David's other psalms. The first quotation is from Psalm Sixty-Nine: "May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents,"⁷⁰ and the second from Psalm One Hundred Nine: "May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership."⁷¹ The first quotation is probably a reference to the piece of land that was bought with the money Judas had received for his betrayal.

It is generally understood that verses 18 and 19 are not part of Peter's address but an insertion by Luke to clarify the reference. It was not Judas who bought the field, but it was bought with Judas' money, as we understand from Matthew's record.⁷² We gather from Luke's description of Judas' suicide that the rope or the branch of the tree must have broken and that Judas fell down from the tree and landed on some sharp rocks. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* quotes Augustine who interprets this passage to mean, "he fastened a rope around his neck and, falling on his face, burst asunder in the midst." Evidently, when his body was recovered it was in such a mangled condition

⁶³ See Matt. 15:15; 16:16; 17:4; 18:21; 19:27; 26:33

⁶⁴ Mark 3:14,15,19

⁶⁵ Phil. 2:7

⁶⁶ John 6:70,71

⁶⁷ Luke 24:45

⁶⁸ John 13:18

⁶⁹ Ps. 41:9

⁷⁰ Ps. 69:25

⁷¹ Ps. 109:8

⁷² See Matt. 27:3-10

that the word spread among the inhabitants of Jerusalem who, immediately, named the field “Akeldama,” “Field of Blood.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that the field was thus named “because it was bought by the price of the life or blood of the Lord Jesus.” It seems more logical to suppose that it was named for the blood of Judas, because of the bloody way he came to his end.

It is obvious that the group that had followed Jesus from the moment of His baptism was much larger than the circle of the twelve apostles. It is also clear that each of those who had seen the risen Lord would automatically be a witness of His resurrection. The purpose of the election, therefore, was not to have an extra witness but to appoint a new member to the inner circle of twelve to serve as a legislative body of the church to be born a few days hence. This being the significance of this election, the question of whether Matthias or Paul ultimately replaced Judas becomes irrelevant. Regardless of Paul’s invaluable contribution to the growth of the church, he never played a role in the legal functioning of the council that was ready to present the Kingdom of Heaven to the people of Israel after Pentecost.

The apostles must have understood that the Lord would indeed restore the Kingdom to Israel, immediately after the coming of the Holy Spirit. We gather from Peter’s words, spoken after the healing of the crippled man at the temple gate, that the expectation was that the Kingdom of Heaven was imminent. Peter said to the crowd at the time: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”⁷³ It was Israel’s unwillingness to repent that led to a different development of church history. We, therefore, consider the election of Matthias to be part of God’s original plan with His people. Jesus Himself had told the disciples: “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”⁷⁴

The election of Matthias was done by the casting of lots. This was a time-honored practice in Israel and, in some instances, God ordained it. We read in Proverbs: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”⁷⁵ It is not sure how it was done exactly. Commenting on the casting of lots to determine the fate of the goats on the Day of Atonement, *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “The Jews inform us that there were two lots made either of wood, stone, or any kind of metal. On one was written LASHEEM ... for the NAME, i.e., YAHWEH ... which the Jews will neither write nor pronounce: on the other was written LA`IZAA`ZEEL ... for the SCAPE-GOAT: then they put the two lots into a vessel which was called kalpey, the goats standing with their faces toward the west. Then the priest came, and the goats stood before him, one on the right hand and the other on the left, the kalpey was then shaken, and the priest put in both his hands and brought out a lot in each: that which was in his right hand he laid on the goat that was on his right, and that in his left hand he laid on the goat that was on his left, and according to what was written on the lots, the scapegoat and the goat for sacrifice were ascertained.” There was nothing reprehensible in the fact that the apostles adapted this practice to ask for God’s guidance.

Luke does not tell how who proposed the two candidates. Interestingly, the only details he gives us are about the person who lost the election. Matthias, who was chosen, does indeed fade out of the picture after this election.

C. Coming of the Holy Spirit.

2:1-41.

The feast of Pentecost was an Old Testament institution. The name comes from the Septuagint, meaning “fifty.” “It was the second of the great Jewish national festivals [and it] was observed on the 50th day, or 7 weeks, from the Paschal Feast, and therefore in the Old Testament it was called ‘the feast of weeks.’ ” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*). It marked the end of the wheat harvest in Israel. It was celebrated on the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week, which is our Sunday. The harvest season began with the feast of the first fruit. God had instructed Moses: “When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath. You must not eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live.”⁷⁶ It was on that day of the first fruit that the resurrection took place and Jesus was presented to the Father as the first fruit of the new harvest. Fifty days later, the church of Jesus Christ was born on the feast that

⁷³ ch. 3:19-21

⁷⁴ Matt. 19:28

⁷⁵ Prov. 16:33

⁷⁶ Lev. 23:10,11, 14

marked the end of the harvest. The unusual feature of the celebration was the presentation of two loaves of bread, (*made with yeast!*) before the Lord.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia observes: “Later Jewish writers are very minute in their description of the preparation of these two loaves (Josephus, Ant, III, x, 6). According to the Mishna (Menachoth, xi.4), the length of the loaf was 7 handbreadths, its width 4, its depth 7 fingers. The Old Testament does not give it the historical significance which later Jewish writers have ascribed to it. The Israelites were admonished to remember their bondage on that day and to reconsecrate themselves to the Lord (Deut 16:12), but it does not yet commemorate the giving of the Law at Sinai or the birth of the national existence, in the Old Testament conception (Ex 19). Philo, Josephus, and the earlier Talmud are all ignorant of this new meaning which was given to the day in later Jewish history.” *The Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, however, categorically states: “This feast of Pentecost was kept in remembrance of the giving of the law upon mount Sinai, whence the incorporating of the Jewish church was to be dated, which Dr. Lightfoot reckons to be just one thousand four hundred and forty-seven years before this. Fitly, therefore, is the Holy Ghost given at that feast, in fire and in tongues, for the promulgation of the evangelical law, not as that to one nation, but to every creature.”

The NIV does not do justice to the Greek text with the translation: “When the day of Pentecost came...” The Greek reads: “*Kai en toó sumpleeroústhai...*” which means: “And when was completely come...” The NKJV is more accurate with: “Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come...” *Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament* renders the words: “in the fulfilling of the days.” Luke uses the same word in the story of the storm on the lake: “the boat was being swamped.”⁷⁷ We see in this the fulfillment of a prophecy. The Old Testament harvest feast was a figure of the actual feast of Pentecost, which occurred after Jesus’ ascension with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

G. Campbell Morgan, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, writes about this day of Pentecost: “Then a new day dawned in human history, a new departure was initiated in the economy of God. Taking the Bible as the history of God’s dealings with men, there has never been anything like this before, though everything had looked toward it, waited for it, and hoped for it.”

The NIV text simply reads: “They were all together in one place.” Older versions use the words, “with one accord.” Some commentators consider the Greek text from which the older versions draw to be corrupt. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* is based on the text used by the KJV. The commentary states: “ ‘With one accord *homothumadon...*’ this word is very expressive; it signifies that all their minds, affections, desires, and wishes, were concentrated on one object, every man buying the same end in view; and, having but one desire, they had but one prayer to God, and every heart uttered it. There was no person uninterested-none unconcerned-none lukewarm; all were in earnest; and the Spirit of God came down to meet their united faith and prayer. When any assembly of God’s people meet in the same spirit they may expect every blessing they need.”

The place where the disciples met is not specified. It probably was the room where they had gathered before, but some commentators believe that it was in one of the annexes of the temple. Others believe that the gathering began in the upper room, but, as the crowds came rushing toward that place, the disciples moved outside. Wherever the place, the public immediately came rushing toward it when the Holy Spirit came down. We cannot build a theology of evangelism on the description of the event of Pentecost, but we have to admit that the conversion of 3000 people in that one day was not the result of an organized outreach. As in the case of the preaching of John the Baptist, he did not go to where the people were; the people came to him. Build a perfect mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door! None of this is, of course, an argument against outreach evangelism.

Luke mentions three outward signs that accompany the baptism of the Holy Spirit: a violent wind, tongues of fire, and the speaking of foreign languages. The second and third of these appear to be so closely linked that they could be considered identical. We should have a closer look at each of these phenomena. The NIV renders vs. 2: “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” It was the sound of a hurricane, not the windstorm itself. *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament* observes: “It was not wind, but a roar or reverberation ‘as of the rushing of a mighty wind.’ ... This is not a strict translation nor is it the genitive absolute. It was ‘an echoing sound as of a mighty wind borne violently’ (or rushing along like the whirring sound of a tornado).” There was, evidently, no physical disturbance of the air but it sounded as if a strong wind of hurricane strength was blowing. We use this kind of language when we say that a tornado sounds like the passing of a freight train. There is a play on words in the Greek text that cannot be rendered in any English translation. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the words for “wind” and “spirit” are identical. Jesus used this

⁷⁷ Luke 8:23

play on words when He said to Nicodemus: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”⁷⁸

This sound of a hurricane without any leaf of a tree moving must have been just as strange as the burning bush was to Moses. We read about Moses’ experience: “Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up.’”⁷⁹ The people in that room heard the hurricane entering the place where they were, but not a hair of their heads was ruffled. Their souls and spirits, however, were shaken to their very foundation. Unlike Moses, they knew what was happened when the Holy Spirit entered into them. The Spirit of God did not force His way in; He came because He had been invited. These people had been waiting for Him, according to the promise Jesus had given to them prior to His ascension. For ten days, they had daily prayed for the Spirit to come and fill their lives.

For the apostles the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them established a new relationship with their risen Lord, such as they could never have experienced before. Before going to the cross, Jesus had told them: “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”⁸⁰ They saw Jesus as they had never seen Him before. The coming of the Holy Spirit meant the fusion of the Spirit of Jesus Christ with their spirits in an intimate bond that was unparalleled.

When Jesus announced the coming of this event, He said: “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” But Luke does not use the word “baptize” in the context of the Pentecostal experience. The Greek word for “baptize” is *baptizo*, which is derived from the word *bapto*, which literally means, “to overwhelm,” “cover wholly with a fluid.” The word was used for the dyeing of fabric. The word “baptize” does not imply a structural change in the person who undergoes the rite. As with the dyeing of fabric, the change is cosmetic. When Luke describes what happens to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, he says: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” This filling is not cosmetic; it is not something that merely touches the skin. One cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit without becoming a new creature. The Holy Spirit did not merely soak the disciples; He changed them.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: “As the Holy Spirit was given to men, the disciples were baptized (Acts 1:5) and at the same time filled with the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit is described in 1 Cor 12:13. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to join people of diverse racial and social backgrounds into one body—the body of Jesus Christ, which is his Church. In the strict sense of the word, Pentecost was the birthday of the Church. This baptism of the Spirit was never repeated. It was later extended to believers in Samaria (Acts 8), to the Gentiles (chs. 10; 11), and to the disciples of John the Baptist (19:1-6). The filling of the Spirit was often repeated, but not the baptism with the Spirit.”

The second phenomenon that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit was the appearance of “tongues of fire.” The fact that Luke uses the Greek word *glossa*, links this sentence to the next: “All of them ... began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” The word *glossa* means: “tongue,” or “language.” It is never used in the sense of a flame. So, the gift of tongues, that is the speaking in a foreign language one has not learned to speak, was given to the disciples with the accompanying sign of a spreading fire. The experience was unique. As far as we know, the apostles afterwards never used this gift of proclaiming the Gospel in a foreign language, and certainly the appearance of flames of fire is never mentioned again.

What happened on the morning of Pentecost offset the curse God had placed upon mankind at the construction of the tower of Babel.⁸¹ At Babel, the Lord confused mankind so that one person could no longer understand what the other was saying. At Pentecost, there was no confusion; the audience testified: “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

It is nigh to impossible to penetrate to the core of this miracle that occurred on the day of Pentecost. The feast had drawn people from all over Eastern Europe and Western Asia to Jerusalem. The Jews who had traveled from their place of residence, probably, spoke more than the dialect of the place where they had grown up. The apostles spoke Aramaic, which was the language that replaced Hebrew after the return of the Jews from their Babylonian Captivity. Some of them may have known some Greek or Latin, since those were widely used throughout the Roman Empire at that time. It could be argued that there really was little or no need for the apostles to address the crowd in a language other than that used at that time in Jerusalem. The mass conversion took place after Peter preached, obviously, in Aramaic, and not because of this demonstration of tongues. The Jews and proselytes, who had come to Jerusalem from other parts of the world, probably, must have understood enough to

⁷⁸ John 3:8

⁷⁹ Ex. 3:2,3

⁸⁰ John 16:16,22

⁸¹ See Gen. 11:1-8

know what was going on in the temple. Luke states about these people that they were staying in Jerusalem. The Greek word used is *katoikeo*, which means: “to house permanently.” So, why this demonstration of glossolalia? Some have suggested that the hearing of the various languages was in the ears of the hearers, not in the mouths of the preachers. But the text clearly states that the Spirit enabled the apostles to speak other languages. The immediate impact upon the audience was that something was going on that defied a natural explanation. Some, however, mockingly disregarded the supernatural and accused the apostles of being drunk.

We are not told what the content of the various utterances was. Those, who understood what was being said, heard “the wonders of God.” Luke uses the Greek word *megaleios*, which literally means: “magnificent.” That is different from the explanation Peter gave in his following Pentecostal sermon. G. Campbell Morgan, in *The Acts of the Apostles*, suggests that the apostle may have been singing or chanting “the mighty works of God.” This in itself would not have arrested the attention of the crowd, but the fact that the foreigners would hear the singing of songs from their homeland in their mother tongue surely would.

Peter preached the first sermon ever preached in the church of Jesus Christ. His text was a section from Joel’s prophecy, chapter 2:28-32^a. Peter may have quoted this scripture portion in its original Hebrew language. The quotation is word for word literal, with the exception of the beginning. Peter says: ““In the last days...” whilst the Old Testament text reads: “And afterwards.” There is no change of meaning in this substitution. The obvious meaning is that, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, God ushered in a new dispensation of grace, inaugurated with the birth of the church. From a dispensation of symbols and shadows, God’s revelation entered into a dispensation of reality. In the Old Testament God’s revelation of Himself had come in the form of images and rituals; atonement was typified by the spilling of animal blood, and it had been limited mainly to the people of Israel. The New Testament ushers in an atonement for the sins of the whole world through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the application of this redemption in the baptism of the Holy Spirit who came “upon all flesh.”

Peter’s quotation of Joel’s prophecy goes well beyond what happened on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit had been poured out on a small group of people, not, as Joel foretold, on all people. Visions, dreams, and prophecies had not yet occurred. And there were no dramatic changes among the heavenly bodies, such as the darkening of the sun and the turning of the moon into blood. Donald G. Barnhouse, in his commentary *The Acts of the Apostles*, suggests that vs. 16 could be rendered: “This is the beginning of that which Joel prophesied.”

Some commentators have tried to spiritualize the latter part of this prophecy. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* quotes Bishop Lightfoot who suggests that the blood refers to the blood of Jesus, the billows of smoke to Christ’s ascension, and the darkening of the sun to Jesus’ dying on the cross. All this seems a little farfetched. F.F. Bruce, in his commentary *The Book of the Acts*, however, observes with more logic: “The wonders and signs to be revealed in the world of nature, as described in vv. 19 and 20, may have more relevance in the present context than is sometimes realized: it was little more than seven weeks since the people in Jerusalem had indeed seen the sun turned into darkness, during the early afternoon of the day of our Lord’s crucifixion. And on the same afternoon the paschal full moon may well have appeared blood-red in the sky in consequence of the preternatural gloom.” The author adds in a footnote: “It could not have been a solar eclipse, because the moon was full at the Passover festival.”

In His discourse about the end times, our Lord Himself places these phenomena after the coming of the Antichrist and at the end of the great tribulation. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’”⁸² Peter corroborates this in his Second Epistle: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” And John used the same words as Joel to describe the result of the breaking of the sixth seal in Revelation: “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red.”⁸³

Having placed the supernatural events of the moment in their biblical context, Peter proceeds to briefly rehearse the well-known facts of Jesus ministry and death, and the lesser-known events of His resurrection and ascension. The last two were proof of the fact that Jesus was indeed the Messiah the people of Israel had expected throughout the ages. Peter’s sermon concludes with the first altar call in the church to which people respond in an unprecedented way, a way that has never been since surpassed in the history of the church.

Apart from the necessity of placing the events of Pentecost in their Old Testament context, one of the main reasons for Peter’s quotation of Joel’s prophecy may have been the last verse: “And everyone who calls on the name

⁸² Matt. 24:29

⁸³ Rev. 6:12

of the Lord will be saved.” These words gave biblical authority to Peter’s call for repentance. It also gave to those who responded the assurance that God would save them if they would only call on His Name. The prescription for salvation seems almost too simple, too good to be true. I once witnessed the salvation of a former witchdoctor, a member of the Mè tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia. On his deathbed, he cried: “Jesus help me!” I firmly believe I will see him as I enter the gates of heaven. His family members could not believe that he died a Christian. It was too easy for them to accept.

Peter’s rehearsal of the known facts about Jesus’ ministry must have brought back the masses from the frenzy in which they were during the crucifixion to their enthusiasm of the heydays of Jesus. The reaction of the crowd to Jesus’ preaching and miracles had been such that the members of the Sanhedrin felt they had to proceed with great caution in arresting Jesus, lest there would be a general riot.⁸⁴

In vs. 23, Peter touches upon one of the greatest mysteries of God’s council: the exercise of man’s free will on the one hand, and God’s “purpose and foreknowledge” on the other. In handing Jesus over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion, the Jews were guilty of murder, but at the same time they fulfilled God’s divine purpose. If we follow the line of human reasoning, we must conclude that the two are irreconcilable opposites. We understand that either man is programmed to do what God has determined he must do, which relieves him of personal responsibility, or we believe that man is free and responsible for his acts, in which case God cannot have ordained what he must do. In several issues of *Christianity Today* in the summer of 2001, two theologians, John Sanders and Christopher A. Hall, exchanged e-mails with one another on the subject of “Openness.” The theological concept of “Openness” proposes that God does not possess perfect knowledge of the acts of human beings. I have not read that either of them has come to the conclusion that there is at least one missing component in their reasoning, which drives both of them to the conclusion, that human liberty and God’s purpose and foreknowledge are irreconcilable. In our human logic we operate on a two-dimensional level, while God’s reality is at least three dimensional, or probably more correctly, multi-dimensional. That discovery does not solve the problem for us, but it brings the matter to the level where we can concede that, although we may see it as irreconcilable, in reality it cannot be so. The fact that Jesus Christ is “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world,”⁸⁵ will have to remain a mystery to us until “we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.”⁸⁶ John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, assigns to the spirits of the damned the task to ponder: “In thoughts more elevate; and reasoned high of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate; fixed fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute, and found no end, in wand’ring mazes lost.”

Adam Clarke, in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, digs deeply into the subject, which he calls “that awful subject, the foreknowledge of God.” We copy: “Though it is a subject which no finite nature can comprehend, yet it is possible so to understand what relates to us in it as to avoid those rocks of presumption and despondency on which multitudes have been shipwrecked. The foreknowledge of God is never spoken of in reference to himself, but in reference to us: in him properly there is neither foreknowledge nor afterknowledge. Omniscience, or the power to know all things, is an attribute of God, and exists in him as omnipotence, or the power to do all things. He can do whatsoever he will; and he does whatsoever is fit or proper to be done. God cannot have foreknowledge, strictly speaking, because this would suppose that there was something coming, in what we call futurity, which had not yet arrived at the presence of the Deity. Neither can he have any afterknowledge, strictly speaking, for that would suppose that something that had taken place, in what we call preterity, or past time, had now got beyond the presence of the Deity. As God exists in all that can be called eternity, so he is equally everywhere: nothing can be future to him, because he lives in all futurity; nothing can be past to him, because he equally exists in all past time: futurity and preterity are relative terms to us; but they can have no relation to that God who dwells in every point of eternity; with whom all that is past, and all that is present, and all that is future to man, exists in one infinite, indivisible, and eternal NOW. As God’s omnipotence implies his power to do all things, so God’s omniscience implies his power to know all things; but we must take heed that we meddle not with the infinite free agency of this Eternal Being. Though God can do all things, he does not do all things.”

The NIV renders Peter’s wording: “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” The Greek text in The Interlinear Transliterated Bible reads: “Him, by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and being delivered by hands wicked have crucified and slain.” This raises several very difficult questions in our human mind. Did God want the Jews to murder Jesus? The answer must be: “Certainly not!” On the

⁸⁴ See Matt. 26:5

⁸⁵ Rev. 13:8

⁸⁶ See I Cor. 13:12

other hand, the question: “Did God want His Son to die?” must be answered: “Yes!” Jesus Himself had stated earlier: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁸⁷

Peter’s audience did not enter into a theological discussion or try to convince the apostle of the inconsistency of his argument. The presence of the Holy Spirit brought them under deep conviction of their responsibility and sin. The question “Who put Jesus on the cross?” can only be answered with: “I did with my sin.” A. W. Tozer, in one of his sermons, said about this question: “Every one of us in Adam’s race had a share in putting Him on the cross! I have often wondered how any professing Christian man or woman could approach the communion table and participate in the memorial of our Lord’s death without feeling and sensing the pain and the shame of the inward confession: ‘I, too, am among those who helped put Him on the cross!’ ” In the Old Testament dispensation, a person would put his hands on the head of a sacrificial animal, laying his sins on the animal’s head. This gesture made man responsible for the animal’s death.⁸⁸ Jesus had predicted that the Holy Spirit would generate conviction of sin in the heart of men. He had said: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.”⁸⁹

It is amazing to see that, nowhere in Peter’s sermon, he mentions the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. He is presented as “a man accredited by God.” Evidently, the Holy Spirit allows us to slowly come to grips with truths that are not easily accessible. There may be stages in our experience of discovery from Jesus being “real” to Him being the Messiah, the One who took my place, to confessing, in Thomas’ words: “My Lord and my God!”

In vs. 24, Peter states the fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in a way that has raised question among theologians through all of church history. We read: “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death.” The Greek word rendered “agony” in the NIV is *odin*, which means a pang or throes of pain, especially in childbirth. Some scholars believe that this refers to the agony of Christ prior to His crucifixion. God removed the agony so His Son could undergo His suffering in a more dignified manner. But we find nothing in the record of Christ’s suffering on the cross to substantiate this. *Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament* comments on the meaning of *odin*: “The meaning is disputed. Some claim that Peter followed the Septuagint mistranslation of Ps 18:5, where the Hebrew word for ‘snares’ is rendered by the word used here, ‘pains;’ and that, therefore, it should be rendered snares of death; the figure being that of escape from the snare of a huntsman. Others suppose that death is represented ‘in travail,’ the birth-pangs ceasing with the delivery; i.e., the resurrection. This seems to be far-fetched, though it is true that in Classical Greek the word is used commonly of birth-throes. It is better, perhaps, on the whole, to take the expression in the sense of the King James Version, and to make the ‘pains of death’ stand for death generally.” Peter, more likely, chose to use the language of David to describe the resurrection. David had sung in one of the psalms: “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.”⁹⁰ According to *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament*, one of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, *The Codex Bezae* has ‘Hades’ instead of death.

We don’t know how many rumors about Jesus’ resurrection had been traveling around prior to the day of Pentecost. It could be that Peter’s announcement of Christ’s resurrection did not take the audience completely by surprise. Jesus’ appearances had not been limited to the small group of disciples only. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that Christ “appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”⁹¹ That event cannot have been kept from public knowledge.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is presented in the New Testament as proof of His being the promised Messiah. That is obviously the point Peter wants to make here. Paul states that the resurrection is proof of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. We read in Romans that He “was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁹² And in his address to the philosophers of Athens, Paul says that the resurrection is proof of Jesus’ authority as supreme judge over this world. We read: “For [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”⁹³

We tend to consider resurrection from the dead an impossibility. Our opinion is mainly based on the fact that we have accepted death as final, even though we believe in a life after death. In actuality death is the most

⁸⁷ Matt. 20:28

⁸⁸ See Lev. 4:29

⁸⁹ John 16:8

⁹⁰ Ps. 116:3

⁹¹ I Cor. 15:6

⁹² Rom. 1:4

⁹³ Acts 17:31

illogical twist to human life on earth. It makes no sense, logically or emotionally, that the life of a human being, or of any other living creature on earth, would end in death. To accept death and reject the resurrection amounts to saying that death makes more sense than life. Jesus Himself had linked the resurrection to the character of God in His magnificent answer to the Sadducees: "About the resurrection of the dead-have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."⁹⁴ The resurrection is not only a possibility; it is the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the existence of God. Peter says correctly: "It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

At this point, we would expect Peter to go into detail about the eyewitness accounts of those who saw Jesus after His resurrection. After all the whole point of the election to fill Judas' empty place had been that someone else "must become a witness with us of his resurrection."⁹⁵ Yet none of this is mentioned here. Peter proceeds to build his case about the inevitability of Christ's resurrection upon the Old Testament Scriptures. This makes his argument so convincing to the audience. Peter could have used John's approach, who wrote in his First Epistle: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us."⁹⁶ He chose not to.

Proving that Jesus' resurrection was not only possible or probable but a necessary fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy left his hearers no choice but to accept. They could have answered Peter with the doubts Thomas had expressed if he had appealed to the eyewitness reports. They could have believed that the apostles had hallucinated. But the words of the prophets did not leave them this option. The resurrection was clearly depicted in the ceremony for the cleansing of a leper who had been declared healed. In this ritual, two birds were used, one of which was killed and the blood was poured into a vessel of clean water; the other bird was dipped in the water and released in the open field.⁹⁷

Peter's quotation is from Psalm 16:8-11 in the Greek version of the Septuagint. There are some slight, but insignificant differences with the Hebrew text. The Hebrew text reads: "I have set the LORD always before me," which indicates David's initiative. He was determined to keep his eyes on the Lord. The Greek text uses the word *prooraō*, which can mean either "to behold in advance," or "to keep in view." The Greek word puts a stronger emphasis on the prophetic character of David's seeing of the Lord. In the context of Peter's sermon, David's vision on God becomes Jesus' vision of the Father. Jesus went to the cross "for the joy set before him ... and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."⁹⁸ He knew that the path to life was His resurrection from the dead. Having signed the eternal covenant with His own blood, He knew that the Father had committed Himself to bring His Son back from the dead.⁹⁹

David's psalm suggests that Christ's dead body had not begun to decay in the time He spent in the grave. Jesus may not have spent a literal three days in the grave as the idiomatic expression "three days and three nights" suggests. The Jews calculated the day to begin at 6:00 PM. So, if Jesus was placed in the grave before 6 o'clock, one minute after six was considered "one day." Thus Friday afternoon was the first day, the whole of Saturday the second, and Sunday morning the third. In our calculation of time Jesus was in the tomb no longer than approximately 36 hours. But decay had not set in. This in itself would be highly unusual because normally decay sets in the moment the spirit leaves the body. The Spirit of the Lord must have hovered over the tomb as He did before the first day of creation as recorded in Genesis, when "darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."¹⁰⁰

We detect a touch of humor in Peter's words "I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day." The same sense of humor is evinced during the hearing before the Sanhedrin when Peter and John had healed the crippled man at the temple gate. Peter began his defense with the words: "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed..."¹⁰¹

The audience needed no proof of David's death. It was therefore obvious that the words of Psalm Sixteen could not have applied to the person of David himself; they must have been a prophetic reference to someone else.

⁹⁴ Matt. 22:31,32

⁹⁵ See ch. 1:22

⁹⁶ I John 1:1,2

⁹⁷ See Lev.14:4-7

⁹⁸ Heb. 12:2

⁹⁹ See Heb. 13:20

¹⁰⁰ Gen. 1:2

¹⁰¹ ch. 4:9

The mention of David's grave may have been more appropriate in a sermon on the day of Pentecost than we would suppose. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes Dr. Lightfoot who made the interesting observation that Rabbi Jose saith, "David died at Pentecost, and all Israel bewailed him, and offered their sacrifices the day following. This is a remarkable coincidence; and may be easily applied to him of whom David was a type."

David's prophetic utterance was partly based on God's promise to him that one of his descendants would occupy his throne forever. When David conceived the plans for the building of the temple, God told him by the mouth of the prophet Nathan that not he would build God a house but that God would build a house for him. We read: "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."¹⁰² Other psalm writers built on this theme. The author of Psalm Eighty-Nine wrote: "You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.' ' Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness--and I will not lie to David--that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.' "¹⁰³ And in one of the Songs of Ascents we read: "The LORD swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: 'One of your own descendants I will place on your throne.'"¹⁰⁴ All these Scripture references must have been well-known to the public Peter was addressing. No one, at this point, raised the question as to whether Jesus was in fact a descendant of David. The obvious fact of His resurrection served as a sufficient proof to everyone.

Having established the biblical foundation for Christ's resurrection, Peter brings in the eyewitnesses. A crowd of 120 people or more who could testify under oath to have seen Jesus Christ after His resurrection would have been sufficient to settle any case in a court of justice. The final proof of His ascension was the undeniable fact of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The sermon ends with a quotation of Psalm One Hundred Ten, which is the psalm that is most quoted in the New Testament. From Jesus' argument with the Pharisees and the doctors of the law we understand that this psalm was indisputably considered to refer to the Messiah.¹⁰⁵ This last quotation gives biblical authority to the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prophecy affirms that God would exalt the Messiah and make Him, not only the savior of the nation of Israel, but the ruler of the universe. The final blow, that which powerfully drives home the point, is found in Peter's closing words: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." The conclusion is inescapable that, the people of Israel, not only failed to recognize their Messiah, but they rejected Him in a way that was beyond humiliation, they had crucified Him as the lowest of the low. Paul's words to the church in Corinth come to mind: "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."¹⁰⁶

The fact that Peter calls Jesus "Lord" is very significant. The LXX uses the Greek word *Kurios*, without the article, as a translation for the Old Testament YHWH. This is the word Peter uses at this place in his sermon. In his commentary, *The Book Of The Acts*, F. F. Bruce states: "The first apostolic sermon leads up to the first apostolic creed: 'Jesus is Lord' (cf. Rom. 10:9; I Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11)– 'Lord' not only as the bearer of a courtesy title, but as the bearer of 'the name which is above every name' (Phil. 2:9)." This lends added force to the earlier quotation from Joel's prophecy, particularly the words: "And everyone who calls on the name of the *Lord* will be saved." It was their calling on the Name of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, that Peter's audience would receive forgiveness of sin and salvation.

Luke uses the Greek word *katanusso* to describe the reaction of the hearers of Peter's sermon. The word means: "to pierce thoroughly." This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used. *Barnes' Notes* observes correctly that the English "compunction" is a fit translation. The realization that they were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion hit them like a sharp instrument that punctured their conscience. As we mentioned above, the responsibility for Jesus' death on the cross lies with the whole human race. Seldom do we realize though, that we are individually guilty of murder. If the guilt of murder of a common person would crush us, how much more regicide, or theocide? We don't find this word in any dictionary, but I do not hesitate to invent it. It is a healthy discovery

¹⁰² II Sam. 7:12-16

¹⁰³ Ps. 89:3,4, 35-37

¹⁰⁴ Ps. 132:11

¹⁰⁵ See Matt. 22:41-46

¹⁰⁶ I Cor. 2:8

that, in having our sins forgiven, we are not merely delivered from the guilt of some petty sins but of murder in the first degree, the very first degree!

The reaction of Peter's audience is obviously the result of the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Jesus had predicted that such would be the result of the coming of the Spirit. On the night before His crucifixion, He had told His disciples: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."¹⁰⁷ The greatest sin of these people had been their unbelief. They had seen the proof of Jesus' claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, in the most extraordinary miracles the world had ever witnessed, and yet they had rejected Him. Now, the presence of the Spirit of God showed them the reality of their condition.

Sin has a blinding effect on man's mind and conscience. When Adam and Eve first sinned, they entered into a world of unreality, incorrectly pinpointing their physical nakedness as the cause of their shame, and thinking that a mere fig leaf could solve their problem. The Holy Spirit uncovers the nakedness of our soul and shocks us into the realization of the reality of the foulness of our condition. It is one thing to commit a murder, but when the victim comes back to life and confronts us with our act, that is quite a different matter. That is what happened to these people. They had killed their Messiah and He had risen from the dead and now stared them in the face through the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Peter's advice to the audience is: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." In saying this, Peter opens the door of a new dispensation of God's grace. In the Old Testament, there would have been no forgiveness for the sin of first-degree murder. As far back as in the days of Noah, God had said: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."¹⁰⁸ No sacrifice could atone for the guilt of a murderer. The law said: "If a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death."¹⁰⁹ Peter offers here a way of forgiveness that did not exist before.

The first step on the road to forgiveness is repentance. The Greek word used is *metanoia*, which consists of compunction, or conviction of sin and the reversal of a decision. The word is a composite of *meta*, which means "after," and the verb *noeoo*, "to perceive," or "to think." Literally it means "an afterthought," that is a second thought after observing the facts. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* offers another possibility of interpretation: "Or the word may be derived from *meta*, after, and *anoia*, madness, which intimates that the whole life of a sinner is no other than a continued course of madness and folly."

Repentance of sin is serious business. The human heart has a tendency to dodge the consequences of repentance. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "False repentance dreads the consequences of sin; true repentance dreads sin itself." The same *Commentary* continues: "True repentance is the only thing in such a state of mind that can give any relief. An ingenuous confession of sin, a solemn purpose to forsake it, and a true hatred of it, is the only thing that can give the mind composure. Such is the constitution of the mind that nothing else will furnish relief. But the moment we are willing to make an open confession of guilt, the mind is delivered of its burden, and the convicted soul finds peace. Until this is done, and the hold on sin is broken, there can be no peace."

In the context of Acts chapter 2, repentance for the Jews meant a change of mind about the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter's audience had to come to grips with the fact that they had been wrong in their opinion about Jesus and that He was in fact their Messiah. This *metanoia*, this "second thought" about Jesus led to the horrible realization: "We killed the Lord of glory." At that point Zechariah's prophecy saw an almost literal fulfillment: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives."¹¹⁰ John picks up this theme in Revelation to indicate that there will be a similar universal reaction on the day of Christ's second coming. We read: "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ John 16:8-11

¹⁰⁸ Gen. 9:6

¹⁰⁹ Ex. 21:14

¹¹⁰ Zech. 12:10-14

¹¹¹ Rev. 1:7

Peter's advice to his hearers is that they seal their repentance in baptism. We possess no conclusive knowledge about the origin of baptism in New Testament times. That the rite was a familiar one is obvious from the Gospel records about the ministry of John the Baptist. The New Testament rite of baptism may have evolved from the Old Testament ablutions, which the law required after a ritual defilement.¹¹² There also seems to be a connection with the rite of initiation into the priesthood. When Aaron and his sons were consecrated as priests in Israel, we read: "Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water."¹¹³ The high priest also underwent a yearly ritual that could be called "baptism" at the conclusion of the ritual on the Day of Atonement.¹¹⁴

John's baptism of repentance suggests that baptism was considered to be an outward sign of an inward decision to repent of one's sins. In the case of Jesus' baptism it was probably a confirmation of acceptance of the call to be the Messiah. The rite of Christian baptism is, obviously, based upon the great commission, as given in Matthew's Gospel: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁵ Peter's advice to his audience to repent and be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ rested upon Jesus' great commission to evangelize the world.

There is a clear link in the text between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the side of Peter's hearers there had to be a willingness to repent and to confess their sin. Baptism for them constituted a commitment of surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. Forgiveness of sin and receiving of the Holy Spirit followed this. Baptism thus became the key to regeneration. I firmly believe that, in our present dispensation, the order is reversed. Unless we believe that baptism causes regeneration, as some churches teach, we must accept that one has to be born again before baptism becomes a valid option.

The fact that Peter only commands baptism in the Name of Jesus, instead of using the formula given by Jesus Himself, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," does not mean a deviation from the great commission. For the Jews who personally had had a hand in the crucifixion of Jesus, the core of the matter was confession of the Name of Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The fact that the crime they had committed became the means of forgiveness of their sins must have been beyond their comprehension, as it is beyond ours.

"The gift of the Holy Spirit" should not be confused with "the gifts of the Spirit,"¹¹⁶ or even "the fruit of the Spirit."¹¹⁷ "The gift" in this instance must be seen as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human heart, which causes a regeneration of being. The Bible presents man as a triune being: spirit, soul, and body.¹¹⁸ When Adam and Eve sinned, their spirit died and the organ for fellowship with God could function no longer. Every human being born into this world possesses a living body and soul, but a spirit that is dead. When the Holy Spirit enters a person's soul, the spirit is brought to life and fellowship with God is restored. That is, in essence, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit are subsequent manifestations of this initial gift.

This gift of the Holy Spirit was in fulfillment of the promise God had given by mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, who voiced this glorious prophecy: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."¹¹⁹ "The promise" is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul would later connect this promise of the Spirit to the promise of God's blessing, given to Abraham. He wrote to the Christians in Galatia: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."¹²⁰ God had said to Abraham: "I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."¹²¹

Bible commentators have argued the point whether Peter foresaw the preaching of the Gospel to the gentiles or not. The obvious fact is that the Holy Spirit encompassed the gentiles in this promise, whether Peter understood this or not. There is, however, no doubt that Peter knew about God's plan for the salvation of the world,

¹¹² See e.g. Lev. 15:16

¹¹³ Lev. 8:6

¹¹⁴ Lev. 16:23

¹¹⁵ Matt. 28:19

¹¹⁶ See I Cor. 12

¹¹⁷ Gal. 5:22,23

¹¹⁸ I Thess. 5:23

¹¹⁹ Ezek. 36:25-27

¹²⁰ Gal. 3:14

¹²¹ Gen. 12:2,3

in spite of the prejudice he had to overcome when he was sent to bring the Gospel to Cornelius and his family.¹²² If Peter obeyed the great commission in advising his hearers to be baptized, he must also have understood the rest of Jesus' words: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...."¹²³

Baptism in the Name of Jesus would set the new believers apart from "this corrupt generation." The Greek word rendered "corrupt" is *skolios*, which means "warped," or "perverse." "Save yourself" in this context has, of course, no theological implications. It simply means distancing oneself from the acts and mentality of the rest of the people. Paul defines it in his Epistle to the Philippians as: "that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe."¹²⁴

The implication is that the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah was proof of the perversity of the nation of Israel. It would have been natural for Israel to receive her Messiah, as natural as a baby's drinking on his mother's breast. John's statement: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him,"¹²⁵ is an indication of the world's corruption. It is required of us to choose sides if we want to be saved. Moses called the nation of Israel to their senses after they had made the gold calf by making them choose. We read: "So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.'"¹²⁶

About three thousand people responded to Peter's altar call. We are not given the logistics of the mass baptism that followed. The carrying out of this ritual may have taken several days, although Luke states specifically, "about three thousand were added to their number *that day*." And in vs. 47 we read: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

D. Life of the primitive church

2:42-47

On the day of Pentecost, not only the church was born, but also the first mega church. Even in our day, a church that enlists 3000 baptized members is no mean phenomenon. The results of the preaching of Peter and the other apostles must have overwhelmed everyone. It must have been a spiritual springtime in the city of Jerusalem. We read: "Everyone was filled with awe." This may refer to both believers and unbelievers. We do not know how long this celebration lasted. It may have taken the enemy some time to regroup and strike back. But attacking he did. One of the mysteries of divine council is that God allowed him an impressive measure of success, a seemingly complete victory.

The fellowship of believers in Jerusalem was the closest form of communion this world has ever seen. There was a manifestation of unity and mutual love such as has never been before or afterward. In his book *Acts, An Expository Commentary*, Donald Grey Barnhouse states: "These traits were found in the new church: steadfast continuance in apostolic doctrine; Christian fellowship; communion or 'breaking of bread,' and prayer. Keep those four factors alive in any church group and you have the makings of a healthy church. Bible doctrine, one-to-one fellowship, the close intimacy with Jesus Christ suggested by the Lord's Supper, and breathing the breath of heaven in regular prayer. These are the marks of a healthy church. Depart from any of those characteristics and you have an anemic, sick church, such as we see so much of today."

The Pulpit Commentary comments on the condition of the early church: "Just as the Transfiguration gave a passing glimpse of the state of glory, so here we have a specimen of what Christian love and unity in its perfection, and unchecked by contact with the world without, would, and perhaps some day will, produce. But even at Jerusalem this bright vision of a paradise on earth was soon troubled by the earthly dissensions recorded in Acts 6.; and the Christian community received a timely lesson that things good in themselves are not always practicable in an evil world, where sluggish virtues require the stimulants of bodily wants to draw them out and strengthen them, and where hypocrisy often claims the kindly offices which are due only to disciples indeed."

As Barnhouse observed, there were four elements that formed the lifeline of this early fellowship: Sound doctrine, close fellowship, observing of the sacraments (particularly the Lord's Supper), and prayer. "The apostles' teaching" must have consisted mainly in the exposition of Jesus' teaching, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Lord had said to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from

¹²² See ch. 10:1-48

¹²³ Matt. 28:19

¹²⁴ Phil. 2:15

¹²⁵ John 1:10,11

¹²⁶ Ex. 32:26

what is mine and making it known to you.”¹²⁷ We find the written record of most of this teaching in the four Gospels.

“They devoted themselves” is a good translation of the Greek word *proskartereo*, which means “to be earnest towards a thing.” or “to persevere,” or “to attend assiduously all the exercises.” The members of the first church in Jerusalem were determined not to stop until they had received the blessing of the Holy Spirit in all its fullness. This determination was an important factor in the manifestations of the power of the Spirit. When there is unity of purpose and love among men, God is free to work. The psalmist sings: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! ... For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”¹²⁸

There was a sense of awe among believers and unbelievers. Luke writes: “Everyone was filled with awe.” Those who have surrendered their lives to God will always have this sense of awe. What the Holy Spirit does in the intimacy of our fellowship with God will never cease to amaze and overwhelm us. There was a sense of awe among those who did not dare to come close, because of the supernatural character of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Some outsiders may have been kept from joining the group of believers because they knew themselves well enough to know that they could never live the Christian life. The truth is, of course, that no one can. It is a supernatural life that can only be lived in the power of God’s Spirit.

The air was filled with the miraculous. The Holy Spirit endowed the apostles with the gift to exercise miraculous powers.¹²⁹ The greatest miracle, however, was that transformation of hearts of the believers. “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” This means that people were delivered from their egoism and greed. This is the only instance in which a truly communistic society was able to function, at least for a limited time, without being corrupted. The reason that, in other periods of world history, communism has not lived up to its promises is that the participants brought their sinful human nature into the experiment. The common link between communism and capitalism is human egoism.

It also meant that the believers were delivered from fear of the future. It is, of course, not sinful to save up money for “a rainy day.” But our savings accounts often serve as a security to compensate for our security in God. The writer to the Hebrews analyses the human attitude correctly with the statement: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”¹³⁰

It is interesting to note that the early church moved to the temple grounds and held her gatherings in the temple courts. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It is very remarkable that at this early age of the Church’s existence Christians did not deem themselves separated from their Jewish brethren, or from the Old Testament institutions. Christianity was but Judaism perfected; the gospel the full blossoming of the Law. The first Christian Jews, therefore, did not conceive of themselves as quitting the religion of their fathers, but rather hoped that their whole nation would in a short time acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ. Christian institutions, therefore — the prayers, the breaking of bread, the prophesyings and speaking with tongues, and the apostolic teachings — were supplemental to the temple service, not antagonistic to it; and the church took the place rather of the synagogue than of the temple.” Obviously, the temple ceremonies with its sacrificial rituals did not cease on the day of Pentecost. While the early Christians came to grips with the fact that, in Paul’s words, “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes,”¹³¹ the sacrificial animals that, for centuries had portrayed Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, were still being killed in the same building. We don’t know for how long, but it appears that the apostles and early Christians continued to participate in the rituals as long as the temple stood.

At the same time, small groups were gathering daily in homes, probably similar in fashion as the home group gatherings that have come into vogue again in our day. The words “They broke bread” are variously understood by Bible scholars to mean celebrating the Lord’s Supper, or simply having meals together. It may very well be that the sacrament of “communion” was celebrated every time believers came together for a common meal.

The NIV states that “they ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” The NKJV uses the words: “simplicity of heart.” The KJV: “singleness of heart.” The Greek word used is unique. It occurs only here in the New Testament. *Aphelotes* literally means “ground without stones,” hence “smooth.” There was nothing in the believers’ inmost being that could be a cause for stumbling. The Holy Spirit had done a work of perfect healing in their hearts. Medical science knows of gallstones and kidney stones but not of heart stones. Yet the human heart knows pains

¹²⁷ John 16:12-14

¹²⁸ Ps. 133:1,3

¹²⁹ See I Cor. 12:10

¹³⁰ Heb. 13:5,6

¹³¹ Rom. 10:4

that are worse than those caused by the build-up of calcium in other parts of the body. God had fulfilled His promise given to Ezekiel: "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."¹³²

The strange phenomenon occurred that even those who did not confess their sins and received the Holy Spirit enjoyed having the believers in their midst. The church of Jesus Christ was like an oasis in the wilderness. They were good for the environment. They were like the people of whom the Psalmist sang: "As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."¹³³ Their consistent praise of God was like water on a parched land. After the initial mass conversion, individuals were being drawn into the fellowship of believers. "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." God initiates our salvation. Our change of mind, and change of direction on the path to perdition does not constitute salvation in itself. It is only part of the process. God is the author of our salvation. The fact that the text states that the people who came into the fold "were being saved" does not mean that their salvation was not an accomplished fact. It is, as *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* observes: "Salvation is a thing of the present, as well as of the past and future." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* suggests: "Better translate it 'those saved from time to time.' It was a continuous revival, day by day."

II. The church in Jerusalem 3:1-5:42

A. A typical miracle and sermon 3:1-26

Luke told us in the previous chapter that "many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." In this chapter, he selects one of those miracles, not only as an example, but also because of the subsequent sermon Peter was able to preach in public, and because the event became a turning point in the history of the church. This miracle triggered to first great counter attack of the enemy.

The fact that Peter and John went to the temple at the time of the afternoon sacrifice to participate in the public prayer strongly suggests that the members of the early church had not yet abandoned participation the temple rituals. If the two apostles merely intended to pray together without partaking in the temple ritual, they would have said their prayers at home.

Little is known about the public prayer that accompanied the evening sacrifice. The law prescribed two daily sacrifices, one in the morning and one in the evening. We read in Numbers: "This is the offering made by fire that you are to present to the LORD: two lambs a year old without defect, as a regular burnt offering each day. Prepare one lamb in the morning and the other at twilight, together with a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives. This is the regular burnt offering instituted at Mount Sinai as a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire. The accompanying drink offering is to be a quarter of a hin of fermented drink with each lamb. Pour out the drink offering to the LORD at the sanctuary. Prepare the second lamb at twilight, along with the same kind of grain offering and drink offering that you prepare in the morning. This is an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD."¹³⁴ After the construction of the temple, these sacrifices became events to which the public was drawn and participated in, in public prayer. The Jewish practice to pray three times a day may have evolved from the words of David: "Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice."¹³⁵

Before entering the temple precincts, Peter and John passed by a crippled beggar at the temple gate. Scholars are uncertain which gate was the one called "Beautiful." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes Josephus, who states "that the temple had nine gates, which were on every side covered with gold and silver; but there was one gate which was without the holy house, and was of Corinthian brass, and greatly excelled those which were only covered with gold and silver ... The magnitudes of the other gates were equal one to another; but that of the Corinthian gate, which opened on the east, over against the gate of the holy house itself was much larger ... for its height was fifty cubits, and its doors were forty cubits, and it was adorned after a most costly manner, as having much richer and thicker plates of silver and gold upon them than upon the other. This last was probably the gate which is here called Beautiful; because it was on the outside of the temple, to which there was an easy access, and because it was evidently the most costly." It seems, however, that Josephus' description is difficult to reconcile with other known facts about the temple. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Josephus may have confounded the outer

¹³² Ezek. 11:19

¹³³ Ps. 84:6

¹³⁴ Num. 28:3-8

¹³⁵ Ps. 55:17

gate that led into the court of the women with the court that led from there into the actual temple area. Another name given to this gate is Nicanor.

Luke carefully describes the condition of the beggar at this gate as “crippled from birth.” This excludes any possibility that his healing could be attributed to some psychological boost that made the man stand on his feet. This man had never been able to stand on his legs. When Peter and John passed, he evidently stretched out his hand or cup, in a gesture all too familiar for beggars, as I have seen them do in Asia. The man was strategically placed, because most people entering the temple to worship would be in the frame of mind that does not allow one to pass by a person in need without giving something to him. Some beggars must make a good living.

When Peter and John stopped, the beggar “gave them his attention.” Peter’s invitation “Look at us!” is not the usual introduction to the giving of alms. The man must have expected an unusually large gift. The two apostles did get his full attention. As it turned out, the man received a great deal more than he could ever have expected. The apostle Paul calls Jesus “him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”¹³⁶

Peter’s words: “Silver or gold I do not have” have caught the attention of scholars over the centuries. Whether it means that Peter was so poor that he could not even carry cash on him, or whether he did not intend to give any to the man, cannot really be deduced from this saying. The *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “It was a constant custom for all who entered the temple to carry money with them to give to the treasury, or to the poor, or to both. It was on this ground that the friends of the lame man laid him at the gate of the temple, as this was the most likely place to receive alms. Though it was customary for all those who entered the temple to carry some money with them, for the purposes mentioned above, yet so poor were the apostles that they had nothing to give, either to the sacred treasury, or to the distressed.” The same commentary then continues to launch some less than subtle barbs at the Roman Catholic Church, which in our modern age, would no longer be acceptable (except maybe in Northern Ireland). We read: “The popish writers are very dexterous at forming analogies between Peter and the pope; but it is worthy of note that they have not attempted any here. Even the judicious and generally liberal Calmet passes by this important saying of the person whom he believed to have been the first pope. Thomas Aquinas, surnamed the angelical doctor, who was highly esteemed by Pope Innocent IV, going one day into the pope’s chamber, where they were reckoning large sums of money, the pope, addressing himself to Aquinas, said: ‘You see that the church is no longer in an age in which she can say, Silver and gold have I none?’ ‘It is true, holy father,’ replied the angelical doctor, ‘nor can she now say to the lame man, Rise up and walk!’ ” The same words have been attributed to others also, and their historicity can therefore not be asserted.

It is obvious that Peter and John could not be counted among the affluent of this world. They were, to use the worlds of the apostle Paul among the “not many ... wise by human standards; not many ... influential; not many ... of noble birth.”¹³⁷ Yet, they have had more influence upon world history than all the richest people in the world together. Jesus differentiates between those who store up things for themselves and those who are rich toward God.”¹³⁸

Peter’s wording that accompanies the performance of this miracle is unique and merits a closer look. The reference to his personal poverty is clear. He cannot claim anything that makes a person important in the eyes of the world. He proceeds to claim an authority that is not his own. The miracle was clearly performed in the Name of Jesus, whom Peter called here “Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” A few minutes later, Peter addressed the crowd that had gathered with the words: “Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.” Yet, Peter said to the man: “What I have I give you.” The paradox in Peter’s words seems to define the position of every born again believer. Jesus Christ lives within us. Paul speaks of “the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹³⁹ I am His and He is mine.¹⁴⁰ The power of His Name is in us but it is His power, not ours.

The record of Acts also shows that Peter and some of the other apostles had a specific gift of healing, as one of the gifts the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the church. The apostle Paul explains: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”¹⁴¹ And in another place he states: “To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another

¹³⁶ Eph. 3:20

¹³⁷ I Cor. 1:26

¹³⁸ See Luke 12:21

¹³⁹ Col. 1:27

¹⁴⁰ See Song 6:3

¹⁴¹ Rom. 12:6

distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."¹⁴² Peter, obviously, exercised the gift with which the Holy Spirit had endowed him, while at the same time, he credited the Name of Jesus as the source of the power that healed the man.

Luke, the physician, describes the miracle with an eye to the medical details. Peter takes the man by the right hand, which released the supernatural power that flowed from Peter's body into his. When the woman, who had suffered from bleeding for twelve years, touched Jesus' clothes, we read: "At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched my clothes?'"¹⁴³ Luke diagnosed the cause of the man's paralysis as weakness of the ankles.

Peter's helping hand made the man realize that he could all-of-a-sudden do what he had never been able to do. He not only stood up, he jumped up. He not only walked, he jumped. "Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God." We must try to picture this humorous scene. The temple court was a place of solemn worship. No one was supposed to run and shout there, not even children, let alone an adult. This man's exuberance was like a burst of loud laughter during a high mass in a medieval cathedral. The priests who came out must have put their finger on their lips, saying: "shst!" It wasn't just the fact that the people recognized him as the crippled beggar but also because of the noise and commotion he made. How does one celebrate deliverance from a forty-year long inability to walk? I remember clearly my jumping up in the air when word reached us that the surrender of Nazi Germany ended the long nightmare of war in my homeland of Holland. I had never jumped that high before. This man had never jumped in his life. He walked and jumped and praised God. What a sight! God and the angels must have laughed out loud in heaven.

According to Josephus, Solomon's Colonnade on the east side of the main building was the only part of the first temple, built by Solomon that survived the Babylonian destruction. When King Herod restored the second temple, which had been built after the return from captivity, this colonnade was the only part that was left standing.

Seeing the crowd, Peter immediately seizes the opportunity to give a ringing testimony regarding the power of the Name of the resurrected Jesus.

Peter's introduction may sound strange to us. "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you?" Peter understood, of course, that the fact that a man born a cripple, was jumping up and down was enough reason to be surprised. "Surprise" even seems too weak a word in this context. But, as *Barnes' Notes* point out, it wasn't the miracle itself but the conclusion the people were drawing about Peter and John's supposed supernatural powers that caused the surprise. We read: "The particular thing which he intended to reprove here was not that they wondered, for that was proper; but that they looked on himself and John as if they had been the authors of this healing. They ought to have understood it. The Jews were sufficiently acquainted with miracles to interpret them and to know whence they proceeded; and they ought not, therefore, to ascribe them to man, but to inquire why they had been performed by God."

In his explanation, Peter takes the same line as in his message on the day of Pentecost, but the language here is even stronger and more condemnatory. Peter minces no words when he says: "You disowned the Holy and Righteous One." And: "You killed the author of life." Jesus is no longer introduced as a man, as "Jesus of Nazareth [who] was a man accredited by God,"¹⁴⁴ but as the Word who is God, through whom all things are made.¹⁴⁵

In mentioning the Patriarchs, Peter links the miracle to the promise God had given to Abraham and had repeated to Jacob and Isaac. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "**The God of Abraham**, etc. The continuity of the New Testament with the Old Testament stands out remarkably in St. Peter's address. He speaks to the 'men of Israel,' and he connects the present miracle with all that God had done to their fathers in days gone by. He does not seem conscious of any break or transition, or of any change of posture or position. Only a new incident, long since promised by the prophets, has been added. 'He thrusts himself upon the fathers of old, lest he should appear to be introducing a new doctrine' (Chrysostom)."

The emphasis on faith in the Name of Jesus serves the double purpose of explaining the inexplicable miracle and also to help the hearers take a step of faith that would lead to the salvation of their souls. It is evident that so much more was involved in the miracle than the healing of a sick man. The coming of the Kingdom was at stake here. More than in the first address, Peter emphasizes here the purpose of Jesus' death as the ultimate sacrifice for man's sin. It seems that, if the whole nation of Israel had repented at that time, the Lord would have returned immediately and introduced "times of refreshing" as are anticipated in the Millennium. Peter's address marks a

¹⁴² I Cor. 12:8-11

¹⁴³ Mark 5:30

¹⁴⁴ Ch. 2:22

¹⁴⁵ See John 1:1-3

hinge of history. It could have turned toward salvation, but man was not ready for that. This makes us realize that repentance of sin is never merely a personal matter. It can change the course of world history. The title of one of Winston Churchill's book could be applied to Peter's message. It was *The Hinge of Fate*.

It seems an understatement to say that the surrender of Jesus to the Roman authorities in order to have Him crucified was merely an act of ignorance. Committing an act like that to the least member of the human race already amounts to inhuman cruelty in the highest degree. Paul makes a similar remark as Peter in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. We read: "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."¹⁴⁶ Ignorance refers to the Person, not to the act. The ignorance pertains to the fact that they did not know who it was they crucified. Their ignorance did not provide an excuse; it made their cruelty even more sinful.

In saying this, I find myself here in variance with most commentaries. The general interpretation of the text is that Peter does provide his hearers with an excuse. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, states: "Mark the inimitable skill and tenderness with which he who had just wounded by his sharp rebuke now binds up the wound. All sternness and uncompromising severity before, he is all gentleness and indulgence now. They were only 'men of Israel' in ver. 12, now they are 'brethren.' He has an excuse for their grievous sin. They did it in ignorance (comp. Luke 23:33; 1 Timothy 1:13). Only let them see their error and repent of what they had done, and their forgiveness was sure." It is true that Peter's tone is tender, but his words are nevertheless sharp. He speaks the truth in love. The point is not that they were less guilty because they were ignorant but that God's grace is so amazing that there is forgiveness even for this most heinous crime.

Again, Peter refers to the mystery of God's predetermination of Jesus' death. The word "ignorance" refers in part also to the fact that those who nailed Jesus to the cross had no idea that they were killing the Lamb of God who carries away the sins of the world. They were completely ignorant of the fact that they participated in the ultimate sacrifice for man's sin.

There is nothing tender in the way Peter presents the choice of life or death to his audience. In quoting Moses, he explains that they have the choice between "times of refreshing" at the return of their Messiah, or being "completely cut off from among his people."

The Greek word, rendered "restore" is *apokatastasis*, which is derived from a word, meaning "reconstitution." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* explains that: "Now, as the word is here connected with which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets, it must mean the accomplishment of all the prophecies and promises contained in the Old Testament relative to the kingdom of Christ upon earth; the whole reign of grace, from the ascension of our Lord until his coming again, for of all these things have the holy prophets spoken; and, as the grace of the Gospel was intended to destroy the reign of sin, its energetic influence is represented as restoring all things, destroying the bad state, and establishing the good-taking the kingdom out of the hands of sin and Satan, and putting it into those of righteousness and truth." The same *Commentary* adds the following beautiful application: "This is done in every believing soul; all things are restored to their primitive order; and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keeps the heart and mind in the knowledge and love of God. The man loves God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and his neighbor as himself; and thus all the things of which the holy prophets have spoken since the world began, relative to the salvation of any soul, are accomplished in this case; and when such a work becomes universal, as the Scriptures seem to intimate that it will, then all things will be restored in the fullest sense of the term. As therefore the subject here referred to is that of which all the prophets from the beginning have spoken (and the grand subject of all their declarations was Christ and his work among men), therefore the words are to be applied to this, and no other meaning. Jesus Christ comes to raise up man from a state of ruin, and restore to him the image of God, as he possessed it at the beginning."

Peter's greatest statement in this message is: "And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers." This word is spoken to Jews. They were the original heirs of God's promise. That is why the apostle Paul always insisted that the Gospel be first preached to the Jews. In his Epistle to the Romans, he states: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." But the Gospel is ultimately meant just as much for the gentile as for the Jew.

Peter's reference to the prophet Moses foretold was well understood by his audience. There was some confusion in the Jewish mind as to the offices of the Messiah and this prophet. It was not generally understood that the two could be the same person. People had asked John the Baptist: "Are you *the* Prophet?"¹⁴⁷ At certain times during Jesus' ministry, they had come to the conclusion that Jesus was the prophet Moses had promised. We read in John's Gospel: "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the

¹⁴⁶ I Cor. 2:8

¹⁴⁷ John 1:21

Prophet who is to come into the world.’¹⁴⁸ And at another time, we read: “On hearing his words, some of the people said, ‘Surely this man is the Prophet.’¹⁴⁹ Moses’ prediction is found in Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, ‘Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.’ The LORD said to me: ‘What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.’”¹⁵⁰

Identifying “the author of life” with “the prophet” throws a completely new light on the subject of prophecy. We correctly understand a prophet to be a person who speaks the Word of God. Jesus not only speaks the Word, He is the Word. The quotation of Moses’ prophecy opens tremendous perspectives to the eyes of our spirit. God addresses us personally in Jesus Christ. In the words of The Epistle to the Hebrews: “So we must listen very carefully to the truths we have heard, or we may drift away from them. For since the messages from angels have always proved true and people have always been punished for disobeying them, what makes us think that we can escape if we are indifferent to this great salvation announced by the Lord Jesus himself and passed on to us by those who heard him speak?”¹⁵¹

In a magnificent way, Peter wraps up the whole message of the Old Testament by linking God’s promise to Abraham to all the prophecies spoken from the days of Samuel to Malachi and applying them to the present. The Jews were offered the heritage of Abraham’s promise in the salvation of their souls and the renewal of their lives. The murder they had committed was turned into a sacrifice for their sins, which atoned for all the evil they had ever done. God offered them, not only a complete cleansing of their hearts, but His own eternal life in the Person of the Holy Spirit. This is, what the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls: “This great salvation.”

B. First opposition from Jewish leaders 4:1-37.

Chapter four of the Book of Acts marks a watershed in world history. It tells the beginning of the counter offensive of the powers of darkness. The Holy Spirit had invaded the world on the day of Pentecost and here the evil empire strikes back.

It is very hard, if not impossible, for us to understand the background of the events that are described here. There is no question but that the Spirit of the omnipotent God was no match for all the devils in hell and on earth. What Paul says about the defeat of the Antichrist can be said about all the powers of darkness: “The Lord Jesus will overthrow [them] with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.”¹⁵²

Why does God allow Satan to demonstrate his power and attack God’s children? The question does not seem to have an immediate answer. When those who had returned from the Babylonian Captivity were forced by military power to stop the rebuilding of the temple, God spoke through the prophet Zechariah: “ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”¹⁵³ It seems that the deciding factor was that the majority of Israel refused to accept the gift of the Holy Spirit, offered to them on the day of Pentecost. This refusal would mean centuries of suffering for those who are on the Lord’s side. It means, in the words with which Paul and Barnabas encouraged the churches in Asia Minor, that: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”¹⁵⁴ That verse may very well be the actual theme of the Book of Acts. The Kingdom of God is never forced upon man. God respects the free will of His creatures to the point that He is willing to let His church suffer throughout the ages in order to bring the image of God in man to its full completion.

The preaching of Peter and John brings out the priests and temple guards who arrest the two apostles and put them in prison for the night. Based on information gathered from Josephus, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “There can be little doubt, therefore, that the captain of the temple here spoken of was a priest who had under him the Levitical guard, and whose duty it was to keep order in the temple courts in these turbulent times ... The preaching the resurrection of the Lord Jesus as the ‘First fruits of them that slept,’ would be especially obnoxious to the Sadducees, ‘which deny that there is any resurrection’ (...Luke 20:27). The Sadducees were at this time in power ... and we learn from Josephus ... that the son of this Annas (or Anauus) went over to the sect of the

¹⁴⁸ John 6:14

¹⁴⁹ John 7:40

¹⁵⁰ Deut. 18:15-18

¹⁵¹ Heb. 2:1-3 (TLB)

¹⁵² II Thess. 2:8

¹⁵³ Zech. 4:6

¹⁵⁴ Acts 14:22

Sadducees, being himself high priest as his father had been ... The harsh persecution of the disciples at Jerusalem at this time when the Sadducees were in power is in exact accordance with Josephus's statement in the passage just referred to, that the Sadducees were more severe and cruel in their administration of justice than any other Jews. Their tenet of no life to come made them look to severe punishments in this life." The apostle Paul would later exploit very cleverly the doctrine of the resurrection that divided the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Facing the Sanhedrin, which at that time had evidently more Pharisee representation than at the time Peter and John were charged, he called out: "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."¹⁵⁵ That divided the house. Luke observes at that point: "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all."¹⁵⁶

The intervention of this military power, which interrupted the preaching of the apostles, did not prevent the message to penetrate the hearts of the hearers. Even without an altar call, the church grew in one day to an approximate total of 5000 members. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* suggests that these 5000 were in addition to the 3000 that had already accepted the Gospel on the day of Pentecost.

The violence with which the apostles were dragged away did not hinder the growth of the church. It appears that physical violence is seldom an effective deterrent to a process of a spiritual nature. Governments have never been able to root out faith in God by the use of physical power. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Killing people cannot stop the propagation of the message of the resurrection from the dead. It is true the threat of death can make some people deny their faith, but there is also deep down in the human heart the knowledge that there are things that are worth dying for. Who said: "Give me liberty or give me death?" And David sang in one of the psalms: "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you."¹⁵⁷ It is better to choose death in order to take part in the resurrection of Christ than to flee death and die forever.

The court case of Peter and John against the Sanhedrin almost reads like a comedy. The bench was mainly made up, as we have seen, by members of the Sadducee party, who deny the resurrection. The problem the court faced was the evidence of the miracle performed. Luke states: "But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say." If Peter and John had claimed any other source of power than that of the resurrected Christ, they would have been let go free. But since they maintained that the miracle had been performed in the Name of Jesus, whom the honorable judges had put to death themselves, the situation was unbearably uncomfortable for them, to say the least.

The charge against the apostle was not the fact that they had healed someone who had been a paraplegic from birth, but the power that had effected the healing. It was not the miracle but that what was proved by the miracle that was under scrutiny. Had Peter and John merely claimed a divine gift of healing, or even if they had confessed to use demonic power, they would probably have been discharged without any further ado.

Luke mentions the main personalities that made up the members of the council. We are familiar with Annas and Caiaphas, but nothing is known anymore of Alexander and John. The point, however, is that the presence of these dignitaries would be sufficient to make the most experienced lawyer proceed with caution and strike fear in any person in the dock. Peter and John's defense lawyer is the Paraklete, the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus had said: "When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."¹⁵⁸ The Holy Spirit pleads our cause in the courts of heaven; an appearance before the Supreme Court of men is, therefore, nothing to be afraid of with Him on our side. *Barnes' Notes* comments on Peter's defense: "[Be it known ...] Peter might have evaded the question, or he might have resorted to many excuses and subterfuges (Calvin), if he had been desirous of avoiding this inquiry. But it was a noble opportunity for vindicating the honor of his Lord and Master. It was a noble opportunity also for repairing the evil which he had done by his guilty denial of his Lord. Although, therefore, this frank and open avowal was attended with danger, and although it was in the presence of the great and the mighty, yet he chose to state fully and clearly his conviction of the truth. Never was there an instance of greater boldness, and never could there be a more striking illustration of the fitness of the name which the Lord Jesus gave him, that of a rock, John 1:42; Matt 16:17-18. The timid, trembling, yielding, and vacillating Simon; he who just before was terrified by a servant-girl, and who on the lake was afraid of sinking, is now transformed into the manly, decided, and firm Cephas, fearless before the Great Council of the nation, and in an unwavering tone asserting the authority of him whom he had just before denied, and whom they had just before put to death. It is not possible to account for this change except on the supposition that this religion is true. Peter had no worldly motive to actuate him. He had

¹⁵⁵ Acts 23:6

¹⁵⁶ Acts 23:8

¹⁵⁷ Ps. 63:3

¹⁵⁸ Matt. 10:19,20

no prospect of wealth or fame by this. Even the hopes of honor and preferment which the apostles had cherished before the death of Jesus, and which might have been supposed to influence them then, were now abandoned by them. Their Master had died, and all their hopes of human honor and power had been buried in his grave. Nothing but the conviction of the truth could have made this change, and transformed this timid disciple to a bold and uncompromising apostle.”

Peter’s line of defense is refined, humorous, and strongly accusative. He defines the crime with which they are charged as “an act of kindness shown to a cripple,” and immediately proceeds to accuse the court of the greatest crime in history: the murder of Jesus Christ on whom they had passed the death sentence. The Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stands for the power of His resurrection from the dead. Only a few weeks before, Jesus had stood where Peter and John were now standing. The same council had pronounced the death sentence on Christ. Peter’s invocation of the Name is the equivalent of Jesus Himself standing there. To the members of this council it was as if the man they had killed was standing before them, alive. After Jesus’ crucifixion, the judges may have had second thoughts about their verdict. They may have come to the conclusion that they had done the wrong thing. To see Jesus standing before them in the persons of Peter and John must have condemned them. There was a reversal of roles: they were the accused and the apostles were the judges. The only solution to their predicament was to hush up the matter and order the apostles to be silent.

The leaders of Israel had heard Peter’s quote of Psalm 118: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”¹⁵⁹ before from the mouth of Jesus Himself.¹⁶⁰ At that time also, they had reacted angrily. They had understood the meaning of the quotation quite well. Jesus’ words had been a warning to them that they had decided to discard. Peter, however, does not use these words to haunt the members of the council, but to lead them to a confession of sin and to redemption. The One they had rejected stood before them, not pointing an accusing finger at them, but stretching out saving arms to them. They had killed the Lamb of God who had carried away their sins also. But this amazing grace was too much for them.

Peter’s words: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” raises a banner for all the nations of this world. It does more than proclaim the supremacy of the Christian religion; it opens the only way of escape from the judgment that is coming over this world. What Peter says is merely a repetition of what Jesus had told His disciple on the eve of His death: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹⁶¹ What the members of the Sanhedrin should have done was to openly confess that they had been wrong and officially, and sincerely apologize to God. They chose, however, to deny their guilt. Thus they changed the course of world history, delaying the coming of the “times of refreshing.”

The members of the council were baffled by the fact that, learned people they were, they were unable to refute the arguments of the two uneducated people who were standing before them. The Jews had asked the question about Jesus: “How did this man get such learning without having studied?”

There is a good deal of misunderstanding among Christians also, about the value of education. Mark Twain, jokingly, made an excellent point when he quipped that he never let his schooling interfere with his education. We often fail to distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is what we learn from fellow humans, wisdom is divine.

The Greek uses two words that evoke striking pictures for us because they have found their way into the English language, although with a slightly altered meaning. The word for “unschooled” is *agrammatos*, which means: “unlettered,” or “illiterate.” We could say that these men did not know their grammar. The second word is *idiotes*, which means “a private person,” or “an ignoramus.” The English word “idiot,” however, has acquired a slightly different meaning; the Greek is milder than the English would suggest. To the theologians that made up the Sanhedrin, Peter and John appeared as laymen, not as professionals, which was another point of embarrassment to them. They prided themselves on their education. When Paul gave his testimony, he made it a point to say: “Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers.”¹⁶² Each of the members of this council would have been able to give similar references. Now they had to recognize that the two men standing before them had been taught by Jesus, the one who had checkmated them every time they had tried to debate Him.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary observes: “Had they not had his teaching, the present company would soon have confounded them; but they spoke with so much power and authority that the whole Sanhedrin was confounded. He who is taught in spiritual matters by Christ Jesus has a better gift than the tongue of the learned. He who is taught

¹⁵⁹ Ps. 118:22

¹⁶⁰ See Matt. 21:42-45

¹⁶¹ John 14:6

¹⁶² Ch. 22:3

in the school of Christ will ever speak to the point, and intelligibly too; though his words may not have that polish with which they who prefer sound to sense are often carried away.”

There is nothing wrong, of course, in pursuing the best education possible. What is wrong is to pride oneself on a diploma or a title. If we fail to recognize that the source of our intellect is God, we are dumber than the dumbest. Some people are so intelligent that they completely miss the point. The apostle Paul, the pupil of the great Gamaliel, wrote: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”¹⁶³ These words depict well the predicament of the Sanhedrin at this point.

Added to this was the conclusion that the invocation of the Name of Jesus had been powerful enough to heal a man who had been crippled from birth. To people who, all their lives, had maintained that death is the end of everything, it must have been more than they could bear to have the foundation of their beliefs knocked from under them. In the healing of this man, God has proved again that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “is not the God of the dead but of the living.”¹⁶⁴

After discussing their predicament behind closed doors, the council called the apostles back in “and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” This council of priests derived their authority from the fact that God had ordained them. The ridiculous inconsistency of their charge to the apostles is that they used their God-given authority to deny God’s authority. The answer of the apostles is a magnificent refutation of the council’s charge: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Verdicts in a court of justice must be based on evidence. The charge in this case was the validity of the claim that God had raised Jesus from the dead. The healing of the crippled man served as an irrefutable proof. The case had to be dismissed, and it was. But the judges added that further proof in the future would be forbidden. This charge was not given to the apostles (they were not the ones who had raised Jesus from the dead), but to God. The council ordered God not to perform any further resurrections. The Almighty must have been “amused.” In the psalm that the apostles and other believers would quote later in the day, David wrote: “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”¹⁶⁵

The apostles’ statement: “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” is a good guideline for our methods of evangelism. We must realize that Peter and John’s lives were in jeopardy when they stood before the council. Stephen would later pay with his life for his testimony, as did the apostle James. We can only speak for our Lord when our hope of the resurrection is stronger than the fear of death. The spirit of the apostles was the same as of the three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who before being thrown into the fire, answered the mighty king Nebuchadnezzar: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”¹⁶⁶ Some things are worse than death and some are better than life. Without this conviction, it is better to keep silent about the Gospel of salvation. But blessed are those who “cannot help speaking about what [they] have seen and heard.”

When Peter and John returned to their homes and told their brothers what had happened, the members of the church burst out in spontaneous prayer. They recognized that what happened to the two apostles was the counter attack by the powers of darkness to the Holy Spirit’s invasion of planet earth. We don’t know what the members of the early church had expected after the day of Pentecost. It is more than likely that they eagerly anticipated the return of their Lord and the beginning of, what Peter had called: “times of refreshing.” They realized, however, that, not only were their people and their nation not ready for this, but that the counter attack introduced dark days ahead of them. How dark, they could not have known. The persecution of the early church and the subsequent cruelties performed upon the disciples of Jesus in the Roman Empire and throughout world history was beyond the scope of their vision. Even though they could not foresee what would happen, they did the only thing they could do: they turned to the Sovereign Lord.

¹⁶³ I Cor. 1:18-21,25

¹⁶⁴ See Matt 22:32

¹⁶⁵ Ps. 2:4

¹⁶⁶ Dan. 3:16-18

They appealed to God's omnipotence in calling upon Him as the Creator of heaven and earth. They did not ask God why this was happening to them; but their "why" was directed to the enemy: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" Their question was not a questioning of God's dealing with them, but a cry of compassion for those who refused to be saved. The attitude of the early believers was quite different from that of believers in later centuries and, particularly, in our day. We tend to throw our "whys" in God's face, even to the point of doubting His love, wisdom, and power. The apostles understood that if the people of the world had crucified the Lord of glory, His followers had no right to expect a different treatment. Their concern was not about themselves, but about their enemies and the horrible judgment they would face. Where are Nero, Hitler, and Moa Dze Dung now, and where will Osama Ben Laden be?

Their quotation of David's words in Psalm Two show a clear insight in the meaning of prophecy. Their request was not that persecution be stopped but that the miracles that served as proof of Jesus' resurrection would increase and that they would not be kept from proclaiming the message by fear of death. They asked for more ammunition to give to the enemy so they could be shot at! And God heard their prayers. The prayer meeting ended with an earthquake and a renewed experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Again, God says to them, as He said to Zechariah: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."¹⁶⁷

The prayer indicates that the apostles saw in the persecution a continuation of the attitude of the enemies of God that led to the crucifixion. Herod's role in the crucifixion of Christ is not too clear in the Gospels. Luke is the only one who mentions the king in the passion story.¹⁶⁸ In a way, Herod's moral guilt was graver than Pilate's. We read that Herod mocked and ridiculed Christ; whereas, Pilate at least made an effort to dismiss the charges against Him.

The words "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen," would be puzzling if we understood them to mean that God had ordained the evil. I agree with *Adam Clarke's Commentary*: "It is evident that what God's hand and counsel determined before to be done was not that which Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles (Romans), and the people of Israel had done and were doing; for, then, their rage and vain counsel would be such as God himself had determined should take place, which is both impious and absurd; but these gathered together to hinder what God had before determined that his Christ or Anointed should perform; and thus the passage is undoubtedly to be understood." It remains true, however, that in their evil acts, the enemy accomplished the purpose of Christ's coming into this world, which was: "to give his life as a ransom for many."¹⁶⁹

Verses 31-37 are an extended comment on the earlier description of the life of the church in chapter 2, where Luke wrote: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."¹⁷⁰ They also form a link with the following chapter that deals with the attacks of the enemy from within. It is generally understood that Joseph, or Barnabas, as he was nicknamed, is the same person who teamed up with Paul during the first missionary journey.

The Greek text calls Barnabas *Huios paraklesis*, which means "son of consolation, or exhortation." The word *paraklesis* is related to the Name given by Jesus to the Holy Spirit, the *Parakletos*. The nickname is variously interpreted to mean: "son of consolation," or "son of exhortation." The latter would suggest that Barnabas had the gift of prophecy.

Barnabas' act of generosity in selling his real estate and giving the money to the apostles, serves as an example of the way the early church operated in their expression of love for one another, and as an introduction to the following chapter in which the author describes how genuine love became corrupted.

C. Death of Ananias and Sapphira 5:1-16

We discover the pattern of Luke's composition in the repetition of his arrangement of material. After making a general statement, such as the healings in ch. 2 and the generous love for one another of the members of the church in chapters 2 and 3, the Evangelist chooses one incident as an illustration and then proceeds to show how the enemy of God reacts to it.

The hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira forms the second attack of Satan upon the early church. This attack is more dangerous than the previous one because it shows the enemy within instead of without. The gates of hell will not be able to prevail against the church of Christ as long as its members are fully dedicated to their Master. But the church that becomes corrupt will soon cease to exist.

¹⁶⁷ Zech. 4:6

¹⁶⁸ See Luke 23:7-12

¹⁶⁹ Matt. 20:28

¹⁷⁰ ch. 2:44,45

The question arises what actually was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? It was not the fact that they decided to hold back part of the proceeds of the sale of their property. They were under no obligation to sell, and after the sale they were not required to give all or any of the money to the apostles. Their sin was their conspiracy of silence. It is true that Sapphira told an outright lie in answer to Peter's question: "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" But we do not read that Ananias spoke one single word when he handed to money to Peter. His silence became thus very eloquent. In giving the money to the apostles without a word, he projected the image of the person who loved the Lord so much that he gave Him all he possessed. His sin was in his image. He was not concerned what God would think about him but what people would. That is what "image" is all about.

Peter recognizes this deceit as an attack of Satan upon the church. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* penetratingly observes that Peter's question: "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?" implies "that Satan is powerless over the hearts of men until they give him encouragement." We seldom recognize that behind every effort to build an image for ourselves there is the strong influence of the devil who wants to destroy the image of God in us. Ananias certainly did not live up to his name, which means: "The grace of God"; neither did Sapphira, whose name means "beautiful." Ananias and Sapphira are classical examples of what Jesus calls "the weeds" in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.¹⁷¹ The weeds look like the real thing but their fruit is an empty hull. Ananias and Sapphira projected an image of piety, but they were hypocrites.

Was this couple Christian? We cannot say for sure, but I believe they were. One cannot lie to the Holy Spirit if the Spirit is not in one's heart. Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not automatically mean the death of "self." The recognition to be crucified with Christ is usually a long and slow process. The grain of wheat that falls in the ground does not die overnight to produce fruit. We must be aware of the fact that we, ourselves, are our greatest enemies. It is not without reason that it is said that God's greatest enemy is not Satan but the Christian. Unless we constantly and sincerely consecrate ourselves to the Lord, and daily present our bodies as a living sacrifice, the devil will outsmart us without much difficulty.

The punishment of Ananias and Sapphira seems rather harsh to us. We must understand, however, that it was not Peter or the apostles who condemned the couple to death. Ananias' death may have been a spontaneous reaction to the realization of the severity of his sin of omission. Whether the same was the case with Sapphira, we do not know.

Luke comments: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." Reading the account still strikes fear in our own hearts because we realize that the seed of evil that grew up in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira is present in us also. *The Pulpit Commentary* calls this section "The first hypocrisy in the early church." It would be more correct to say that it was the first exposure of hypocrisy. There is no reason to believe that "the flesh" and all manifestations of "self" had been completely stamped out in the hearts of all the other members of the early church. As we suggested above, the baptism and infilling of the Holy Spirit do not automatically cancel out the works of the flesh. Otherwise, Paul exhortation: "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace"¹⁷² would be redundant. The reason for the fear, both in the church and without, was, undoubtedly the fact that the people said to themselves: "This could have happened to me." We know that if God's judgment would pass over the church of today as it did then, the church would be severely decimated. Genuine humility and brokenness of spirit is still a rare entity in the body of Christ today. The severity of the punishment served the purpose of making us realize how great the danger is that threatens the church from within. We could so easily become part of "the fifth column" without our being aware of it. "Lord, deliver us from evil!" Our paramount concern ought not to be what people think about us but how we rate in God's judgment.

D. Second opposition from Jewish leaders

5:17-42

From that time on, most of the church's gatherings occurred in Solomon's Colonnade, where Peter had giving his earlier public address after the healing of the crippled man. As we saw above, this was the only part that remained of the original temple built by Solomon. We could see this as symbolic of the continuity of God's revelation of Himself. It was at this place that Jesus had made the statement: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it

¹⁷¹ Matt. 13:24-30

¹⁷² Rom. 6:12-14

again in three days,” on which John had commented: “The temple he had spoken of was his body.”¹⁷³ Now, the body of Christ, the actual temple of the Holy Spirit, gathered at the place that had been its shadow for centuries.

Luke’s statement: “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number,” sounds contradictory. We understand the reluctance of the people to officially join the church, especially after the word had spread about the premature death of Ananias and Sapphira. But the grace of God was so strong and compelling that some could not resist joining. Grace can be irresistible!

The air in those days was so filled with an atmosphere of the supernatural that miracles were more the rule than the exception. The streets were filled with sick people, waiting for the passing of Peter so that they would be healed when his shadow fell on them. The fact that his shadow fell on people is an indication that it happened close to sunset. It reminds us of the glorious evening about which Matthew speaks in his Gospel: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to [Jesus], and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.”¹⁷⁴ Luke’s expert statement as a medical person is: “All of them were healed.” Peter must have needed a double portion of God’s grace to be able to remain humble under such circumstances. It must not have been an easy task for him to serve as the rock upon which Christ was building His church.¹⁷⁵ The revival in Jerusalem drew crowds from the surrounding places. The influence of the Holy Spirit was felt in most of Judea.

It does not amaze us that Satan would not allow such demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit to continue in his territory. After all, Jerusalem was, in John’s words: “the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.”¹⁷⁶ The second counter attack was launched immediately, this time involving all the apostles. The ground troupes of Satan’s army were the high priest and the members of the party of the Sadducees. The Greek word rendered “party” is *haireisis* from which our word “heresy” is derived. Some translations use the word “sect,” but the original meaning is not necessarily derogatory.

Some commentators believe that the high priest was Caiaphas, others Annas. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It does not appear that Annas himself was a Sadducee, but his son was, and hence it is highly probable that the Sadducees should have attached themselves to Annas, and made a tool of him for suppressing the doctrine of the Resurrection.” The doctrine of the Resurrection is undoubtedly the most offensive part of the Gospel for Satan, of whom the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that he: “holds the power of death.”¹⁷⁷ The recognition that death does not have the last word in this world would mean the end of fear for mankind. The Department of Propaganda of the underworld could never allow this truth to be proclaimed openly.

With sparkling humor, Luke gives account of the desperate efforts by the Sanhedrin to incarcerate the apostles and bring them to trial. The high court was puzzled to find the prison cells empty with the guards standing in front of the doors, till someone came and reported: “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” King Herod would face the same predicament some time later in the arrest of Peter, but since he did not believe in the supernatural intervention of angels, we read: “After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.”¹⁷⁸ The Sanhedrin did not have that option and they would have had to face the public opinion polls if they had taken such extreme measures as to execute the temple guards. There was, however, a motion brought to the floor to execute the apostles, which was defeated through the intervention of the learned Gamaliel. The charge against the apostles was: “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s [Jesus’] blood.” The members of the council conveniently forgot that they had shouted only a few months earlier: “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”¹⁷⁹ Little did they realize that it would mean for them the only escape from the wrath of God that was awaiting them if His blood were on them and their children.

In *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, Bishop Lightfoot identifies this Gamaliel as: “Rabban Gamaliel the first; commonly, by way of distinction, called Rabban Gamaliel the elder. He was president of the council after the death of his own father, Rabban Simeon, who was the son of Hillel. He was Paul’s master, and the 35th receiver of the traditions, and on this account might not be improperly termed ... a doctor of the law, because he was one that kept and handed down the Cabala received from Mount Sinai. He died eighteen years before the destruction of Jerusalem, his son Simeon succeeding him in the chair, who perished in the ruins of the city.”

¹⁷³ John 2:19,21

¹⁷⁴ Matt. 8:16

¹⁷⁵ See Matt 16:18

¹⁷⁶ Rev. 11:8

¹⁷⁷ Heb. 2:14

¹⁷⁸ Acts 12:19

¹⁷⁹ See Matt. 27:25

As a Pharisee, Gamaliel believed in the doctrine of the resurrection, which does not imply that he believed in the resurrection of Jesus. Although there were some early rumors that Gamaliel may have been a Christian, but *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “There does not seem to be any foundation for the legend in the Clementine Recognitions, that he was in secret a Christian.” One of the reasons of his taking the floor was, undoubtedly, that he did not want the Sanhedrin to pass a motion outlawing the preaching of a doctrine that was an essential part of his creed. Since he was one of the most influential members of the council, his word carried a lot of weight.

The learned doctor cited two examples of rebel leaders in the recent history of the country whose movements fizzled out when the leaders were killed. Scholars have tried to identify Theudas without much success. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, Josephus mentions a Theudas, leader of a rebellion, but he was executed 12 years after Gamaliel’s speech. The fact that the Theudas mentioned by Gamaliel did not make it into the books of history does, of course, not disprove his existence. This kind of research falls actually outside the scope of our study. There is, however, no reason to doubt the correctness of Luke’s statement here. Judas, the Galilean can be more easily identified as the leader of a movement that opposed the census ordered by Augustus at the time of the birth of Jesus.

The gist of Gamaliel’s address is the suggestion that the movement that was the result of Jesus’ life and teaching would end in the same way as the ones stated, but he adds the warning that it could be that the origin of the church of Jesus Christ would be divine instead of human. Those words contain a subtle warning but they do not go as far as to suggest what ought to be done if the preaching of the apostles was in fact the truth of God. Gamaliel’s speech may have been an exercise of diplomacy, which resulted in the release of the apostles, but it completely left untouched the point of vital importance of what to answer if, indeed God was speaking to His people. His advice actually amounted to the statement: “If God speaks, do not answer!” The Sanhedrin must have disregarded this implication of the doctor’s motion, believing that this movement that was accompanied by extraordinary miracles would simply faze out by itself if left alone. The question: “Are we actually fighting against God?” was never asked or answered.

The council issued another order to the apostles, forbidding them to continue preaching, and they were condemned to the corporal punishment of flogging, which was probably carried out by giving each of them the forty-less-one stripes. This kind of flogging was ordered in the Pentateuch for certain offences. We read: “If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes.”¹⁸⁰ This punishment, which was absolutely uncalled for, was meant to be a compromise between the extreme elements and the moderate members of the council.

The strange and remarkable reaction of the apostles to this painful and shameful punishment was joy. They rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” Such a reaction is in complete opposition to a natural response. Not only did the apostle decide not to fight back, neither did they complain to God for the bad treatment they had received, but they thanked Him for it. To rejoice because of being counted worthy by God implies that they did not consider themselves to be worthy in their own eyes. These men, who were filled with the Holy Spirit, carried with them a deep and crushing conviction of their own sin and unworthiness. The fact that Satan fixed his eye on them and started shooting his arrows at them gave them the assurance that they were important enough in the cause of the Kingdom to become the object of the enemy’s attention. We read in the Book of Job that God said to Satan: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” With God’s permission, Satan begins to afflict Job. Job reacts to this with fierce anger toward God and his friends. We don’t know if, prior to the session of the Sanhedrin, God had drawn Satan’s attention to these twelve men, but we see that their reaction to their suffering is quite the opposite of Job’s.

Besides the discovery of their own worth in the Kingdom, they reacted the way they did because of their love for Jesus. They understood that their physical pain was minor in comparison to the agony of Jesus’ scourging and crucifixion. They thanked God for allowing them to feel some of the pain their Master had felt when He gave Himself as an atoning sacrifice for their sin.

How different is our reaction to the suffering God allows us to undergo! Maybe we do not love as we ought to! We bristle when we read James’ words: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”¹⁸¹ And we find it difficult to follow the apostle Paul when he writes to the Philippians: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through

¹⁸⁰ Deut. 25:2,3

¹⁸¹ James 1:2

the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”¹⁸² And to the Colossians, he wrote: “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”¹⁸³

Suffering is not a part of God’s original plan for His creation; it is the result of sin. But for us as Christians, to suffer means to be targeted by the enemy, which is an indication that we play an active part in the spiritual war that is being fought in the heavenly places, and that we are actively promoting the coming of the Kingdom. David knew that his suffering was not in vain. He wrote: “You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?”¹⁸⁴ And: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”¹⁸⁵

The enemy’s counter measures failed to have any effect upon the zeal of the apostles. They continued their witness, both in the temple and in home meetings. The words “proclaiming the good news” are the translation of the Greek verb *euangelizo*, from which is derived our word: “to evangelize.”

III. Extension of the church in Palestine through dispersion

6:1-12:25

A. Choice of the Seven

6:1-7

The appointment of the first laymen in the early church, the deacons, was the result of a problem that arose in connection with the ministry of love the apostles had taken upon themselves. We can distinguish the hand of the enemy again in a situation, which was initially meant for good, but which turned sour because of the flaws of human nature. Satan worked upon the capacity for racism and jealousy among the saints.

It is not certain who the “Grecian Jews” were. Some commentators believe that they were visitors in Jerusalem who actually lived in other countries where Greek was spoken, who did not speak Hebrew, or Aramaic themselves, as did the Jews who lived in Israel. It seems doubtful, however, that those people would be merely visitors who had remained after coming to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. The fact that the problem revolves around widows would make us think that these were people who had taken up residence in Jerusalem or in the country. They may have been Jews who were born outside the country of Israel and who had migrated back to the land of their fathers. Growing up abroad, they spoke Greek and were consequently looked down upon by those who were born in Israel and only spoke Aramaic. Another possibility is that these were actually gentiles who had converted to Judaism and who were also considered second-class citizens.

One could hardly blame the apostles for the discrimination. The twelve must have delegated the distribution of food and money to others, who had shown partiality to their own race and people. The suggestion that the apostles would take it upon themselves to oversee this ministry would only be to right the wrong. But even that would be too much of a task in a church which numbered several thousand members. The apostles understood their primary task to be “prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

The qualifications for those who were to give themselves to the mundane task of distribution was that they be “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.” The apostles correctly understood the matter not to be merely a question of fair distribution but that it was a spiritual problem. They recognized the shadow of the adversary in the background of the whole affair.

Incidentally, this matter proves that communism in its pure form cannot exist as long as there are human beings who have a capacity for jealousy and egoism. The controversy is not capitalism versus communism but “the flesh” against “the Holy Spirit.” In a perfect world, capitalism would probably not be able to flourish. The very fact that some people sold their property and divided their excess money was obviously the fruit of the Holy Spirit, although God did not make it into a law.

The apostles never considered the option to cancel the distribution of food and money. They only wanted this ministry of love to be better organized. The election of the deacons also proves that they were in favor of some form of democracy. The communism of the early church was not like communism, as we know it now; there was no dictatorship involved.

We do not know how the election took place, but we are given seven names, among which Stephen, Philip, and Nicolas beg our special attention. The main reason why Luke included this incident in his narrative may well be to introduce Stephen and Philip to us. Stephen would become the first martyr of the church, whose death would ignite the great persecution, and Philip became the bridge of the Gospel to Samaria. Nicolas is called “a convert to

¹⁸² Phil. 1:29

¹⁸³ Col. 1:24

¹⁸⁴ Ps. 56:8 (NKJV)

¹⁸⁵ Ps. 116:15

Judaism.” This probably made him the only non-Jew in the group. His place of origin, Antioch, may have made him instrumental in the founding of the first church among the gentiles, although this is not specifically mentioned. As we progress in our study, it becomes clearer how well laid is Luke’s plan of narrative in the Book of Acts.

The fact that Stephen is mentioned separately and that he is described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” seems to indicate that he served as the chairman of the committee. The “faith” mentioned, probably, relates to the gift of healing. He was probably a Hellenistic Jew, which would make him immanently suited for the ministry for which he was chosen. Greek would then have been his native tongue, although he may have spoken Hebrew also.

An immediate result of the reorganization of the church, if we may call it that, was a great increase in the number of adherents. Luke says: “the word of God spread.” He does not mention if that was due to the fact that the apostles could now devote themselves exclusively to preaching; we rather get the impression that Stephen, the layman, was a key figure in this tremendous revival. One of the greatest miracles mentioned is the conversion of a large number of priests. As we have seen, the majority of priests, if not all, belonged to the party of the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. Their conversion meant a complete turnabout. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on this: “This was one of the greatest miracles done by the grace of Christ: that persons so intent on the destruction of Christ, his apostles, and his doctrine, should at last espouse that doctrine, is astonishing; and that they who had withstood the evidence of the miracles of Christ should have yielded to the doctrine of his death and resurrection, is worthy of note. And from this we may learn that it is not by miracles that sinners are to be converted unto God, but by the preaching of Christ dying for their offences, and rising again for their justification.”

B. Occasion of the dispersion: Ministry and martyrdom of Stephen

6:8-8:3

It was particularly Stephen’s ministry, and probably the conversion of the large group of priest that caused opposition against the preaching of the Gospel. Strangely enough, this opposition came apparently from people who were not natives of the city of Jerusalem. It is difficult for us to understand the condition of the place at that time, but it appears that there was a constant coming and going of Jews, who were living abroad, to the temple to participate in the celebration of the various feasts. These foreigners had their own synagogues in the city. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “There were said to have been four hundred and eighty synagogues in Jerusalem alone in the time of our Savior,” but the Commentary doubts that this statement is correct.

Luke singles out one particular group called “the Libertines.” About these, *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “There has been very great difference of opinion about the meaning of this word. The chief opinions may be reduced to three:

1. The word is Latin, and means properly a ‘freedman,’ a man who had been a slave and was set at liberty. Many have supposed that these persons were manumitted slaves of Roman origin, but who had become proselyted to the Jewish religion, and who had a synagogue in Jerusalem. This opinion is not very probable; though it is certain, from Tacitus ... that there were many persons of this description at Rome. He says that 4,000 Jewish proselytes of Roman slaves made free were sent at one time to Sardinia.

2. A second opinion is, that these persons were Jews by birth, and had been taken captives by the Romans, and then set at liberty, and were thus called ‘freedmen’ or ‘liberties.’ That there were many Jews of this description there can be no doubt. Pompey the Great, when he subjugated Judea, sent large numbers of the Jews to Rome These Jews were set at liberty at Rome, and assigned a place beyond the Tiber for a residence. ... Many Jews were also conveyed as captives by Ptolemy I to Egypt, and obtained a residence in that country and the vicinity.

3. Another opinion is, that they took their name from some ‘place’ which they occupied. This opinion is more probable from the fact that all the ‘other’ persons mentioned here are named from the countries which they occupied. Suidas says that this is the name of a place. And in one of the fathers this passage occurs: ‘Victor, Bishop of the Catholic Church at Libertina, says, unity is there, etc.’ from this passage it is plain that there was a place called ‘Libertina.’ That place was in Africa, not far from ancient Carthage.”

It is often the case that people who live outside the country of their origin demonstrate greater patriotic fervor than the natives of the country do. Most of them are, as the French say, “more royalist than the king.” The ones who took it upon themselves to argue with Stephen may have been more fanatical in their desire to maintain the rituals and customs of Judaism than the Jews who lived in the shadow of the temple. Any suggestion that the temple and the whole complex of ceremonies that were carried out in that building might be a mere image of another reality of which the essence was the Person of the resurrected Christ, would have struck them as extremely dangerous and offensive. That such was the core of Stephen’s preaching is obvious from his defense as Luke records it in the next chapter. Added to this was the fact that in every debate with Stephen in which they engaged they were checkmated; an experience that is usually rather deflating for a person’s ego.

Not being able to silence Stephen by convincing him to be wrong, and consequently condemning themselves as being in error, they resorted to bribing some people to take him to court on trumped up charges. Only two or three people who were unscrupulous enough to accept money for lying were needed. The law stated that at least two witnesses were required for a conviction. We read: "One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."¹⁸⁶ It is also quite likely that Stephen had made statements similar to the ones of which he was being accused. It would be sufficient to misquote him or to quote him out of context in order to make his case look bad enough for a conviction. What Stephen had actually preached is very clear from his defense, which Luke recorded in the next chapter.

The priests who had converted to Christianity were probably not members of the Sanhedrin; if they were, the following actions of the august body would be difficult to explain.

We read that Stephen standing before the court in a most unusual way caught their attention: "They saw that his face was like the face of an angel." Several commentators comment that Luke borrowed an expression that was not uncommon among Jewish writers. The most well documented case in Scripture of the phenomenon Luke describes here is, of course, the appearance of divine glory on the face of Moses after he came down from the mountain where God had spoken to him. We read: "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him."¹⁸⁷ The man accused of blaspheming Moses stood before them with the glory of Moses on his face. *Barnes' Notes* interprets the words, not as denoting a supernatural occurrence. We read: "It is not meant that there was anything 'miraculous' in the case of Stephen, but it is language that denotes calmness, dignity, and confidence in God, all of which were so marked on his countenance that it impressed them with clear proofs of his innocence and piety." It seems however that more was expressed on Stephen's face than merely "calmness, dignity, and confidence in God." It is true, however, that a heavenly peace can be visible upon the face of some people who are facing death. In the city of Haarlem, Holland, a statue has been erected to commemorate the public execution by the Nazis of a number of hostages as a reprisal for the murder of one of their staff members. The statue represents a man facing a firing squad. The expression on his face is one of a vision of the glory and peace he was about to enter after the bullet would end his life on earth. Some of this may have been the angelic peace Stephen exuded. This peace is often the greatest condemnation to those who observe it. It was probably the sense of guilt, more than anything else, that made the members of the Sanhedrin so angry that they killed Stephen on the spot. The sight, more than the words, was unbearable.

The text of Stephen's defense, as we read it in ch. 7:1-53 is probably a condensed version, although it seems to be quite detailed. The opinion of scholars regarding its content is quite varied. The pendulum swings from one side to the other. Some consider it "out of place," others, "difficult but striking," and others again, "of inestimable value."

One of the questions is how Luke was able to reproduce the text of Stephen's address in such detail. There is no indication that the trial was a public one. The most logical explanation, as *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggests, is that Paul, who must have been present, passed the information on to Luke, later on when they became acquainted with each other.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "As regards its scope and object, the two main clues to it are the accusation which Stephen rose to rebut, and the application with which he ended in vers. 51-53. If we keep these two things steadily in view, we shall not be very far wrong if we say that Stephen sought to clear himself by showing, (1) by his historical summary, what a true and thorough Israelite he was in heart and feeling and fellowship with the fathers of his race, and therefore how unlikely to speak blasphemous words against either Moses or the temple; (2) how Moses himself had foretold the coming of Christ as a prophet like himself, to enunciate some new doctrines; (3) how at every stage of their history their fathers had resisted those who were sent to them by God, and that now his judges were playing the same part."

It is difficult for us, being separated from the incident by culture and time, to imagine the tension of the occasion. The atmosphere must have been loaded with prejudice and hatred. Stephen faced the group of men who had condemned Jesus to death and who had forbidden the apostles to preach His resurrection. The suggestion that Stephen would receive a fair trial is ludicrous. Also if, as we suppose, Stephen was in fact a Grecian Jew, the fact that he had to defend himself before a court that consisted exclusively of Hebrew Jews put him in the difficult position of having to prove his allegiance to the fundamentals of Judaism before a body that would be strongly

¹⁸⁶ Deut. 19:15

¹⁸⁷ Ex. 34:29,30

prejudiced against him even before he opened his mouth. This may account for the rather lengthy historical introduction of the speech he gave in his own defense.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary remarks: “That Stephen delivered this speech, not in the mother-tongue, but in Greek, is next to certain, from the conformity of its style to that of the Septuagint, and from the conformity of some of its details to that translation where it diverges from the Hebrew text; and if he was a Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jew, as there is every reason to think he was, this would be to him the more natural language. In this case we have here no mere translation of the speech (as in the case of Paul’s address on the castle stairs, Acts 22), but the original.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary gives us an excellent condensation of the speech: “As Stephen was now vindicating himself from the false charges brought against him, he shows that he had uttered no blasphemy, either against God, Moses, or the temple; but states that his accusers, and the Jews in general, were guilty of the faults with which they charged him: that they had from the beginning rejected and despised Moses, and had always violated his laws. He proceeds to state that there is no blasphemy in saying that the temple shall be destroyed: they had been without a temple till the days of David; nor does God ever confine himself to temples built by hands, seeing he fills both heaven and earth; that Jesus is the prophet of whom Moses spoke, and whom they had persecuted, condemned, and at last put to death; that they were wicked and uncircumcised in heart and in ears, and always resisted the Holy Spirit as their fathers did. This is the substance of Stephen’s defense as far as he was permitted to make it: a defense which they could not confute; containing charges which they most glaringly illustrated and confirmed, by adding the murder of this faithful disciple to that of his all-glorious Master.”

It must have been something rather humiliating for the members of the court, who were mostly doctors of the law, to have a layman explain to them the meaning of the facts that belonged to their field of expertise.

A superficial glance at Stephen’s representation of Abraham’s call might lead to the thought that he was incorrect in stating that God called him when he was still in Ur. The Genesis account gives the impression that the call came while Abraham was in Haran. Stephen’s version was evidently widely accepted by the rabbis of his time. We conclude from this that, when God called Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father’s household, his father, Terah, took the initiative and made the whole family migrate from Ur to Haran, but not to the land which God had promised to Abraham alone. We read: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.”¹⁸⁸ It wasn’t until “the old man died” (interpret the expression in the way the apostle Paul uses it) that Abraham was free to follow God’s call.

There is an insinuation in Stephen’s approach that, when God calls man and reveals Himself to him, man will always try to obstruct or slow down the realization of that revelation. It wasn’t until the death of him who wanted to keep the initiative, instead of following the divine leading, that Abraham entered the Promised Land. In beginning with Abraham’s call, Stephen established the fact that the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to their illustrious ancestor.

There are in Stephen’s address many suggestions that may not be very obvious to us, but that were definitely understood by the members of the court. In his quick review of the history of salvation, Stephen established the fact that the rite of circumcision was an outward seal of the covenant God had made with Abraham and his descendants; it was not an intrinsic part of the Law of Moses. Paul probably heard this statement and the seed of his later teaching about the place and meaning of circumcision may have been planted in his heart at this time. The controversy about circumcision had, of course, not arisen yet, since there had not been any converts to Christianity from among the pagans. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “This covenant blessing, Stephen implied, was not dependent upon the existence of the Temple but upon the promises and faithfulness of God.”

In his bird’s-eye view of Israel’s history, Stephen peeled off layer after layer of the gloss that tradition had put upon it. A closer look at their “glorious history” brought out the fact that a long line of rebellion and sin had marked it. The patriarchs, to whom Israel traced its origin, had sold their brother Joseph into slavery, after they had considered murdering him. When Moses came upon the scene and felt a burden to deliver his own people from the plight of their slavery: they rejected him. We often interpret the incident of Moses’ intervention in a fight between two Israelite men, after having killed an Egyptian himself, as an indication of his prematurely running ahead of God’s plan with His people. This interpretation may be valid, but Stephen used the story as an illustration of how Moses, whom the people in Stephen’s time considered to be the greatest character of the Scriptures, was initially rejected by his own people. Moses, ultimately, became God’s instrument for Israel’s deliverance. He became the father of the nation. It was he who predicted the coming of the Messiah, which is the point Stephen intended to make.

¹⁸⁸ Gen. 11:31

Stephen took more time recounting the calling of Moses than for any other part of his historical review. One of the reasons for this may be that it was at the moment of Moses' call that God, for the first time, appeared to a human being in glory and revealed His true identity as YHWH. Stephen simply called the voice that called Moses: "an angel." The Exodus account calls Him: "the angel of the LORD."¹⁸⁹ Whether the rabbis of Stephen's time considered "the angel of the LORD" to be identified with the coming Messiah, as we often do, I do not know.

One of the accusations against Stephen was that he spoke against the law. At the moment Moses received the law on the summit of Mount Sinai, however, the people were busy making their Golden Calf.

Stephen's quotation from the prophet Amos¹⁹⁰ is one of the most powerful parts of his address. There is no immediate record in the Pentateuch stating that the people of Israel worshipped idols during their desert journey. We find a hint of it in Moses' farewell speech, when he said: "They sacrificed to demons, which are not God."¹⁹¹ The intent of Amos' words was not to say that the Israelites committed open idolatry but that their hearts belonged to Moloch while they sacrificed to YHWH. Basing himself upon this Old Testament prophecy, which was irrefutable, made it very easy for Stephen to draw the parallel to his day to prove that, although the leaders of the nation professed to be zealous for Moses and the temple, their heart did not belong to God.

Stephen did not mention the fact that the tabernacle that was constructed in the desert had been neglected for centuries until the coming of David. He merely intimated that the temple built by Solomon, the original edifice of which the temple of his day was the outcome, was an extension of the tabernacle, which had been the vehicle of God's revelation in the desert.

The sin of the Pharisees and doctors of the law in Jesus' time was that they had shifted the focal point from the center to peripheral things. To them the issue was not God but the temple with its rituals and ceremonies. Jesus had lambasted the leaders of the people, calling them "blind": "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."¹⁹² They worshipped the temple instead of God.

Stephen alluded to King Solomon's words in his inaugural prayer: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"¹⁹³ Following this, he quoted Isaiah's words: "This is what the LORD says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?' declares the LORD."¹⁹⁴ In a most powerful way this layman made the point that the temple with all its rituals is an empty hull if God is not in it. The members of the Sanhedrin had excluded God from His temple and from their own lives. They had destroyed the worship of God by diverting it from the person of the Almighty to a building made by man.

Stephen's defense then turns into an accusation. He put the court on trial, using scriptural expressions. The words "uncircumcised hearts" are first found in Leviticus. Warning the Israelites about a possible captivity, God had said: "I sent them into the land of their enemies--then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin..."¹⁹⁵ And the words "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts" are borrowed from Deuteronomy, where Moses said: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer."¹⁹⁶

The essence of worship never consists in the place in which it is done but in the person who is worshipped. Jesus explained this in simple terms to the Samaritan woman: "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁹ Ex. 3:2

¹⁹⁰ Amos 5:25-27

¹⁹¹ Deut. 32:17

¹⁹² Matt. 23:16-22

¹⁹³ I Kings 8:27

¹⁹⁴ Isa. 66:1,2

¹⁹⁵ Lev. 26:41

¹⁹⁶ Deut. 10:16

¹⁹⁷ John 4:21,23-24

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary observes: "If the Temple is not necessary for the worship of God, neither is it a guarantee that men will worship God rightly. Stephen accused those who worshiped in the Temple of being stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, of resisting the Holy Spirit, and of betraying and murdering the Righteous One, thus following the example of their rebellious forefathers. Stephen had been accused of blaspheming the law of Moses. His answer was that it was not really he who was guilty of this sin but the Jewish people, who from the times of Moses had transgressed God's Word. He was accused of blaspheming God by setting aside the Temple. His answer was that Israel's history itself proved that the Temple was only a temporary institution and was not essential for the true worship of God."

It is clear, both from the Old Testament and the New, that if the rite of circumcision is not an outward symbol of an inward spiritual reality, it has no value. The removal of the foreskin represents the surrender of man's heart to the will of God and the willingness to hear and obey His voice. Being uncircumcised in heart and ears means resisting the will of God and being unwilling to obey His law. The apostle Paul rightly observes: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."¹⁹⁸ And in another place he writes: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh."¹⁹⁹

Matthew Henry's Commentary draws the lesson from Stephen's words: "There is that in our sinful hearts that always resists the Holy Ghost, a flesh that lusts against the Spirit, and wars against his motions; but in the hearts of God's elect, when the fullness of time comes, this resistance is overcome and overpowered, and after a struggle the throne of Christ is set up in the soul, and every thought that had exalted itself against it is brought into captivity to it, 2 Cor 10:4-5. That grace therefore which effects this change might more fitly be called victorious grace than irresistible."

In asking the question: "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One," Stephen makes a sweeping and generalizing statement. It may be true that some of the prophets escaped the wrath of the nation, but the history of Israel can be summed up with the declaration that the people of Israel generally persecuted those who spoke in the Name of God. Jesus often referred to this in several of His addresses. In the Sermon on the Mount we read the Beatitude: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."²⁰⁰ His most condemning and compassionate words are found in His accusatory address to the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."²⁰¹ Jesus suggested that the Israelites were the descendants of Cain rather than of Abraham. Jesus singled out the prophet Zechariah who had been assassinated by order of King Joash.²⁰² The tradition says that Isaiah, who more than anyone else, foretold the coming of the Messiah, was sawn in two by order of King Manasseh.

The apostle John continues this train of thought in his First Epistle, where we read: "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous."²⁰³ If one thing was lacking in the courtroom of the Sanhedrin it was love. The ones who sat in judgment over Stephen were driven by hatred and their hearts were filled with murder. What they were about to do with Stephen was the immediate result of the presence of the powers of darkness that ruled the assembly.

¹⁹⁸ Rom. 2:28,29

¹⁹⁹ Phil. 3:3,4

²⁰⁰ Matt. 5:11,12

²⁰¹ Matt. 23:33-37

²⁰² II Chron. 24:22

²⁰³ I John 3:10-12

Stephen's parting shot is the accusation that they, who prided themselves of keeping the law to the minutest detail, actually broke it. Jesus referred to this when He said to the same people: "You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy and faithfulness."²⁰⁴ The "more important matters" are defined as: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "²⁰⁵ There was neither love for God nor love for their neighbor in the hearts of these men.

Stephen's words: "You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels" have puzzled Bible students throughout the centuries. It was evidently a common concept among the rabbis that angels were present and instrumental in the making and giving of the stone tablets to Moses when he was with the Lord on Mount Sinai. The pivotal Greek word used in this sentence is *diatage*, which means "arrangement" or "institution." The KJV renders it, "instrumentality." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "This interesting fact, that the ministration of angels was employed in the sublime scenes of the giving of the law at mount Sinai is not expressly recorded in the Old Testament; but it is certainly implied in Ps 68:17, 'The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them [as in] Sinai, in the holy place' (compare also Deut 32:2, in the Septuagint): it is explicitly stated (as if it had been a known fact) in Gal 3:19, and Heb 2:2); the general doctrine of Scripture regarding the ministry of angels, especially in all the higher operations of providence and grace, is quite in accordance with it; and Josephus and Philo both speak of it as a recognized fact."

The reaction of the assembly to Stephen's accusation is one of rage and fury. The Greek word used is *diaprio*, which literally means: "to saw asunder." The KJV renders it: "cut to the heart." Shakespeare uses a similar expression in Hamlet. When Hamlet confronts his mother with her sin of having married the man who murdered his father, she cries out: "O Hamlet, thou has cleft my heart in twain." To which Hamlet responds: "O, throw away the worser part of it, and live the purer with the other half."²⁰⁶ The members of the Sanhedrin, however, did not consider the possibility of throwing away "the worser part of it." This dignified body of judges changed into a raging mob. Like wild animals, they fall upon their prey, dragging Stephen out of the city and stoning him to death. There was nothing legal or dignified in what they did. No sentence was pronounced and the customary waiting period between the sentence and the execution was dispensed with.

The judges had jumped to the conclusion that Stephen was guilty of the sin of blasphemy. Based on his statement: "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." There was nothing blasphemous in this statement. The words were a direct reference to Daniel's prophecy: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."²⁰⁷ Since Jesus had frequently used the title "Son of Man", and since it was considered to be one of the titles of the Messiah, the judges considered Stephen guilty of suggesting that Jesus was the one Daniel had seen in his vision.

Verses 54-56 give us a rare vision of both hell and heaven at the same time. Hell burst open in the reaction of the members of the Sanhedrin and heaven opened before Stephen's eyes. This dear servant of God saw Jesus rise from His throne and stand up to welcome and embrace him. It appears that several of God's saints are allowed such a vision at the point of death. Death is the ugliest and fiercest foe we face in this life. God hates it even more than we do, but Stephen's vision at the moment of his home going is meant for our comfort. God wants us to look forward to the moment when we will walk through the veil into the reality of His glory. The only event that can surpass this will be the Second Coming. In the meantime, even before the time has come when body, soul, and spirit are separated, while hell is raging around us, we may comfort ourselves with Stephen's vision, both for ourselves and while grieving those who went before us.

This dual revelation of heaven and hell sometimes occurs in other forms in daily life. Speaking about her time in a German extermination camp, Corrie ten Boom writes: "More than conquerors... It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it, experienced it minute by minute—poor, hated, hungry. We are more than conquerors. Not 'we shall be.' We are! Life in Ravensbrück took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew better daily, truth upon truth, glory upon glory."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Matt 23:23

²⁰⁵ Luke 10:27

²⁰⁶ Hamlet: Act III, Sc, IV

²⁰⁷ Dan. 7:13,14

²⁰⁸ *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill

Stephen's last concern is for his murderers. His last words are a prayer: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," asking God not to enter this murder as evidence against them on the Day of Judgment. His words are an almost direct quote of Jesus' prayer during His crucifixion: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."²⁰⁹ Stephen's concern for the soul of his murderers is a deeply moving proof of God's love for sinners. For it was the love of God that was reaching out to these people who had sold themselves to the devil. These words seem irreconcilable with the fierce accusations Stephen shouted at his judges earlier. We find the same contrasting emotions in the Lord Jesus during the healing of the man with the shriveled hand. We read: "And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said..."²¹⁰ God's anger and love coexist in perfect harmony.

It has been observed that this is the first instance in Scripture in which a prayer is directed to Jesus.

At this point, Luke introduces to us Saul, who would later become the apostle Paul. We are again amazed at the subtle way in which Luke introduces his subjects. The further we read in Acts, the more it becomes obvious how extremely well the narrative is put together. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this: "This appearance of Saul upon the stage of St. Luke's narrative is an element which will soon change the whole current of the narrative, and divert it from Jerusalem to the whole earth. Nothing can be more striking than this introduction of the young man Saul to our view as an accomplice (albeit 'ignorantly in unbelief') in the martyrdom of Stephen. Who that stood there and saw him keeping the clothes of the witnesses would have imagined that he would become the foremost apostle of the faith which he sought to destroy from off the face of the earth?" Augustine attributes Paul's later conversion to the witnessing of Stephen's death. The first verse of the next chapter, however, states that, at this point Saul fully approved of Stephen's execution. The Greek word rendered "giving approval" is *suneudokeo*, which suggests more than merely voting in favor of the action. It expresses pleasure in what is done. If Stephen's death made any positive impression upon Saul it was not more than the planting of a seed that would later grow to a conviction of sin and make him ripe for the grace of God's forgiveness.

C. The Gospel in Samaria 8:4-25

Luke records that Stephen's death triggered a great persecution for the church in Jerusalem to the point that most of the believers fled the city. It seems that Saul was one of the main instigators of this satanic fury. After his conversion, this period of his life kept haunting the apostle, as is evident from his later testimony in Acts: "And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him,"²¹¹ and his references to it in the epistles: "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God,"²¹² and: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief."²¹³

The persecution scattered most of the believers from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria and later beyond. Whether everybody, except the apostles, left is doubtful. It is also probable that several who fled returned after a while. The fact that the apostles did not flee is remarkable. Their life was more endangered than anyone else's. Their decision to remain in spite of threats against them must have been due to the conviction that God wanted them to stay, regardless of the consequences. They must also have felt that they were under special divine protection. The safest place to be is always in the center of God's will and that is where they found themselves to be.

Jesus' words at their first commissioning service must have rung in their ears. Their Lord had foretold this persecution. He had said to them: "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles," and: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."²¹⁴

The persecution was meant to exterminate the Gospel, but it achieved the exact opposite of what it was meant to accomplish. The blood of the first martyr, Stephen, became in fact the seed of the church. *The Pulpit Commentary* remarks in a Homily on these verses: "Thus the immediate effect of the persecution raised at Jerusalem

²⁰⁹ Luke 23:34

²¹⁰ Mark 3:5 (NKJV)

²¹¹ Acts 22:20

²¹² I Cor. 15:9

²¹³ I Tim. 1:13

²¹⁴ Matt. 10:17-18,28-31

for the extirpation of the faith of Jesus Christ was that that faith was carried into cities and districts and countries where it might never have been heard of but for the persecutions. Samaria heard the gospel; it was deposited in the heart of the eunuch for dissemination in Ethiopia. From Azotus to Caesarea it was proclaimed aloud. It passed on to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. It took deep root in Antioch, and was passed on from thence through all Asia and on into Europe.” It was the persecution that made the believers carry out the Lord’s command to “be [His] witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²¹⁵ History is filled with instances that indicate that persecution is often the best that can happen to a fledgling church. The main stimulus for the rapid expansion of the Reformation, for instance, turned out to be the burning at the stake of those who were caught possessing and reading the Bible. It was mainly due to the communist efforts to eradicate religion in China that the church multiplied more than one thousand percent in a few decades.

One of the amazing aspects of this phenomenon is that the lay section of the church had the main thrust in the spreading of the Gospel, this evangelization. The apostles, the clergy, stayed in Jerusalem. The Greek word, rendered “preach,” is *euaggelizo*, from which we derived the verb “to evangelize.” The word does not mean to preach a sermon, but simply to pass on the good news of Jesus’ resurrection and its consequences.

Enter Philip, one of the seven deacons, another layman. It is the general consensus of Bible scholars that this Philip is not the apostle by the same name. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* explains: “Philip—not the apostle of that name (as some of the fathers supposed), for in that case (as Grotius observes) the apostles would have had no need to send some of themselves to lay their hands on the newly-baptized disciples (Acts 8:14-17). It was the deacon of that name, who in the list of the seven stands next to Stephen, likely as being the next most prominent. Probably (as Meyer supposes) the persecution was especially directed against Stephen’s colleagues.” Philip fled to Samaria, not necessarily to the capital city, but to the province by that name. Miraculous signs that caught the attention of the people accompanied his proclamation of Christ.

We know from Jesus’ visit to Samaria that the Jews and Samaritans were, to put it mildly, not on friendly terms. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “The deadly hatred that subsisted between these two nations is known to all. The Jews cursed them, and believed them to be accursed. Their most merciful wish to the Samaritans was, that they might have no part in the resurrection; or, in other words, that they might be annihilated.” The Samaritans were the descendants of a few members of the tribe of Ephraim and a larger group of people who had entered the country by forced migration after the ten tribes had been carried off in captivity by the Assyrians.²¹⁶ Philip’s proclamation was in obedience to the specific command given by Jesus on the day of His ascension to His “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²¹⁷

A large revival broke out when several demon-possessed people had been delivered and others with physical ailments were healed. Satan had had his stranglehold on these people as he had in Jerusalem. The marked difference between the two places was, however, that even after the demonic powers had been exorcised in Jerusalem, the people in power still did not turn to their Messiah for the forgiveness of their sins. But in Samaria, even the powerful witchdoctor, Simon, professed Christ and asked to be baptized.

Simon’s supernatural powers were of demonic origin. The public had been unable to distinguish between power that came from God and that which originated with Satan. It seems that even Simon himself was confused on this point. Simon had used his power to promote himself. He had evidently not even given credit to the masters he served but he acted as if he was himself a supernatural person. He recognized, however, that Philip’s power was superior to his, and it seems that the main reason for his acceptance of the Gospel was not the salvation of his soul but the acquisition of the power that Philip demonstrated. It is obvious that Simon feared to lose his influence upon the people. He decided that the best way to maintain his prominent position was to follow the Gospel and, if possible, acquire the authority to bestow the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon whom he chose.

When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem about the conversion of the Samaritans, Peter and John were delegated to investigate and confirm. The council of apostles must have understood that the events in Samaria were consistent with the commission Jesus had given to them to take the Gospel there. Jesus’ own visit to the region had, in a way, laid the groundwork for this outreach.

The fact that the Samaritans believed and were baptized but that the Holy Spirit had not come upon them in the same manner as He had come upon the apostles and believers in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost has given rise to various and sometimes conflicting conclusions among scholars. The problem is the distinction between regeneration by the Holy Spirit and the filling of the Holy Spirit which endows a person with supernatural gifts. Since these people had professed faith in Jesus Christ and were baptized in His Name for the forgiveness of their

²¹⁵ Ch. 1:8

²¹⁶ See II Kings 17:24-29

²¹⁷ ch. 1:8

sins, there can be little doubt that they were born again. Whether this made them members of the body of Christ is another question. Paul would write to the Corinthians on a later date: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”²¹⁸ It seems that this confirmation of the unity of all who confess Christ Jesus as their savior, this being baptized into one body, is the point of vital importance in this case. It was for this reason that Peter and John laid their hands upon the new Samaritan believers and the Holy Spirit confirmed them by bestowing His gifts upon them, assigning them their place in the body of Christ. From that they on the church no longer existed of Messianic Jews but of members of the body of Christ. Henceforth, Jesus Christ was their peace. In the words of Paul: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”²¹⁹ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* astutely observes: “The imposition of hands was not necessary for the Samaritans; but it was necessary for the apostles, that they might be fully convinced that God was indeed breaking the barriers of racial prejudice and including these half-breed people within the fellowship of the Church. This was not a new Pentecost but an extension of the one Pentecost to the Samaritan people.”

The result of the apostles’ prayer and imposition of hands was that the Holy Spirit came upon those people in a visible way. We do not read that they spoke in tongues, but that may have been one of the manifestations of the Spirit’s coming. We read in a parallel situation later on in Acts: “When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”²²⁰ In both instances, the conditions were unique. It would be a definite mistake to build a theology upon any of these events, or proclaim them to be a paradigm for the development of spiritual experiences, as some people have done. The importance of this chapter is to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit opened a new door for the witness of Christ’s resurrection and for the growth of the church.

Simon the sorcerer recognized the importance of the phenomena he witnessed, and he saw an opportunity to strengthen his position among the people of Samaria. The flaw in his judgment was that he thought Peter was the kind of person who could be bribed. It is to Simon’s effort that we owe the introduction of the word “simony” in the English language, which *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines as: “the buying or selling of a church office.” Peter’s sharp rebuke must have shaken the witchdoctor to the core. “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!” does not necessarily mean that Peter wished this man to be lost for eternity. It was meant to make him understand that he was in danger of ending up in hell unless he would make a definite break with his evil past and with the master he served. J. B. Phillips renders Peter’s word in the most shocking way: “To hell with you and your money!” In a footnote, the author adds: “These words are exactly what the Greek means. It is a pity that their real meaning is obscured by modern slang usage.” Eugene E. Peterson in his paraphrase of the New Testament, *The Message*, says basically the same: “To hell with your money! And you along with it.” If such words are shocking to the soul of the American Christian, what must they have been to Simon!

Peter’s sharp rebuke is, in fact, mixed with a deep compassion for Simon’s soul. Compassion does, however, not always wear kid gloves. Simon needed this spiritual slap in the face in order to come to the realization that he was not the great power he had imagined himself to be. He had been a pawn of the devil, who had carefully fed his ego to prepare him for the slaughter in hell. It is interesting to see that Peter analyzes Simon’s desire to maintain his place of importance as “bitterness.” The Greek word is *pikria*, which is sometimes used for “poison.” It was Simon’s hatred of people, and probably hatred of himself that drove him in his ambitions. His supplication that Peter pray for him is most pitiful. We don’t know what ultimately happened to Simon. Peter’s rebuke must have held out hope for him.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “St. Peter’s answer is remarkable, not only for the warmth with which he repudiates the proffered bribe, but also for the jealous humility with which he affirms that the gifts of the Spirit were not his to give, but were the gift of God.”

D. Conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch 8:26-40

After the arrival of the two apostles, Philip receives divine instructions to leave Samaria and go south. Whether the angel spoke to him in a dream or whether he had a vision or a visitation, we are not told. He departed, evidently, without asking questions.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments: “How circumstantially particular are these directions! Everything is so precisely marked that there is no danger of the apostle missing his way. He is to perform some great duty; but what, he is not informed. The road which he is to take is marked out; but what he is to do in that road, or

²¹⁸ I Cor. 12:13

²¹⁹ Eph. 2:14

²²⁰ ch. 19:6

how far he is to proceed, he is not told! It is GOD who employs him, and requires of him implicit obedience. If he do his will, according to the present direction, he shall know, by the issue, that God hath sent him on an errand worthy of his wisdom and goodness. ... God never sends any man on a message, without giving him such directions as shall prevent all mistakes and miscarriages, if simply and implicitly followed. This is also strictly true of the doctrines contained in his word: no soul ever missed salvation that simply followed the directions given in the word of God. Those who will refine upon everything, question the divine testimony, and dispute with their Maker, cannot be saved. And how many of this stamp are found, even among Christians, professing strict godliness!"

From a revival, which probably involved several thousand people, God drew Philip away to minister to a single individual. The fact that the man Philip was to meet on the road was a high placed official in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia does in no way detract from the fact that God bestows very personal attention upon individuals. Philip was not only taken from a bustling city with thousands of people, a place that we would call strategic in church planting, but he was told to go to the desert, where the expectation to find an audience is reduced to zero. According to *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, "the road-the desert road-that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," toward which Philip was directed, "refers to the portion of the road between Eleutheropolis and Gaza, which is without villages and exposed to Bedouin marauders of the desert." These instructions must have puzzled Philip. They probably seemed senseless to him, but this did not keep him from obeying them. As usual, God's foolishness is wiser than man's wisdom.²²¹

When Philip arrived at the place the angel had indicated, he crossed paths with the chariot of the eunuch. We may suppose that the queen's secretary of the treasury did not travel alone. He must have been accompanied by a host of underlings and his chariot was probably part of a larger caravan. To approach the chariot close enough to be able to strike up a conversation must not have been easy. But the Holy Spirit who prompted Philip also opened the way.

Whether this eunuch was an emasculated servant of the queen or not cannot be determined. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* believes that: "The term eunuch was given to persons in authority at court, to whom its literal meaning did not apply. Potiphar was probably an eunuch only as to his office; for he was a married man. See Gen 37:36; 39:1. And it is likely that this Ethiopian was of the same sort." His physical condition would have made a difference in his participation in the temple rituals. Eunuchs in the physical sense of the term were not allowed in the temple. The law states: "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD."²²² *The Pulpit Commentary* states about this man: "He was doubtless a proselyte of the gate. Eusebius ... speaks of him as the first Gentile convert, and as the first fruits of the faithful in the whole world. He adds, as Irenaeus before him had hinted, ... that he is reported to have preached the gospel to the Ethiopians, by which the prophecy of ... Psalm 68:31 was fulfilled. Later traditions speak of Candace as baptized by him."

Philip's task was made considerably easier by the fact that the man was reading from the scroll of Isaiah. The reading was done aloud, so Philip's question provided a natural link to his witness. In all probability the queen's treasurer was reading from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It could be, however, that he was also familiar with the Hebrew text, since it has been found that there were Jewish settlements in Ethiopia at that time. The quotation in Acts, however, is taken from the Septuagint.

It is significant to see how natural Philip's approach was. There was, first of all, the guidance and prompting of the Holy Spirit. There is no biblical basis for lapel grabbing evangelism. The most effective witness of the Gospel is done to people to whom the Lord directs us. If we have made ourselves available to the Lord to speak or not speak, according to His guidance, and we pray to be able to make natural contacts, we will be great winners of souls. It has been said that the witness of the Gospel amounts to kicking in of open doors.

Philip addressed the man at the point of his need. His question was relevant because Isaiah's prophecy begged for interpretation. The text quoted is Isaiah 53:7,8. The fact that the eunuch happened to be reading this particular verse of Scripture was another indication of God's hand in this encounter. At this point, there can have been little doubt left in Philip's mind as to why God had directed him to this place. Even the obstacle that a minister of a foreign country would ask "a hitchhiker" in the desert to join him in his chariot to give instructions in the Scriptures was overcome with no apparent difficulties. Without any hesitation, the eunuch asked Philip to climb up. How easy it is to witness to someone who is spiritually hungry!

The text in Acts is not a literal quotation from Isaiah. The sentences are reversed but there is no change of meaning. The words quoted are probably what Philip heard when he approached the chariot. The eunuch must have read the preceding verses earlier, which read: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was

²²¹ See I Cor. 1:25

²²² Deut. 23:1

crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”²²³ The eunuch’s question as to whether Isaiah spoke about himself or someone else, therefore, refers to the whole chapter.

In the Greek we find again the word *euaggelizo* in the sentence that reads in the NIV: “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and *told him the good news* about Jesus.” Philip showed this man the Gospel in Isaiah’s text. It seems that in most instances in which the Gospel was preached to the Jews, the emphasis was on the resurrection of Christ. Isaiah refers briefly to the resurrection, as in: “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”²²⁴ Most of Philip’s testimony to this man will have revolved around Christ’s death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Philip did more than answering the eunuch’s question: “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” He showed him the solution to the problem of the sin in his own life. This conclusion is obvious from the fact that the eunuch asked to be baptized as they passed a stream of water.

The older versions, as well as the NKJV have inserted vs. 37: “Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” These words are not found in most of the Greek manuscripts and are consequently omitted in modern translation, with the exception of TLB. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The whole of ver. 37 of the A.V. is omitted in the R.T., on the authority of the best existing manuscripts. But on the other hand, Irenaeus, in the third book against Heresies, Acts 12:8, distinctly quotes a portion of this verse ... and Cyprian, in his third book of Testimonies, 43, quotes the other part of the verse.”

It appears from this report that baptism was administered immediately upon conversion; it is also obvious that it was done by way of emersion, both of which are still points of controversy in our time.

The words “the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away,” have been interpreted variously as a supernatural removal of Philip from the scene of baptism or a prompting by the Spirit to Philip to withdraw. The thought that an angel would have carried Philip through the air from Gaza to Azotus seems in fact strange. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggest: “Perhaps this means no more than that the Holy Spirit suggested to the mind of Philip that he should withdraw abruptly from the eunuch, and thus leave him to pursue his journey, reflecting on the important incidents which had taken place. Some suppose that the angel of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord, are the same person throughout this chapter. There is a remarkable reading in the Codex Alexandrinus which exists thus in two lines: *‘The Spirit of the Lord fell upon the eunuch: But the angel of the Lord snatched away Philip.’* This reading is found in several other MSS. and in some versions. Many think that the Spirit or angel of God carried off Philip in some such manner as the Apocrypha represents the transportation of Habakkuk, who was taken up by the hair of the head, and carried from Judea to Babylon! For such an interposition there was no need. When Philip had baptized the eunuch, the Spirit of God showed him that it was not the will of God that he should accompany the eunuch to Meroe, but, on the contrary, that he should hasten away to Ashdod; as God had in that, and the neighboring places, work sufficient to employ him in.”

Philip eventually settled in Caesarea. Luke records that during his travels with Paul he received hospitality in Philip’s home. We read: “Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.”²²⁵ Having heard and believed the Gospel and having committed himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the eunuch no longer needed Philip. The joy of the Lord accompanied him on the remainder of his homeward journey.

E. Conversion of Saul

9:1-31

At this point, Luke arrives at the main topic of his book, which is the life and work of the Apostle Paul who became God’s chosen instrument to bring the Gospel to the gentiles. Luke had already introduced Saul in the previous chapters, as the one who had voted in favor of and assisted in the execution of Stephen. Here he comes to us as the main factor in the persecution of the church. The Greek text, which is rendered: “Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples,” is very emphatic. *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament* explains that: “Saul breathed, like a war-horse who sniffed the smell of battle.” The statement that Saul was breathing murder implies that he was personally responsible for the death of several believers, both men and women, in Jerusalem.

²²³ Isa. 53:4-6

²²⁴ Isa. 53:11

²²⁵ Acts 21:8

Why Paul was particularly interested in persecuting Christians in Damascus is not explained. Samaria would have been a closer target, but being a devout Jew, Paul was probably not willing to contaminate himself by entering there. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes that there was a large group of Jews, living in Damascus. We read: "There may have been thirty or forty synagogues at Damascus, and not less than forty thousand resident Jews."

Luke fails to explain to us why Saul wanted letters from the high priest to persecute Christians in Damascus. Evidently, the Sanhedrin, of which the high priest was the president, claimed jurisdiction over all synagogues everywhere. The Christians Saul want to arrest in Damascus were probably mainly people who had fled Jerusalem when the persecution broke out.

On the road to Damascus, Saul experienced the most radical turnabout of his life. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus has become such a well-known story that "the road to Damascus" has become a standard expression of any pivotal occurrence in one's life. Much has been said and written about the inner conflict that must have plagued this inquisitor as a result of his witnessing the martyrdom of Stephen. This had triggered hatred in his soul, but it must also have planted a seed of wonder about the truth of Stephen's Gospel for which he had been willing to die. Saul may have seemed single-minded in his effort to stamp out Christianity, but what he wanted to eradicate most of all was, probably, his own inner conflict.

Close to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Saul and stopped him in his track. Paul recounts this experience twice in Acts, once in addressing the mob that tried to kill him,²²⁶ and the second time when defending himself before the Roman governor Felix and King Agrippa.²²⁷ In the latter version, Paul adds some words, spoken by Jesus, that are not found in the other accounts: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." The NKJV maintains the text that is found in the KJV, but not in any of the newer versions: " 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' And the Lord said to him..." Evidently, they are not found in any reliable Greek manuscripts. Since Paul used the words in his account before Felix and Agrippa, however, they must have been part of the conversation between Jesus and himself.

Barnes' Notes comments: "The expression 'to kick against the prick' is derived from the action of a stubborn and unyielding ox kicking against the goad. And as the ox would injure no one by it but himself; as he would gain nothing, it comes to denote 'an obstinate and refractory disposition and course of conduct, resisting the authority of him who has a right to command, and opposing the leadings of Providence, to the injury of him who makes the resistance.' It denotes 'rebellion against lawful authority, and thus getting into greater difficulty by attempting to oppose the commands to duty.' This is the condition of every sinner. If people wish to be happy, they should cheerfully submit to the authority of God. They should not rebel against his dealings. They should not complain against their Creator. They should not resist the claims of their consciences. By all this they only injure themselves. No man can resist God or his own conscience and be happy." Those words, which are omitted here but which were obviously spoken, give us to believe that Paul knew in his heart that Jesus was the Messiah and that the report of His resurrection from the dead was true.

Putting the three accounts of Saul's conversion together, we understand that the people who accompanied Saul on the road to Damascus saw the light but did not hear the voice of Jesus speaking to him. The sound they heard, as Luke records, must have been Saul's voice.

In this encounter, Jesus penetrates to the core of Saul's problem. Saul never thought he persecuted Jesus of Nazareth; he may have thought that he only persecuted the people who were corrupting Judaism by following a counterfeit prophet. In reality, Saul had set his heart against Jesus Himself. In his mind Saul must have dismissed the person of Jesus as irrelevant since He had been crucified and thus was no longer a threat. But deeper down, his resistance was focused on Jesus, who had claimed to be the Messiah. The beauty of Jesus' words is that He identified Himself with those who were persecuted. In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus expressed the same principle in a positive way. To the righteous He said: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."²²⁸

The divine encounter left Saul of Tarsus blind. The fiery inquisitor, who planned to search out Christians and kill them, entered Damascus as the blind man he had always been, being led by the hand. The experience left Saul shaken to the core. He was unable to eat or drink for three days. One of the most painful experiences for a person is to see himself as God sees him. He would later confess to the church in Corinth that he saw himself as

²²⁶ Acts 22:6-11

²²⁷ Acts 26:12-16

²²⁸ Matt. 25:40

“one abnormally born.”²²⁹ The Lord left Saul to himself in the dark for three days, giving him time to digest what happened to him.

We do not learn directly what all went on in Saul’s mind during those three days. We know that he fasted and prayed and that he had another vision, this time of a man, named Ananias, who came and prayed for him. Saul had no guarantee that his blindness was not a lasting condition. It is not unlikely that Jesus allowed him to settle for the fact that he would be impaired in this way for the rest of his life, before giving him the vision of Ananias’ coming to pray for him.

We know nothing about Ananias apart from what is stated in these verses. He may have been a refugee from Jerusalem, but the prevailing view is that he was a citizen of Damascus. How he had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, we do not know. It took some convincing on the part of Jesus to make Ananias fulfill this vision for Saul. This disciple’s reluctance is quite understandable to us. He only knew that Saul had come to Damascus for the purpose of catching Christians and killing them. But Jesus overruled his objections by ordering him to go. Ananias must have been more than amazed at God’s surprises. Who could ever have thought that Jesus would turn a murderer around in his tracks and make him the man of God’s choice! Ananias’ obedience is exemplary.

Jesus’ explanation to Ananias is worth a closer look: “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Ananias undoubtedly passed on these words to Saul.

So, Saul was told that not only his main ministry would be to the gentiles and that God would use him to testify before governors and kings, but also that this would involve personal suffering. The testimony before the highest worldly authorities would involve imprisonment, a fate to which Saul had subjected his own victims. God wanted Saul to feel what he had done to others. Throughout his life, he would never be allowed to forget this. The same was true about his suffering. Although there is total forgiveness and restoration, there is also righteous retribution. God’s grace does not let us “off the hook.” We do pay for the sins we have committed before we confessed them. There is healing but the scars will remain with us as a constant reminder. C. S. Lewis illustrates this beautifully in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in *The Horse and his Boy*. A girl, Aravis, is clawed by a lion who mauls her back. Aravis had fled her parental home, after drugging the slave girl who was responsible for her safety. The girl is beaten when she wakes up. It turns out that the lion is Aslan, and that the claw marks respond exactly to the number of stripes the whip had made on the slave girl’s back. Aslan makes Aravis pay for what she had done to her slave girl. Saul, or Paul, would know for the rest of his life why he suffered pain and persecution. Paul would later recognize this. Writing to the church in Corinth and comparing himself to other Christian workers, he writes: “I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”²³⁰ And to Timothy he wrote: “And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am.”²³¹

It was part of Ananias’ obedience to the vision he had received that he accepted Saul as a brother in Christ. We may suppose that this was not an easy transition for him. Corrie ten Boom, who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp where her sister died, went back to Germany at the end of World War II. During one of her evangelistic meetings, she met a man whom she recognized as a former camp guard. The man stretched out his hand to greet her, saying that he had become a Christian and that the Lord had forgiven him. Corrie hesitated for a moment before shaking the man’s hand, remembering the crimes committed in the camp and thinking how easy it was to say that God had forgiven. Ananias probably had to overcome the same kind of reluctance. He must have been familiar with Saul’s criminal record. He may have personally known people who had been murdered by him. “Saul, brother!” contains a world of grace. In placing his hands on Saul’s head, Ananias forgave Saul his sins against the church in the name of the church.

Scholars have argued the point as to whether Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit before his baptism or afterward. Also Ananias’ role in this has been a matter of discussion. Thus far the Holy Spirit had either come upon people without the intervention of human prayer or as a result of the prayers and imposition of hands of the apostles. Some have drawn the conclusion from this that Ananias must have been the leader of the church in Antioch. The

²²⁹ I Cor. 15:8

²³⁰ II Cor. 11:23-27

²³¹ II Tim. 1:11,12

text does not explain any of this and, if we remember that every believer is a priest in the house of the Lord, these points ought not to present any problem to us.

Luke tells us that “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that the light in which Saul saw the risen Lord was so bright that it damaged his cornea and that literal scabs covered his eyeballs. But *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “It is not said that scales literally fell from his eyes, but that an effect followed *AS IF* scales had been suddenly taken off. Evidently, the expression is designed to mean no more than this. The effect was such as would take place if some dark, imperious substance had been placed before the eyes, and had been suddenly removed. The cure was as sudden, the restoration to sight was as immediate, as if such an interposing substance had been suddenly removed. This is all that the expression fairly implies, and this is all that the nature of the case demands. As the blindness had been caused by the natural effect of the light, probably on the optic nerve... it is manifest that no literal removing of scales would restore the vision. We are therefore to lay aside the idea of literal scales falling to the earth. No such thing is affirmed, and no such thing would have met the case.”

Some scholars have suggested that Saul’s vision caused permanent damage to his eyes and that “the thorn in the flesh”²³² was an eye disease that plagued him for the rest of his life. The apostle’s reference to a sickness in his Epistle to the Galatians would support this. We read there: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”²³³ This theory has not received much following.

In the Homiletic section of *The Pulpit Commentary* we read the following beautiful observation about Saul’s experience: “Had St. Paul from the first really known Jesus Christ, and had he known the worthlessness of Levitical or Pharisaic righteousness, he would never have been found in the ranks of the enemies of Christ. But he acted in ignorance and in unbelief. When the scales fell off the eyes of his understanding, the rebound of his spirit toward his Lord was instantaneous. From this we learn a lesson of caution in judging even the unbeliever. There may be some cause of his unbelief which we know not of, but which God knows, and will perhaps some day remove. Then the skeptic will come with a bruised and humble spirit to Christ, and the Ethiopian will change his skin.”

There seems to be a discrepancy between Luke’s account of Saul’s subsequent activities, which states: “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God,” and Paul’s own version of the facts as stated in his Epistle to the Galatians: “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.”²³⁴ It is generally supposed that at one point in Luke’s narrative, Paul left for Arabia where he spent two or three years. The question is, at which point. Was it after he had given testimony to his conversion in Damascus, or did he only preach in Damascus after his return from Arabia? *The Pulpit Commentary* mentions the possibility that the place of Paul’s retirement was “*Auranitis*, bordering upon Arabia Deserts, and reckoned as part of Arabia, not above two days’ journey from Damascus.” The majority of commentators, however, favor the Peninsula of Sinai. On this *The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “On the assumption that the Sinaitic Peninsula is meant, Bishop Lightfoot says, ‘He was attracted thither by a spirit akin to that which formerly had driven Elijah to the same region. Standing on the threshold of the new covenant, he was anxious to look upon the birthplace of the old; that, dwelling for a while in seclusion in the presence of the mount that burned with fire, he might ponder over the transient glories of the ministration of death, and apprehend its real purpose in relation to the more glorious covenant which was now to supplant it.’ ”

It is only logical to suppose that the radical change in Saul’s heart required a prolonged period of reflection and maturing. The emphasis in Paul’s testimony to the Galatians seems to be that the Father took His time to reveal His Son in the life of Paul before allowing him to begin preaching the Gospel. We may, therefore, suppose that there is a large gap between verses 19 and 20 in Luke’s account. It is difficult to determine how long Saul spent in Arabia. In Galatians, he mentions “three years,”²³⁵ but whether this includes the period of his Arabian exile is not clear.

It is stated that Saul preached in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus was the Son of God and that He was the Messiah. This is the first instance in the Book of Acts where it is stated that Jesus is the Son of God. There

²³² See II Cor. 12:7

²³³ Gal. 4:13-16

²³⁴ Gal. 1:15-17

²³⁵ Gal. 1:18

had never been any doubt in the minds of the Jews that the Messiah would be the Son of God. The question was whether Jesus was the Messiah.

The irony in Saul's preaching in Damascus was that it was done in the very synagogues for which he had received letters from the high priest to arrest Christians and bring them to trial. Saul may have had high expectations about the results of his preaching. He may have thought that the fact that, as a former inquisitor, he now preached the message he had tried to eradicate would have enormous results. He probably had not counted on the suspicion he aroused in his audience. Many of them didn't trust him. As his testimony became more irrefutable the opposition also mounted to the point where the Jews plotted to take his life. From Paul's own account of his escape in his letter to the Corinthians, we understand that the Jews had involved the Roman government in the matter. There must have been some political tension behind this which does not come to the surface in the text. In Second Corinthians we read Paul's rather laconic report: "In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands."²³⁶ *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* notes on this: "At this time Damascus was under the government of Aretas, king of Arabia, who was now at war with Herod, his son-in-law, who had put away his daughter in order to marry Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. As Herod was supported by the Romans, Saul's enemies might intimate that he was in league with them or Herod; and, as the gates of the city were constantly watched and shut, that no spy might enter, and no fugitive get away, they thought it would be easy to apprehend him; and doubtless got orders for the different officers at the gates to be on the look-out that he might not be permitted to escape."

Saul encountered the same kind of suspicion concerning the genuineness of his conversion from the side of the apostles in Jerusalem as he initially met with in Damascus. It seems strange to us that, of all people, the apostles could not bring themselves to believe that the Lord Jesus could turn a man like Saul around in his tracks and turn a murderer into a saint. Evidently, they had never prayed for his conversion. Had they asked the Lord if Saul's conversion was real, they would have known. It also seems that in the three years between Saul's journey to Damascus and his return to Jerusalem, news would have come to Jerusalem about the events. Their suspicion that Saul wanted to trick the church in Jerusalem and work his way into the inner circle in order to destroy it, must have kept them from searching for the truth. Even the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit as they were, did not always follow the right path. An exception was Barnabas, the man who had lost the vote to become an apostle. It probably did not take Barnabas too long to recognize Christ in brother Saul. Barnabas earned his name: Son of prophecy, or son of consolation." This humble man became an important link in the spreading of the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the world, by simply introducing Saul to the apostles.

Barnes' Notes observes about the apostles' apprehension: "It is not unnatural, however, to have doubts respecting an open and virulent enemy of the gospel who suddenly professes a change in favor of it. The human mind does not easily cast off suspicion of some unworthy motive, and open itself at once to entire confidence. When great and notorious sinners profess to be converted-people who have been violent, artful, or malignant-it is natural to ask whether they have not some unworthy motive still in their professed change. Confidence is a plant of slow growth, and starts up, not by a sudden profession, but is the result of a course of life which is worthy of affection and of trust." In spite of the truth of these remarks, I still believe that there must have been some carnality in the minds of the apostles that kept their minds closed to a reaching out to the man they believed to be lost.

Saul's fervent testimony and his superior logic in debating with the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem accounts for the new trouble he got himself into. Saul's knowledge of Greek was probably superior to that of the other apostles, which made him the ideal person to address the Greek speaking section of the population. Instead of allowing themselves to be convinced and convicted, they reacted with such hatred that they plotted murder. As it turns out, the apostle Paul appeared prone to become the object of assassination plots. A strange reputation!

When the other apostles heard about this they decided to assure Saul's safety by making him return to his native Tarsus. Paul's vision in the temple during his stay in Jerusalem may have played an important part in his return to his birthplace. We read in the apostle's defense later before the mob that wanted to lynch him: "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"²³⁷ Tarsus was the chief city of Cilicia, the southeastern portion of Asia Minor, with a substantial Jewish colony, but definitely in gentile territory.

²³⁶ II Cor. 11:32,33

²³⁷ Acts 22:17-21

Luke's comment that "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" is proof of the fact that Paul had been the driving force behind the persecution. His conversion meant a period in which the believers could catch their breath. It has been observed, however, that the church of Jesus Christ usually grows more rapidly in times of persecution than in peace.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary concludes this chapter with a digest of Paul's conversion which is worthy of a closer look: "The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is one of the most remarkable facts recorded in the history of the Christian church. When we consider the man; the manner in which he was brought to the knowledge of the truth; the impression made on his own mind and heart by the vision he had on his way to Damascus, and the effect produced in all his subsequent life, we have a series of the most convincing evidences of the truth of the Christian religion. In this light he ever viewed the subject himself; the manner of his conversion he ever appealed to, as the most proper apology for his conduct; and, on several most important vocations, he not only refers to it, but enters into a detail of its circumstances, that his hearers might see that the excellency of the power was of GOD and not of man.

Saul of Tarsus was not a man of a light, fickle, and uncultivated mind. His natural powers were vast, his character the most decided, and his education, as we learn from his historian, and from his writings, was at once both liberal and profound. He was born and brought up in a city which enjoyed every privilege of which Rome itself could boast, and was a successful rival both of Rome and Athens in arts and science. Though a Jew, it is evident that his education was not confined to matters that concerned his own people and country alone. He had read the best Greek writers, as his style, allusions, and quotations sufficiently prove; and, in matters which concern his own religion, he was instructed by Gamaliel, one of the most celebrated doctors the synagogue had ever produced. He was evidently master of the three great languages which were spoken among the only people who deserved the name of nations—the Hebrew, and its prevailing dialect, the Chaldaio-Syriac; the Greek, and the Latin; language which, notwithstanding all the cultivation through which the earth has passed, maintain their rank, which is a most decisive superiority over all the languages of the universe.

Was it likely that such a man, possessing such a mind, cultivated to such an extent, could have been imposed on or deceived? The circumstances of his conversion forbid the supposition: they do more; they render it impossible. One consideration on this subject will prove that imposture in this case was impossible, he had no communication with Christians; the men that accompanied him to Damascus were of his own mind—virulent, determined enemies to the very name of Christ; and his conversion took place in the open day, on the open road, in company only with such men as the persecuting high priest and Sanhedrin thought proper to be employed in the extermination of Christianity. In such circumstances, and in such company, no cheat could be practiced. But was not he the deceiver? The supposition is absurd and monstrous, for this simple reason, that there was no motive that could prompt him to feign what he was not; and no end that could be answered by assuming the profession of Christianity. Christianity had in it such principles as must expose it to the hatred of Greece, Rome, and Judea. It exposed the absurdity and folly of Grecian and Roman superstition and idolatry, and asserted itself to be the completion, end, and perfection of the whole Mosaic economy.

It was therefore hated by all those nations, and its followers despised, detested, and persecuted. From the profession of such a religion, so circumstanced, could any man, who possessed even the most moderate share of common sense, expect secular emolument or advantage? No! Had not this apostle of the Gentiles the fullest conviction of the truth of Christianity, the fullest proof of its heavenly influence on his own soul, the brightest prospect of the reality and blessedness of the spiritual world, he could not have taken one step in the path which the doctrine of Christ pointed out. Add to this, that he lived long after his conversion, saw Christianity and its influence in every point of view, and tried it in all circumstances. What was the result? The deepest conviction of its truth; so that he counted all things dross and dung in comparison of the excellency of its knowledge. Had he continued a Jew he would have infallibly risen to the first dignities and honors of his nation; but he willingly forfeited all his secular privileges and well grounded expectations of secular honor and emolument, and espoused a cause from which he could not only have no expectation of worldly advantage, but which, most evidently and necessarily, exposed him to all sorts of privations, sufferings, hardships, dangers, and death itself! These were not only the unavoidable consequences of the cause he espoused; but he had them fully in his apprehension and constantly in his eye. He predicted them, and knew that every step he took was a progressive advance in additional sufferings, and the issue of his journey must be a violent death!

The whole history of Paul proves him to be one of the greatest of men; and his conduct after he became a Christian, had it not sprung from a Divine motive, of the truth of which he had the fullest conviction, would have shown him to be one of the weakest of men. The conclusion therefore is self-evident, that in Paul's call there could be no imposture, that in his own mind there could be no deception, that his conversion was from heaven, and the religion he professed and taught, the infallible and eternal truth of Yahweh. In this full conviction he counted not his

life dear unto him, but finished his rugged race with joy, cheerfully giving up his life for the testimony of Jesus; and thus his luminous sun set in blood, to rise again in glory. The conversion of Paul is the triumph of Christianity; his writings, the fullest exhibition and defense of its doctrines; and his life and death, a glorious illustration of its principles. Armed with this history of Paul's conversion and life, the feeblest believer needs not fear the most powerful infidel. The ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles will ever remain an inexpugnable fortress to defend Christianity and defeat its enemies. Reader, hath not God so done his marvelous works that they may I be had in everlasting remembrance?

F. Peter's ministry in Palestine and the first Gentile converts (1) 9:32-11:18

At this point, Luke takes up the thread of his narrative about the apostle Peter. The main purpose of this turn in the account is probably to indicate how the door of the Gospel opened to the gentiles in the conversion of Cornelius. Peter's travel has not directly related to the persecution Saul had initiated approximately three years earlier. We saw before that the apostles had remained in Jerusalem while other believers fled the city. Peter's main purpose may have been to visit those who had been dispersed and to strengthen the churches that had been planted through the witness of the members of the mother church in Jerusalem.

Lydda was a town on the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea Philippi, about 10 or 12 miles southeast from Joppa, in the territory that had formerly been allotted to tribe of Ephraim. *Barnes' Notes* states: "It was called by the Greeks Diospolis, or city of Jupiter, probably because a temple was at some period erected to Jupiter in that city ... Tradition says that in this city the Emperor Justinian erected a church."

Luke records three miracles performed by Peter, two in the physical realm and one spiritual feat that far surpasses the other two in importance. Peter's visit to Lydda is obviously mentioned because of the healing of Aeneas, a paraplegic. We get the impression that miracle of Aeneas' healing was the only one performed by the apostle. In view of the fact that, in Jerusalem, Peter was instrumental in a very large number of physical healings. We read earlier that: "People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed."²³⁸ None of this seemed to have happened in this location. We may assume, though, that Aeneas was not the only sick person in the area. This healing also had a far-reaching spiritual result because, as a result of it the whole population of two cities, Lydda and Sharon, accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sharon is mostly known because of the poetic description of the bridegroom in Solomon's Song of Songs: "I am the rose of Sharon."²³⁹ These words have been poetically applied to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's journey through the region, probably, involved more than a visit to churches mainly consisting of Jewish believers. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "This area was populated in part by Gentiles; Luke is tracing the extension of the church from the Jewish Jerusalem community to the Gentile converts."

A similar event as in Lydda occurred in Joppa, where Tabitha, or Dorcas, was raised from the dead by the power of Jesus Christ, working through Peter. The meaning of the name of the woman, in Hebrew as well as in Greek, is "gazelle." A question, pertinent to the resurrection of Dorcas, is why the miracle was performed. It doesn't seem that the woman was torn away from a family of young children. She was a widow whose main testimony had been that she performed many good deeds for people poorer than herself. Bringing such a person back from the presence of the Lord she loved and from the heavenly glory she had begun to enjoy may have been wonderful for the bereaved, it certainly was not what Dorcas would have chosen herself. This was not a case of extreme need, such as the raising of the son of the widow in Nain,²⁴⁰ whose death had robbed the mother of her support. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggests that the small delegation sent to Peter left before Dorcas had died, but the text does not give us any reason to believe this. It is even doubtful that the bereaved in Joppa expected Peter to bring Dorcas back to life. Peter's only reputation, so far, had been of one who healed the sick. We can only conclude that the sending of the message of Dorcas' death to Peter was done under the prompting of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of establishing a Gospel witness in the area. As far as we know, no raising of the dead had ever occurred by means of the ministry of the apostles.

Luke has painted a picture in vivid colors for us. The demonstration of grief by the recipients of Dorcas' labor of love is accompanied by a display of all the clothing she made for the poor while she was alive. Peter followed the example of Jesus' resurrection of Jairus' daughter by ordering everybody to leave the room, leaving

²³⁸ ch. 5:15,16

²³⁹ Song 2:1

²⁴⁰ See Luke 7:11-14

him alone with the corpse.²⁴¹ Peter's kneeling down in prayer before attempting to raise the dead woman suggests that he was uncertain of the will of God in that matter. As far as we know, he had never called anyone back to life. The Holy Spirit must have given him the assurance that the miracle was in accordance with the will of God. Yet, when Jesus had sent out His disciples on their first evangelistic journey, He had given them the charge: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons."²⁴² We may assume that some resurrection had occurred during that campaign.

Peter must have spent considerable time in the area after the miracle of Dorcas' resurrection. Luke states that he took his abode in the house of a tanner by the name of Simon. Tanners did not have a good reputation among the Jews. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* notes: "Of the trade itself the Talmudists speak with great contempt; they reckon it among blemishes." Peter must not have considered that staying in the tanner's house he defiled himself ceremonially; this becomes clear for the story told in the next chapter. The Talmud's opinion probably represents one of the finer points of Judaism in which particularly the Pharisees excelled.

Peter recognized the importance of the results of the miracle and the subsequent conversion of many in the area. We may assume that all the converts were either Jews or proselytes. Thus far, no one who was not an adherent to Judaism had been touched by the Gospel message. The church of Jesus Christ, up to this point in the Book of Acts, consisted of Messianic Jews. The next chapter depicts the crossing of a threshold that could only be done by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. That means that the end of this chapter effectively closes the first part of the Book of Acts. When we enter into the next chapter the church is no longer the same as it was on the day of Pentecost.

In chapter 10, Luke further develops the meticulously ordered plan of his treatise in telling how the apostles, particularly Peter, crossed the bridge from "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."²⁴³ Up to that time, the only way for a person to receive the gift of salvation had been by becoming a member of the Jewish nation through circumcision. This was implied in the institution of the Passover Feast. God had said to Moses, before Israel had left Egypt: "An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it."²⁴⁴

The whole purpose and meaning of the law on clean and unclean animals had been to teach Israel the difference between those human beings who were part of God's covenant and those who were not.²⁴⁵ It is, therefore, quite understandable that the early church adhered to the principle of conversion by becoming a member of God's covenant with Abraham in submitting to the rite of circumcision. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus Himself had stated: "Salvation is from the Jews."²⁴⁶ The thought that Jesus' death had "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,"²⁴⁷ between the "clean" and "unclean" was, understandably too much for the first Jewish Christians to grasp. Even after the first pioneers, among whom Peter was the very first, had crossed that bridge, the matter remained a point of controversy. In as much as legalism is still a matter of dispute in our time, the debate is still going on. It has always been difficult for man to see through the symbol into the reality. It is easy to mistake the shadow for the body. It is also difficult to break with a tradition which has supplied a sense of security.

Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius was of enormous importance in the history of the church. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "It was doubtless with a view to Peter's momentous errand to Caesarea that Luke recorded his previous visit to Lydda and his residence at Joppa, consequent upon the restoring of Dorcas to life: the *origines* of Gentile Christianity being the prime object of the Acts." The story not only reveals God's great strategy in the development of His plan to take the Gospel from Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,²⁴⁸ it also show the original way in which God involves individuals. Luke demonstrates having a sharp eye for this detail. His limelight in Acts is directed from one individual to another: from Peter to Stephen, to Philip, to Paul, and to Cornelius. The only person who, unfortunately, remains in the shadow is the author of the book himself.

Cornelius was a Roman military person, stationed in Caesarea. The fact that he is called a centurion means that he had the command of a group of one hundred men. This group was part of a larger army called the Italian Regiment. Caesarea was an important harbor city, built by King Herod the Great and named after the Emperor

²⁴¹ See Matt. 9:25

²⁴² Matt. 10:8

²⁴³ Acts 1:8

²⁴⁴ Ex. 12:48

²⁴⁵ See Lev. Ch. 11

²⁴⁶ John 4:22

²⁴⁷ Eph. 2:14

²⁴⁸ Ch. 1:8

Caesar Augustus. Luke describes Cornelius as God-fearing, who prayed to God and was generous. He was obviously not a proselyte to Judaism but he was convinced of the truth of the Jewish religion. From Peter's sermon, we also understand that he must have been familiar with the baptism of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus. Otherwise the words in verses 37,38 would make no sense: "You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." Yet, Cornelius had never taken the final step that would have brought him into God's covenant with His people. People such as Cornelius were known as "proselytes of the gate," meaning that they were not allowed inside the temple of Jerusalem. In this he differed from the eunuch to whom Philip brought the Gospel. Cornelius was still officially a pagan. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* clarifies: "A few Gentiles became converts to Judaism and accepted all Jewish practices, including circumcision. A larger number stopped short of circumcision but accepted the Jewish belief in God, synagogue worship, the ethical teachings of the OT, and some of the Jewish religious practices. These people, who were called God-fearers, were familiar with the OT in the Greek version as it was read in the synagogues. Devout God-fearers provided the most fertile soil in which the Gospel took root. Cornelius was such a 'semi-proselyte.' His devout character was manifested by his liberal alms to the people and his regular prayers to God."

Luke states that Cornelius was engaged in prayer at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, which was the hour of the evening sacrifice in the temple at which most Jews would say their prayers. The reality of the vision is expressed in the Greek word *phaneros*, which means "plainly," or "clearly." The NIV renders it "distinctly." The angel addressed Cornelius by name and told him that God had accepted his prayers and the alms he had given to the poor. But the angel had no authority to preach the Gospel to this man. In God's dispensation, only man who has fallen in sin and who has experienced salvation is suited to pass on the Good News. Cornelius addressed the angel with "Lord," *kurios* in Greek. The appellation has various meanings in Greek but *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states: "*kurios* is the Septuagint and New Testament representative of Hebrew Jehovah." Cornelius' use of the word here, probably, implies a recognition of the divine character of his visitor.

The content of the angel's message is for Cornelius to invite Peter. It is interesting to observe that it took God less time to convince this pagan than Peter. Cornelius' messengers traveled the thirty miles between Caesarea and Joppa in record time. They probably left late in the afternoon and traveled part of the night, arriving in Joppa around noon of the next day.

At that time Peter was in prayer on the flat roof of Simon's house, which was an ideal place for privacy and quiet. The noon hour was the time at which the Jews had their second prayer time, the other two being 9 AM and 3 PM. Some commentators suggest that Peter may have fasted until that time, which would account for his sudden surge of appetite. While some food was being prepared and Peter prayed, he fell into a trance. The Greek word used is *ekstasis*, from which the word "ecstasy" is derived.

Peter's vision was a strange one. Some commentators suggest that, in his trance, Peter saw a spiritual reality that is usually hidden to the carnal eye. It is difficult to imagine though that, even in the spiritual world, sheets with animals constantly descend from heaven. Part of Peter's vision was, undoubtedly, triggered by his hunger for food, but it was also definitely God's way of teaching him a lesson that would rid him of his prejudice. The sheet was filled with animals among which some were not in the category of kosher food. At the command to kill some of the animals to satisfy his appetite, Peter vigorously protested: "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The Jews had always understood that the distinction between what was kosher and not kosher was symbolic to teach God's chosen people the difference between those who worshipped God and those who worshipped idols. That is what kept devout Jews from entering the house of a pagan. This is illustrated in Jesus' trial before Pilate, where we read: "To avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover."²⁴⁹

The Greek word, rendered "kill" is *thuo*, which often contains a reference to sacrifice. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states that "*Thuo* ... primarily denotes 'to offer firstfruits to a god'; then ... 'to sacrifice by slaying a victim.'" *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* makes some important observations that contribute greatly to the understanding of this passage. We read: "Though this verb is sometimes used to signify the slaying of animals for food, yet, as the proper notion is to slay for the purpose of sacrifice, it appears to me to be better to preserve that meaning here. Animals that were offered in sacrifice were considered as given to God; and, when he received the life, the flesh was given to those who offered the sacrifice, that they might feed upon it; and every sacrifice had in it the nature of a covenant; and covenants were usually made by eating together on the flesh of the sacrifice offered on the occasion, God being supposed to be invisibly present with them, and partaking of the feast.

²⁴⁹ John 18:28

The Jews and Gentiles are certainly represented by the clean and unclean animals in this large vessel: these, by the ministry of the Gospel, were to be offered up a spiritual sacrifice to God. Peter was to be a prime instrument in this work; he was to offer them to God, and rejoice in the work of his hands. The spirit of the heavenly direction seems to be this: The middle wall of partition is now to be pulled down; the Jews and Gentiles are called to become one flock, under one shepherd and bishop of souls, Thou, Peter, shalt open the door of faith to the Gentiles, and be also the minister of the circumcision. Rise up; already a blessed sacrifice is prepared: go and offer it to God; and let thy soul feed on the fruits of his mercy and goodness, in thus showing his gracious design of saving both Jews and Gentiles by Christ crucified.”

To the first Jewish Christians the understanding of the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the whole world presented an almost insurmountable obstacle. The distinction between “clean” and “unclean” had been so engraved in their minds that the prejudice against those non-Jews who believed in YHWH had never been completely eradicated. Yet, the Old Testament was full of references to God’s desire to save all of creation, not just the nations of Israel. The meaning of the fact that Israel was meant to be a Kingdom of Priest, forming the bridge between God and the rest of the world, had never been fully understand.

God had to arouse Peter’s physical appetite and show him three times a sheet full of tasty morsels such as shrimp cocktails, pork roasts, and ham, parts of unclean animals, to convince him of the fact that Christ had always been “the Savior of the world.” The Samaritans had understood better what was hidden to the Jews. They had said: “We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”²⁵⁰

The true meaning of the vision only penetrated to Peter when the envoys of Cornelius appeared at the door and the Holy Spirit ordered him to receive them and go with them. The moment Peter stepped over the threshold of Cornelius’ house, it was, in the words of the astronaut Neil Armstrong, the first man to land on the moon, “A small step for man, a big leap for mankind.”

After meeting the three men sent by Cornelius, Peter invited them to spend the night with him. The following day Peter went with them, accompanied by three brethren from Joppa, making a party of seven total.²⁵¹ When they arrived at Cornelius’ house in Caesarea, four days had elapsed since Cornelius had his vision.

Cornelius had obviously calculated when Peter could be there and at the time of his arrival, the house was filled with relatives and friends. The centurion must have been convinced that the message Peter would bring to them would be the fulfillment of all his desires and needs. The angel he had seen in his vision had not told him what would happen when Peter came, but Cornelius’ expectations were solid enough to make him invite all his relatives and intimate friends so they could share in the blessing that would undoubtedly come.

Peter did not know what to expect when he arrived, but seeing the house full of people and having heard about Cornelius’ vision, it must not have taken him much time to understand what the Lord wanted him to do. I am convinced that God’s way of evangelism for us is to only speak to those whom God places on our path and for whom He opens the door. No campaigns or methods of personal evangelism can replace the clear leading of the Holy Spirit. I have the impression that our crusades and methods often replace God’s method, rather than build on it.

When Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell down at his feet in an act of worship. The NIV reads: “Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.” The Greek word is *proskuneo*, which literally means: “to kiss, like a dog licking his master’s hand,” “to prostrate oneself in homage,” or “to adore.” The KJV usually translates it: “to worship.” The same word is found in the verses: “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”²⁵² Peter understood Cornelius’ greeting to imply that he possessed divine attributes that called for worship, as if Peter were an incarnation of deity. He rightfully refused to accept such accolades. Cornelius’ misunderstanding is easily comprehended. He had logically concluded that if an angel from heaven, such as he had seen in his vision, was not allowed to pass on the message, the one who was called in to do so ranked higher and would be worthy of greater worship in spite of the human disguise. His assumption was even partly correct. In God’s order of creation, man ranks higher than the angel. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews asks this rhetorical question: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”²⁵³ The fact that man presently lacks angelic glory is due to the presence of sin, which is a temporary phenomenon. But even angels, however glorious they may appear, cannot receive worship. Even the apostle John to whom the great visions of the Book of Revelation were shown made this mistake. We read: “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been

²⁵⁰ See John 4:42

²⁵¹ See ch. 11:11,12

²⁵² John 4:23,24

²⁵³ Heb. 1:14

showing them to me. But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!' ”²⁵⁴

The word “only” in the NIV’s rendering: “I am only a man myself,” is not in the Greek. The KJV states more correctly: “Stand up; I myself also am a man.” In God’s eyes, the man of God is never “only” a man!

Peter’s opening remarks: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him,” raise some legitimate questions. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* correctly states: “There was no express prohibition to this effect, and contact to a certain extent was undoubtedly kept up, as is evident from the Gospel History; but intimate social fellowship was not practiced, as being contrary to the spirit of the law, and (as is usual in such cases) the law was strained injuriously in this direction (see John 18:28).” The Law of Moses forbade intercourse with people who practiced idolatry, not with people whose only difference consisted in the fact that they did not belong to the Jewish race or had not converted to Judaism. There must have been many of the original inhabitants of Canaan who lived among the Israelites and who had not submitted to the rite of circumcision. As an example may serve Araunah, the Jebusite, who owned the threshing floor which David bought of him and on which later the temple was built.²⁵⁵ Peter referred to the law as it was practiced, not as God gave it. Evidently, his own inbred prejudice had not been overcome completely yet.

Peter’s question why Cornelius had sent for him seems redundant. The messengers had told him already that Cornelius had received a vision of an angel who had instructed him to call Peter and hear his message. Evidently, Peter wanted to hear it again from Cornelius own mouth.

The words “God does not show favoritism” is the translation of the Greek word *prosopeptes*, which literally means: “an acceptor of a face.” The KJV renders it: “respector of persons.” God is impartial both in the administration of His judgment and His grace. In the words of the apostle Paul: “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”²⁵⁶ Moses first expressed the thought in these words: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.”²⁵⁷ The fact that Israel is God’s chosen nation does not mean that the Israelites are God’s favorites. Yet, it is true that God does have favorites. He may punish the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him, but He shows love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.”²⁵⁸ God is prejudiced against sin, not against racial or cultural differences among men.

Vs. 36 is more complicated in the Greek than the NIV’s rendering would make us believe. The NKJV reads: “The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ--He is Lord of all--that word you know...” TLB is more easily understood: “I’m sure you have heard about the Good News for the people of Israel--that there is peace with God through Jesus, the Messiah, who is Lord of all creation.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “Few verses in the New Testament have perplexed critics and divines more than this. The ancient copyists seem also to have been puzzled with it; as the great variety in the different MSS. sufficiently proves. A foreign critic makes a good sense by connecting this with the preceding verse, thus: In every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness is accepted with him, according to that doctrine which God sent unto the children of Israel, by which he published peace (i.e. reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles) by Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all; and, because Lord of all, both of Jews and Gentiles, therefore he must be impartial; and, because impartial, or no respector of persons, therefore, in every nation, whether Judea, Greece, or Italy, he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

The more amazing part of the text seems to me that Cornelius and those with him were fully acquainted with the facts of Jesus’ life, ministry, and death. Whether they knew of His resurrection is not clear. Somehow, however, they must have thought that the message of salvation, based on these facts of salvation, was intended for the Jews only. The importance of Peter’s ministry was not the passing on of information regarding the facts, but the application of those facts to the hearts of his hearers. As always, when the Holy Spirit works, the Gospel moves from man’s head to his heart.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The parenthesis, ‘He is Lord of all,’ is most opportunely inserted, that his hearers might know that Jesus of Nazareth was Lord of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews.” In stating that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, Peter brings down the wall of separation. This takes the facts of salvation out of their Jewish

²⁵⁴ Rev. 22:8,9

²⁵⁵ See II Chr. 3:1,2

²⁵⁶ Rom. 3:22-24

²⁵⁷ Deut. 10:17

²⁵⁸ See Ex. 20:5,6

context and makes them relevant for Peter's audience as well as for all of us. The remark that Peter, with the other apostles, were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry established the reliability of the reports about Jesus these people had heard. More important was the fact that they were witnesses of His resurrection. Peter's mention that "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" confirmed the physical reality of His resurrection. Jesus' resurrection was not an occult event with which these gentiles may have been familiar; it was a victory over death such as had never occurred before. The great commission is briefly mentioned, followed by the announcement of the second coming. This declaration proclaims the judgment to come, which implies the resurrection of the body for all of humanity. Peter also declared that Jesus is the meaning and content of all of the Old Testament. Not every one of the prophets specifically mentioned in detail the work of the Messiah and the fact that faith in Him would result in pardon for sin, but this is the spirit of the law and the prophets. As *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* remarks: "Without him and the salvation he has promised, there is scarcely any meaning in the Mosaic economy, nor in most of the allusions of the prophets."

The essence of Peter's message is that calling upon the Name of Jesus will result in receiving God's pardon and the cleansing of the heart from sin. Quoting the prophecy of Joel, Paul states the same: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."²⁵⁹ We may assume from what happened next that all those present did indeed call upon the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Without this, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them would have been impossible.

The Holy Spirit then interrupts Peter's sermon. I cannot imagine a better way to end a sermon! To preach the Word of God and have The Holy Spirit apply it to the hearts of the hearers is the greatest experience any preacher can hope for. Whenever a person calls on the Name of Jesus for the forgiveness of his sin, there will be a confirmation from the side of God that the prayer is heard. This confirmation does not always come in the same form as it came here, in an outward manifestation of speaking in tongues. The apostle Paul confirms this: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."²⁶⁰ We are not told if there were other manifestations of the Spirit's presence. Some believe that all the signs that were manifested on the day of Pentecost were present at this occasion, but the text does not confirm or deny this. We actually get the impression that the demonstration of the Spirit's presence was more intended to convince the Jews that were present than the gentiles who experienced it. The Jewish Christians needed to know that they had no right to "call anything impure that God has made clean." It was not so that God broke His own rules. The idea that a person must be circumcised and become a Jew before salvation in Jesus Christ could be applied to him was man's thought, not God's. As it turns out, there is no prescribed ritual to follow in order to be saved. Some people received the Holy Spirit after they were baptized; others were baptized after receiving the Holy Spirit. The twelve disciples Paul met in Ephesus are an example in case to prove the first point,²⁶¹ Cornelius and his guests were baptized afterward. The only fixed rule is that without the presence of the Holy Spirit baptism has no meaning.

In the case of Cornelius and company, Peter and his associates had to be convinced that the Holy Spirit had done His perfect work. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, Cornelius and his guests needed no further confirmation. When Peter was called to account in the next chapter, it was believed that he had done something illegal in baptizing people who had not been circumcised first. In Peter's defense he settled the matter by stating: "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"²⁶² Unfortunately, that did not settle the matter in church history.

F. Peter's ministry in Palestine and the first Gentile converts (2) 9:32-11:18

Peter's Defense 11:1-18

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary remarks: "It is surprising that in a short book Luke would devote so much space to a second recital of the conversion of Cornelius. This indicates that Luke considered this event one of the most important in the life of the early church." The observation is entirely correct. The transition of the church from a purely Jewish community of believers in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to a body of believers that would span the world and all human races was a momentous event, the importance of which cannot be overstated. For Luke, a believer from among the gentiles, the history of salvation hinged on this event.

It is difficult for us to imagine how enormous the threshold was the Jewish community had to cross in order to reconcile themselves to the legality of Peter's conduct. We find the point on which Peter was attacked recur

²⁵⁹ Rom. 10:13; see Joel 2:32

²⁶⁰ Rom. 8:16

²⁶¹ See Acts 19:1-7

²⁶² Acts 11:17

throughout the Book of Acts and in the Pauline Epistles. And as stated earlier, the principle of legalism has as yet not conceded defeat in the church of Jesus Christ.

It seems that Peter went to Jerusalem expecting criticism and that the six brothers from Joppa accompanied him for that very reason. We would expect that Peter's testimony alone would have been sufficient to convince the church in Jerusalem. Evidently, this was not the case.

The main accusation was that Peter had entered the house of gentiles and had eaten with them. Interestingly, Paul would later accuse Peter of doing the opposite! In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul wrote: "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?'"²⁶³ Evidently, criticism of Peter's behavior did not cease in the meeting Luke describes here and, at some point, Peter buckled under it. How persistent the Jewish critics were is obvious from the repeated allusions to it in Paul's epistles.

The sad part of this report is that the fact that the Gospel had reached the gentiles caused a split in the church that was never healed. The group that was later called "The Circumcision" actually accused Peter of having given up his Jewishness in accepting people as brothers in Christ who had not become Jews themselves. One of the problems was that the opposition based itself on a rigorous interpretation of the Scriptures. The fact that the Holy Spirit had shed new light on those Scriptures had not convinced them. The church would officially take her stand beside Peter, but the opposition never died.

The question is, of course, whether Peter ceased to be a Jew when he set aside certain Jewish practices. The question plagues modern Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah and it is often cause for severe persecution from the side of the family to which the converts belong.

Luke tells the story from the viewpoint of a gentile believer in Jesus. Although this may have influenced him in the choice of his material and the colors of his painting, we may believe that, Acts being the inspired Word of God, the Holy Spirit guided the author also in expressing his gentile sentiments in the matter.

Peter's vision and his interpretation of it were, of course, subjective. The fact that people have visions does not always prove that they understand the mind of God. The vindication of Peter's experience was in the fact that the Holy Spirit came upon a group of gentiles, even as Peter was speaking, before there could be any question about circumcision or baptism. There were seven people, standing next to Peter, ready to testify to the truth of the event.

When the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his guests, Peter remembered the promise Jesus had given to His disciples on the day of His ascension: "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."²⁶⁴ The first one ever to speak those words was John the Baptist. While preaching at the River Jordan, John had announced: "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."²⁶⁵ For Peter it must not only have been a matter of remembering the words, he must have relived the experience. To see people come to the point where they turn to the Lord for salvation is a thrill equal to the one we experienced when we took the same step ourselves. It seems that Jesus' words had acquired a new meaning for Peter and that he realized, more than ever before, that water baptism is merely an outward expression of an inner spiritual reality, the transformation of a life through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit came upon Cornelius and his guests, Peter had exclaimed: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" In front of the church counsel, he said: "Who was I to think that I could oppose God?" The statement implies that there had been traces of opposition in Peter's heart. This was evinced even in his reaction to the vision of the sheet filled with animals and the voice that said: "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." Peter had retorted: "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." Not all tradition is, of course, wrong. It is amazing to see, however, how difficult it is for most of us to be free from the grip of tradition and enter into the freedom of pure fellowship with God. Jesus promised us: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."²⁶⁶ The key to the freedom in knowledge of the truth through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is our willingness to obey.

Peter's inquisitors are finally convinced. They praise the Lord, saying: "So then, God has granted *even* the Gentiles repentance unto life." The rendering of the Greek word *kai* with "even" is linguistically legitimate, but is

²⁶³ Gal. 2:11-14

²⁶⁴ Ch. 1:5

²⁶⁵ Mark 1:8

²⁶⁶ John 8:31,32

does express the lingering prejudice of a Jew toward a gentile. The translation: “also the Gentiles” would have been just as correct. One gets the impression that these Jewish Christians felt as if God had to overcome the same cultural obstacle they did, in taking the Gospel to all nations and in all the world. Wouldn't Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria have been enough?

The Adam Clarke's Commentary concludes this section with the observation: “The Christians who were present were all satisfied with Peter's account and apology; but it does not appear that all were ultimately satisfied, as we know there were serious disputes in the church afterward on this very subject: see Acts 15:5, etc., where Christian believers, from among the Pharisees, insisted that it was necessary to circumcise the converted Gentiles, and cause them to keep the law of Moses. This opinion was carried much further in the church at Jerusalem afterward, as may be seen at large in Acts 21.”

G. Establishment of a Gentile church at Antioch 11:19-30

Luke picks up the thread of his narrative from where he had dropped in chapter eight of his book. He had stated: “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”²⁶⁷ The fact that he retrieves the line of the story at this point, after having stated Peter's role in the conversion of Cornelius, suggests that the preaching of the Gospel to the Greeks in Antioch began after the first gentiles had been accepted into the church. The report of the establishment of the gentile church in Antioch also was needed to lay the foundations for Paul's evangelistic campaigns in Asia Minor and Europe, which occupies most of the rest of the book.

From this point in the narrative, the church of Jerusalem fades in the background, with the exception of the report of the gathering of the Synod in ch. 15, and the city of Antioch receives prominence in the development of the Gospel. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about Antioch: “Antioch, the capital of the Greek kingdom of Syria, on the river Orontes, built by the first king, Seleucus Nicator, in honor of his father Antiochus, who was one of Alexander the Great's generals. It lay about one hundred and eighty miles north of the northern frontier of Phoenicia. There was a large population of Jews, whom Seleucus attracted to his new city by giving them equal political privileges with the Greeks. It was reckoned by Josephus to be the third city in importance of the whole Roman empire, Rome and Alexandria being the two first.”

The most authoritative scholars agree that the people from Cyprus and Cyrene (a city in North Africa), must have been Greek speaking Jewish settlers who were particularly attracted to the Greeks in Antioch because of the common language they spoke. Their Gospel witness to those Greek gentiles met with great success and a great number of them converted to faith in Jesus Christ. We don't read that there were any supernatural manifestations that accompanied their conversion as in the case of Cornelius, but the fact of Cornelius' conversion and the report of the gathering in Jerusalem and Peter's defense must have had an impact on the preaching of the Gospel to these people. Luke's statement that “the Lord's hand was with them” may imply that the preaching went together with miracles, but it could also refer to the fact that the church grew rapidly.

The apostles in Jerusalem recognized the importance of the events in Antioch and the report of the church growth and they sent Barnabas, the man who had not been chosen to become one of the inner circle, to investigate and report back. Luke testifies about Barnabas that “he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” Whether Luke ever met Barnabas personally, is uncertain. At the point where Luke introduces himself in the narrative²⁶⁸, Barnabas was no longer Paul's companion. This testimony about Barnabas may have been Paul's. After the split in their relationship, that would be a very positive point and a compliment to Paul's character.

Barnabas' conclusion at his first visit to the first church of the gentiles was that they needed more extensive shepherding and that an erudite person with sophistication, such as Paul, would be needed to fill the post. So he traveled to Tarsus, where he knew Paul resided, and the two formed a team that would work together for several fruitful years.

It was in the city of Antioch that the name “Christian” was born. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It was a memorable event in the history of the Church when the name of *Christians*, which has distinguished them for nearly eighteen centuries and a half,²⁶⁹ was given to the disciples of Christ. Hitherto they had been called among themselves disciples, and brethren, and saints, and, by the Jews, men ‘of the Way’ (... Acts 9:2), or ‘Nazarenes’ (... Acts 24:5), but now they received the name of *Christians*, as followers of Christ, from the outside world, and accepted it themselves (... Acts 26:28; 1 Peter. 4:16). From the Latin form of the word *Christians*, *i.e.* followers of Christ ... the designation must have been invented by the Gentiles, either by the Roman court or camp at Antioch, or

²⁶⁷ ch. 8:4

²⁶⁸ See ch. 16:10

²⁶⁹ This statement could be updated to 20!

by the Greek population, influenced as they were by Roman forms of speech current amongst them ... We may be sure that *Christians*, *i.e.* followers of Messiah, is not a name likely to have been given by Jews. There is no evidence either of its having been given in derision.”

While Paul and Barnabas were ministering to the church in Antioch, several people from Jerusalem visited, among whom there were those who had the gift of prophecy. This is not the place to explore the meaning of the word “prophet” in the New Testament. It is obvious from the example mentioned that, at least in this case, it involved the ability to predict the future.

One of the visiting prophets was Agabus. We meet him again at a later time in Caesarea in the home of the deacon Philip, where he predicted that Paul would be put in prison.²⁷⁰ Agabus foretold a coming famine that would affect the whole Roman Empire. It is generally supposed that this famine occurred during the fourth year of the reign of the Emperor Claudius. There were four famines during Claudius’ reign, attested to by several ancient writers. Josephus reports that this famine, which lasted from 44-48 AD particularly afflicted Judea.

The believers in Antioch took Agabus’ prophecy seriously and decided to send help to Judea even before the event took place. We find here an analogy with the story of Joseph, who as the assistant of Egypt’s Pharaoh, prepared for the seven-year-long famine by preparing large stocks of grain beforehand.²⁷¹

Agabus’ ministry to the church in Antioch was of great importance. It generated a spirit of compassion and generosity in the hearts of the believers, a social concern that is an important part in any process of church growth. The Antioch Christians felt indebted to the church of Jerusalem from which the Gospel message had gone out. Paul considered this sentiment to be a logical conclusion from the fact that the gentile churches received the message of salvation originally from the church of Jerusalem. Writing to the Romans, he states: “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”²⁷²

There is some bitter irony in the fact that the church that started out as a community in which nobody suffered any material hardship ended up as the poorest church on the map. Luke had stated earlier: “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”²⁷³ Satan had obviously gained some points in the mother church and God had seen fit to allow them to suffer both persecution and material hardship. Compassion for the suffering church is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Antioch evinced this fruit in a moving expression of generosity.

The gifts are sent to the elders of the church in Jerusalem by the hands of Paul and Barnabas. This is the first place in the Book of Acts where the term “elders” is used as a translation of the Greek *presbuteros*. Most scholars see in this word proof that the church was organized on the pattern of the Jewish synagogue.

It is difficult to determine when Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to hand over the money. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* suggests that this was Paul’s first visit after his conversion. This, however, does not seem to agree with the fact that the apostles sent Paul to Caesarea and Tarsus when the Greek speaking Jews attempted to assassinate him²⁷⁴ and that Barnabas went to Tarsus to get Paul for the work in the Antioch church. It may be that this visit is the same one Luke mentions in ch. 15 as Paul and Barnabas were delegated to go to Jerusalem when the matter of circumcision of the gentiles became an issue in the Antioch church. The last verse of the next chapter seems to indicate that they went immediately, which means that they would have been in Jerusalem when James was executed and Peter imprisoned and supernaturally delivered.

H. Persecution by Herod Agrippa I 12:1-25

It is difficult to interpret Luke’s words “It was about this time...” They may mean something like “Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem...” It is difficult to assert whether, as some suppose, Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem at the time of the execution of James and Peter’s imprisonment.

King Herod decided to mingle in the persecution of the church. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains about King Herod: “Herod the king here mentioned is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, and son of

²⁷⁰ See ch. 21:10,11

²⁷¹ See Gen. 41:48,49

²⁷² Rom. 15:25-27

²⁷³ ch. 4:34,35

²⁷⁴ See ch. 11:28-30

Aristobulus and Bernice. During the reign of Tiberius he resided at Rome, in alternate favor and disgrace, sometimes banished, sometimes a prisoner, sometimes a guest at the imperial court. He was a great friend of Caius Caesar Caligula, and, on his succeeding to the empire on the death of Tiberius, was promoted by him to the tetrarchy of Herod Philip, with the title of king. He was further advanced three years afterwards to the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas; and, on the accession of Claudius to the throne, Judea and Samaria were added to his dominions, which now comprised the whole kingdom of his grandfather, Herod the Great. Agrippa, in spite of his close intimacy with Drusus, Caligula, Claudius, and other Roman magnates, was ‘exactly careful in the observance of the laws of his country, not allowing a day to pass without its appointed sacrifice;’ and he had given proof of his strong Jewish feeling by interposing his whole influence with Caligula to prevent his statue being placed in the holy of holies. This spirit accounts for his enmity against the Church. He was a man of very expensive and luxurious habits, but not without some great qualities.”

We are not told who all were put in prison. Luke only mentions Peter and the execution of the apostle James, the first of the twelve apostles to suffer martyrdom. This James was the brother of John, one of the sons of Zebedee, one of the three who formed the inner circle among the apostles. He was known as “James, the Greater” to distinguish him from James, the son of Alphaeus, who was nicknamed “James the Less.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states about James being killed with the sword: “In all likelihood by beheading, which (as Lightfoot shows) was regarded by the Jews as the extreme of ignominy. Of this older James we know nothing, except what we read in the Gospels and here—that he was one of the three who, of all the Twelve, were alone privileged to witness the transfiguration, the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter, and the agony in the garden; that he and his younger Brother John were called by their Master ‘sons of thunder;’ that through their mother they applied for the right and left-hand posts of honor in the expected kingdom; and that, when asked if they were able to drink of their Master’s cup and he baptized with His baptism, and replying that they were, Jesus told them they should indeed have that to do, but that what they sought was under other arrangement: finally, we have James here, as a martyr of Jesus, indeed drinking of his Masters cup and with his bloody baptism at length baptized.”

King Herod seems to have taken over where Saul of Tarsus left off. The persecution that unleashed after the death of Stephen had left the apostle under God’s special protection. This protection seems to have been withdrawn. We are again tempted to ask the question why the Almighty allowed this to happen. This is a question that is almost never answered. The apostles never seem to have asked it. Their reaction to persecution had been one of “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”²⁷⁵ In his book *When Heaven is Silent*, Harold Dunn observes that God rarely answers our question “why are we suffering?” but He does answer us when we ask Him what He wants us to do about it.

The Pulpit Commentary records an interesting tradition about the death of James, which is worth copying: “His being singled out by Herod for death in company with Peter is rather an indication of his zeal and activity in the Lord’s service, though we know nothing of his work. Eusebius relates an anecdote of his martyrdom, extracted from the lost work of Clement of Alexandria, called the ‘Hypotutoseis’ (or in Latin *Adumbrationes*), which Clement professed to have received by tradition from his predecessors, to the effect that the informer who accused James was so struck with his constancy in confessing Christ before the judge, that he came forward and confessed himself a Christian too. The two were then led off to execution together; and on the way the informer asked James’s forgiveness. After a moment’s hesitation, James said to him, “Peace be unto thee,” and kissed him. They were then both beheaded. ... As Clement flourished about A.D. 190, the tradition need not have passed through more than three persons.”

Evidently Herod’s execution of James and his intent to have Peter suffer the same fate seems to have been more than a burst of religious zeal alone. Luke’s statement that he put Peter in prison because he saw that James’ execution “pleased the Jews,” suggests that he wanted to be in their favor. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “This trait of his pleasing the Jews is in exact accordance with Josephus’s description of him, as ... loving popularity, and as being very kind and sympathizing with the Jewish people, and liking to live much at Jerusalem.”

The Lord Jesus had been hurriedly sentenced and executed before the Passover celebration started. His death had to coincide in God’s plan with the killing of the Passover lamb. Peter’s execution was scheduled to take place after the celebrations. The apostle’s death would not mean the fulfillment of Old Testament rituals, as Jesus’ death had to be. Peter could die because Jesus had died for him first. We don’t know if Peter spent the whole week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread in prison. Luke states that he was arrested during the feast, which could mean any time. The miracle of his deliverance took place on the last night of the feast, because Herod intended to bring Peter to trial the next day.

²⁷⁵ ch. 5:41

Peter's condition seemed to be hopeless. Humanly speaking it was impossible to save Peter's life. The fact that James had suffered death at Herod's hand must have added to the frustration of the church at the thought of losing Peter also. It was exactly this sense of hopelessness that brought the church to its knees. *Barnes' Notes* affirms: "Nothing scarcely could appear more hopeless than the idea of rescuing Peter out of the hands of Herod, and out of the prison, and out of the custody of sixteen men, by prayer. But the prayer of faith was prevalent with God."

The NIV reads: "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." The NKJV and some other translations read: "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church." The Greek word *ektenes* literally means: "intent," and it can be interpreted as "without ceasing," or "fervent." The same word is found in First Peter, where the NIV reads: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."²⁷⁶ This fervent, uninterrupted, prayer by a handful of believers proved stronger than the power that Herod displayed in such an awesome fashion. We are reminded of the Word of the Lord to Zechariah: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."²⁷⁷ We can hardly say, though, that the prayer of the church was a prayer of faith, because when Peter, released from prison, knocked on the door, nobody believed that their prayers had been answered!

The Matthew Henry's Commentary observes about the church's prayer: "They were very particular in their prayers for him, that it would please God, some way or other, to defeat Herod's purpose, and to snatch the lamb out of the jaws of the lion. The death of James alarmed them to a greater fervency in their prayer for Peter; for, if they be broken thus with breach upon breach, they fear that the enemy will make a full end. Stephen is not, and James is not, and will they take Peter also? All these things are against them; this will be sorrow upon sorrow, Phil 2:27. Note, Though the death and sufferings of Christ's ministers may be made greatly to serve the interests of Christ's kingdom, yet it is the duty and concern of the church earnestly to pray for their life, liberty, and tranquility; and sometimes Providence orders it that they are brought into imminent danger, to stir up prayer for them."

Peter's peace of mind under the circumstances was remarkable. It must be difficult to sleep when bound by two chains to four other men, but to rest peacefully the night before a certain death is more than most human beings would be able to enjoy. Peter's willingness to die for his Lord produced an absence of fear of death that spread a blanket of peace over his whole mind and body. His bodyguard may have been more restless than he was. They had reason to be, because they would face execution if something happened to their prisoner. They were, in fact, the ones who were executed. Talk about God's irony!

When the angel appeared in Peter's cell, Peter was so soundly asleep that he had to poke Peter rather forcefully in order to make him wake up. The Greek word, rendered "struck" is *patasso*, which means: "to knock." *Strong's Concordance* states that it can imply "gently or with a weapon or fatally." But other places where the same word occurs give no indication of any intent of gentleness. In Matthew's Gospel, for instance, we read: "With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear."²⁷⁸ It seems that waking up Peter was the most difficult part of the angel's assignment. Even after the chains had fallen off and all the prison doors were open, Peter still did not realize that this really happened to him; he believed himself to be asleep or having a vision. When the disappearance of the angel and the cold night air finally brought him to full consciousness, he decided to go to the most likely place where he would find members of the church: the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

Luke uses the incident to briefly introduce John Mark to us, because he would play a certain role in the spreading of the Gospel when he accompanied Paul and Barnabas on Paul's first journey. Later he became the point of contention between Paul and Barnabas. The fact that Barnabas was John Mark's uncle may have complicated the relationships. Mary must have been Barnabas' sister or sister-in-law. *The Pulpit Commentary* states however: "Mary the mother of John was aunt to Barnabas (...Colossians 4:10). If Paul and Barnabas were not in her house at the time (which there is no evidence that they were), it is likely that all the particulars of Peter's escape may have been communicated to Paul by John Mark, and by him repeated to Luke. That they went to the house of Mary before their return seems certain from their taking Mark with them to Antioch (ver. 25), possibly to deliver him from the danger Christians were in at Jerusalem at this time." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, again, calls Barnabas the cousin of John Mark.

When Peter knocked on the door of the outer gate of the house, a girl named Rhoda answered the door. She seems to have been the only one who believed that prayer had been answered. Unfortunately, she didn't know what to do with answered prayers. Luke depicts the scene in a rather amusing way. Rhoda's excitement and fumbling,

²⁷⁶ I Peter 4:8

²⁷⁷ Zech. 4:6

²⁷⁸ Matt. 26:51

however, earned her a place in church history; had she simply opened the gate to let Peter in, her name would probably never have appeared in Scripture. The Holy Spirit has strange ways to commemorate our mistakes.

Some of the confusion may be ascribed to the tense condition in which the believers must have lived. Persecution was rampant at that moment and the sending of Rhoda to the door to see who knocked may also have been a safety measure to delay the temple guards, giving the church members a chance to escape.

In a way, we can hardly blame the attendants of the prayer meeting for their astonishment, although Peter's deliverance from prison was not unique in the annals of the early church. Similar deliverances had occurred earlier.²⁷⁹ But at that time the apostles had been put in the public jail, which obviously had not been a high security prison as the one in which Peter had been kept.

It seems from Luke's account that the commotion he caused in the house of Mary was so great that it took the apostle a while before he could explain what had happened to him. It is also apparent from his request to pass on the word to James (Jesus' brother) and "the brothers" (probably the other apostles), that none of the other apostles attended this prayer meeting. Peter then wisely disappeared before his escape was discovered and the soldiers would come to search the houses of known Christians.

We can understand the commotion that occurred in the prison the next morning when Peter's disappearance was discovered. Neither the soldiers, nor King Herod had any room for supernatural interventions. To them only human explanation could be that a traitor had been able to get hold of a key, or rather a series of keys, and open the locks of the chains and the gates. The guards were guilty of sleeping too soundly to hear anything. They had put their trust in the locks. The Roman law stipulated that soldiers guarded their prisoners with their own life. The escape of a prisoner always meant the death of the guard.

Luke used the last seven verses of this chapter to describe God's punishment on King Herod and to contrast his majesty's fate to the condition of the church he persecuted. Herod went back to Caesarea and overstepped his boundaries in a speech he made to the representatives of Tyre and Sidon.

History is silent as to the cause of the friction between the King and the people of Tyre and Sidon. The two countries had for centuries had trade relationships with Israel, providing them with timber and receiving wheat in exchange. This trade went back to the time of King Solomon, or probably earlier. We read: "Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, in addition to twenty thousand baths of pressed olive oil. Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year."²⁸⁰ A quarrel with Herod would have meant great economic hardship for the people of Tyre and Sidon, so they decided to pacify the king, which they did by bribing the king's butler in order to get an audience with the king. Whether the famine predicted by Agabus had already begun is not known. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: "Although Tyre and Sidon were free cities, they were dependent for their food upon the grain of Galilee in Herod's kingdom. For some unknown reason Herod was angry with these two cities. And so, to make peace with him, they presumably bribed Blastus to intercede with the king and gain a hearing for them. The set day, according to Josephus, was a feast in honor of the Emperor. To receive the delegates from Tyre and Sidon in state, Herod arrayed himself in robes made entirely of silver. Pagans commonly attributed divine attributes to their rulers. Josephus relates that after delivering this oration, Herod was struck down with a violent pain in the stomach and was carried to the palace, where, after five days of suffering, he died. His death occurred in A.D. 44, and Judea was then placed under Roman governors, two of whom (Felix and Festus) appear in the later narrative of Acts."

Herod's sin was that he accepted the crowd's adulation, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man," without batting an eye and enjoying the moment to the full. Yet, he must have been familiar with the Word of God to Isaiah: "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols."²⁸¹ No one disregards this without impunity. King Herod died a miserable death, "but the word of God continued to increase and spread."

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, accompanied by John Mark.

²⁷⁹ See ch. 4:17-26

²⁸⁰ I Kings 5:11

²⁸¹ Isa. 42:8

IV. Extension of the church in Asia Minor and Europe 13:1-21:17**A. First mission, Galatia 13:1-14:28****1. The Commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for Missionary Service 13:1-3**

The Pulpit Commentary introduces this chapter by stating: “In this chapter and onwards the scene of the great drama of Christianity is transferred from Jerusalem to Antioch. The first part, which has hitherto been played by Peter and John and James, is now taken up by Barnabas and Saul, soon, however, to be classed as Paul and Barnabas.”

The Antioch church appears to have been well organized. Once again Barnabas, the man who lost the election for apostleship, became one of the main instruments of God in the furtherance of the Gospel. Luke mentions five persons who were the pillars of the church, exercising the ministry of prophets and teachers. The five were: “Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.” Luke does not specify who has what gift. We assume from the fact that Paul and Barnabas were sent out to proclaim the Gospel in other places, their main gift was teaching, although Paul evinced the gift of prophecy also.

We are, of course, already familiar with two of them. Why Simeon is called “Niger” is unknown. “Niger” is Latin for “black.” He may have been a black person from Africa or looked like one. Lucius may have been among the people from Cyrene who first preached the Gospel to the Greek in Antioch.²⁸² Manaen is called the foster brother of Herod the tetrarch. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states about Manaen: “Our margin has given the proper meaning of the original word *suntrophos* ... a foster-brother; i.e. Manaen was the son of the woman who nursed Herod Antipas; and the son, also, whose milk the young Herod shared. Of a person whose name was Manaen or Menahem, and who was in the court of Herod, we read several things in the Jewish writers. They say that this man had the gift of prophecy, and that he told Herod, when he was but a child, that he would be king. When Herod became king he sent for him to his court, and held him in great estimation. It might have been the son of this Menahem of whom Luke here speaks. Dr. Lightfoot has shown this to be at least possible.”

It is logical to assume that the command of the Holy Spirit to set apart Saul and Barnabas came in the form of a prophecy uttered by one of the men mentioned. But the Spirit had, obviously, already spoken to Saul and Barnabas personally, as shown in the words: “The work to which I have called them.” The prophecy, therefore, was a confirmation of the call the two had already received. The normal pattern of a call into ministry seems to be that the Holy Spirit speaks to an individual and confirms the call in the affirmation of the church. The additional fasting by the church during the commissioning service seems to indicate that the brethren wanted to make sure that this was the Lord’s leading. Having come to a sense of unanimity, they sent Paul and Barnabas on their way. Whether this meant that the two also received financial support is not mentioned, but it is very likely. We saw earlier that the church in Antioch demonstrated a spirit of generosity.

2. The First Missionary Journey ch. 13:4-14:28

²⁸² ch. 11:20



John Mark, who must have come with Paul and Barnabas from Jerusalem, accompanied them on the first leg of the journey.

The Holy Spirit directed them to Salamis on the island of Cyprus. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, which may have been the main reason for the team to begin their work at that place. No details are given on their ministry at that place. Refugees from Jerusalem had already evangelized Cyprus when the first persecution occurred.²⁸³

The first incident Luke describes is the audience with the proconsul of the island, Sergius Paulus, who resided at Paphos and who was most likely a gentile. The fact that this man sent for Paul and Barnabas to hear the Gospel is an indication that the ministry of the two was not unnoticed.

Paphos was notorious for her idolatry, witchcraft, and spiritual darkness. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments about the city: "There was probably no town in the universe more dissolute than Paphos. Here Venus had a superb temple; here she was worshipped with all her rites; and from this place she was named the Paphian Venus, the queen of Paphos, etc. This temple and whole city were destroyed by an earthquake; so that a vestige of either does not now remain."

The person of Bar-Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet, attached to the proconsul's court, fitted well in this atmosphere of demonic activity. When the proconsul showed interest in the Gospel, this man opposed him, using probably more than convincing words only. Elymas is not the Greek translation of the name Bar-Jesus but of the word "sorcerer." It is probably an Arabic word, meaning "magician." Knowing this, we better understand Paul's sharp reaction to the opposition of this man. Paul opposed him with all the power of his prophetic office. Bar-Jesus must have used his power to put curses upon people. Such a curse descended upon him now. The physical blindness, which Paul laid upon him, was merely an outward result of the spiritual condition of his heart. We must note, however, that the punishment was temporal, meaning that this man was given the opportunity for conversion and

²⁸³ See ch. 11:19

redemption. The incident was also sufficient to sway the proconsul and bring him to the faith that would save his soul.

Some time after Sergius Paulus' conversion, the team left the island to set sail to Asia Minor, to Perga in Pamphylia. The first thing to observe in vs. 13 is the fact that Luke no longer describes the team as "Barnabas and Paul," but as "Paul and his companions." Most commentators deduct from this that, from that time on, Paul took the lead and Barnabas occupied the second place. Whether this was the case or not, we cannot say for sure. Luke has a subtle and euphemistic way to emphasize dramatic changes. No reason is given for the leaving of John Mark. The fact that this incident later sparked a conflict between Paul and Barnabas suggests that John Mark's reason for abandoning the apostles was less than laudable, but any explanation only amounts to speculation.

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, "Perga was about seven and a half miles inland, on the river Cestrus, which is navigable. There was a constant intercourse between Paphos the capital of Cyprus, and Perga the capital of Pamphylia, fostered probably by the two famous temples of Venus and Diana."

There is no record that Paul and Barnabas did any evangelistic work in that area. The first report comes from Antioch in Pisidia, where the two attended a regular worship service in a Jewish synagogue. *The Pulpit Commentary* describes the order of service in the synagogue as follows: "The order of the synagogue service was first the prayers, read by the *Sheliach*, or angel of the synagogue, the people standing. Then came the reading of the Law in Hebrew by the reader, and the interpretation by the interpreter, who, outside of Judea, generally used the version of the LXX. This reading, or lesson, was called the *Parashah*. Next came the reading and interpreting of the prophets, called the *Haphtorah*, either by the regular reader or by any one invited by the ruler of the synagogue ... Then came the *Midrash*, the exposition or sermon, which Paul undertook at the invitation of the ruler of the synagogue."

Verses 16-41 give us a sample of Paul's preaching to a Jewish congregation. The service was, evidently, also attended by some gentile converts to Judaism, as is obvious from the greeting: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God." Paul's motioning with his hands and the introductory words: "Listen to me!" suggest that the service was not conducted very orderly and in perfect silence, but that there was an atmosphere of cosines and sociable fellowship in which people kept on talking even during the preaching of the Word.

It seems that it was customary to begin a sermon with a short overview of Israel's history with and emphasis on the unfolding of God's revelation. That was also the approach Stephen took in his defense before the Sanhedrin. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that the similarity between Paul's sermon and Stephen's may be an indication of the deep impression the latter had made on Paul who was present during the trial.

It is obvious that Paul was aware of the possibility of resistance against the Gospel message if it were presented too abruptly, without any introduction. He therefore proceeded tactfully by introducing his subject with well-known material that would make the audience feel comfortable. The purpose of the message was to show that Christianity was the natural fruit of Judaism. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "Paul first cited some of the highlights in the history of Israel to show that the God who had led Israel through the centuries had now sent Jesus to be the Son of David of prophecy. The heart of the Biblical faith is that God has acted redemptively in history, first in Israel and then in Jesus Christ."

The main difference between Paul's message and Stephen's defense is in the positive emphasis. Stephen accused his hearers of knowing the law but not obeying the Holy Spirit. Paul's intent was to prove the fulfillment of God's promises to the father in the person of Jesus Christ.

The words "with mighty power" are the rendering of the Greek *brachion hupselos*, which literally means "a high arm." The expression is borrowed from Moses' description of the exodus, as we read in Deuteronomy: "So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders."²⁸⁴

Paul draws a straight line from the exodus, which was the fulfillment of God's promise to the patriarchs, to the promise made to David, that one of his sons would sit on the throne of Israel. The reference to the ministry of John the Baptist also covered familiar ground. John's ministry had, evidently, reached the remotest areas where Jews lived, as is obvious from Paul encounter with some people in Ephesus, who had been baptized with the baptism of John.²⁸⁵ Familiarity with John's message also meant the Paul's hearers would know that John preached the coming of the Messiah. The mention of John's ministry gave greater credibility to Paul's words.

Linking the Gospel message to God's promise to Abraham also gave a powerful incentive to the audience to put their trust in Jesus as the Messiah. We do not know which Scripture portions were read at the beginning of this particular gathering. It is probable that several of Paul's remarks related to the Scripture lesson of that Sabbath.

²⁸⁴ Deut. 26:8

²⁸⁵ See Acts 19:1-3

Some of the portions may have been prophecies about the rejection and suffering of the Servant of the Lord. Paul's remarks must have had relevance to his hearers.

The most powerful argument was, of course, the resurrection from the dead. In order to prove that Jesus' resurrection was foretold, Paul quoted the Second Psalm. The Second Psalm is quoted twice in the Book of Acts. The apostles recognized the fulfillment of David's prophecy at the onset of the persecution and quoted the first two verses during their prayer meeting.²⁸⁶ Incidentally, this is the only place in the New Testament where the Old Testament quotation is backed up by a specific reference. Unfortunately, the NIV's rendering: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" rather obscures the point than clarifies it. The Greek verb *gennaō* means "to procreate," or "to regenerate." The NKJV, as well as most older versions, are clearer: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You." To suggest, as does the NIV that God became the Father of Jesus on the day of His resurrection, does not make much sense, in reference to the resurrection.

Scholars have argued whether Paul's quotation of this psalm refers to the Incarnation or the resurrection. The context strongly suggests the latter.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary makes the following profound observation about this: "It has been disputed whether this text should be understood of the incarnation or of the resurrection of our Lord. If understood of his incarnation, it can mean no more than this, that the human nature of our blessed Lord was begotten by the energy of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the blessed virgin; for as to his divine nature, which is allowed to be God, it could neither be created nor begotten. See some reasons offered for this at Luke 1:35; and, if those be deemed insufficient, a thousand more may be added. But in the above reasons it is demonstrated that the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is absolutely irreconcilable to reason, and contradictory to itself. ETERNITY is that which has had no beginning, nor stands in any reference to time: SON supposes time, generation, and father; and time also antecedent to such generation: therefore the rational conjunction of these two terms, Son and eternity, is absolutely impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas."

The resurrection gave proof of several truths about the person of Jesus Christ. It confirmed, first of all, the validity of all of Jesus' claims and teaching during His short ministry on earth. It was proof of His being the Second Person of the Trinity, as is clear from Paul's words in the introduction of his Epistle to the Romans, that Jesus, "through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."²⁸⁷ But most of all, it rang in a new era in the history of mankind; it meant that a man, a representative of the human race entered heaven and sat down on the throne of the universe, at the right hand of the Father. Jesus' resurrection opened perspectives and horizons that our finite minds, at this point, are unable to comprehend in totality.

Paul's second quote is from Isaiah, chapter 55: "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David."²⁸⁸ This refers to God's promise to David that one of his sons would occupy his throne throughout eternity.²⁸⁹ The Hebrew word, rendered here: "faithful love" is *checed*, which means God's covenant love for His people. The KJV often renders it "loving-kindness." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains: "It is one of His most central characteristics. God's loving-kindness is offered to His people, who need redemption from sin, enemies, and troubles. A recurrent refrain describing God's nature is 'abounding plenteous in checed' Ex 34:6; Neh 9:17; Ps 103:8; Jonah 4:2. The entire history of Yahweh's covenantal relationship with Israel can be summarized in terms of checed. It is the one permanent element in the flux of covenantal history. Even the Creation is the result of God's checed Ps 136:5-9. His love lasts for a 'thousand generations' Deut 7:9; cf. Deut 5:10 and Ex 20:6, indeed 'forever' (especially in the refrains of certain psalms, such as Ps 136)."

Paul's third quote is from Psalm Sixteen: "because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."²⁹⁰ Peter had used the same quotation in his discourse on the day of Pentecost. We don't know if Paul was familiar with Peter's sermon. At least he had come to the same logical conclusion that David's words could not be construed to apply to himself, since he had died and his body had decomposed.

It seems as if Paul jumps to conclusions when he says that the resurrection of Jesus opens the way of forgiveness of sin. We have to bear in mind that Luke gives a condensed version of a lengthy sermon. In referring to the ministry of John the Baptist, Paul may have quoted John's famous exclamation: "Look, the Lamb of God, who

²⁸⁶ See ch. 4:25,26

²⁸⁷ Rom. 1:4

²⁸⁸ Isa. 55:3

²⁸⁹ See II Sam. 7:8-29

²⁹⁰ Ps. 16:10

takes away the sin of the world!”²⁹¹ Or otherwise, those who knew about John must have been familiar with these words. The resurrection was proof of the fact that God, the Father, had accepted Jesus’ death on the cross as an atonement for the sins of the world.

Paul cut through to the core of the Gospel message, which is that the sacrifice of Christ provides a complete pardon for sin, a thing that the Law of Moses never promised. Peter even used a stronger language in preaching the Gospel to Cornelius and his company: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”²⁹²

The Greek word rendered “forgiveness” is *aphesis*, which is derived from a word, meaning “freedom.” The Old Testament concept of forgiveness simply involved a cover-up. The Hebrew word for “atonement” is *kaphar*, which means: “to cover.” It is used in God’s instructions to Noah to build the ark, when God tells him to “coat it with pitch inside and out.”²⁹³ Another Greek word often used is *katharizo*, which means: “to cleanse,” or “purge.” The difference is best expressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, which uses the latter: “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”²⁹⁴ The Old Testament rituals were a temporary measure to cover up the sins of man until the time that a definite cleansing could be made by means of the sacrifice of Christ. In Paul’s words in his Epistle to the Romans: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”²⁹⁵

From a psychological point of view, Paul’s conclusion of his sermon does not seem to be the kind of altar call modern preachers would use. There is no gentile appeal to human emotions, but a harsh warning of doom for those who reject God’s offer. Maybe we have moved away too far from the Biblical approach to the preaching of the Gospel. Not too many preachers would dare to preach on topics such as “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God,” as Jonathan Edwards did.

Paul’s next quote is taken from Habakkuk; or rather it is an adaptation of Habakkuk’s announcement of the coming judgment upon Israel in the form of the Babylonian invasion. We read: “Look at the nations and watch- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”²⁹⁶ The quotation is remarkable from the viewpoint of textual criticism because the Hebrew text uses the word *bagowyim*, whereas the Greek word *kataphrontes*, which is translated “scoffers” is the translation of the Hebrew word *bogadiym*. The text Paul used is from the Septuagint. It is generally supposed that the Greek text contains a copying error.

Barnes’ Notes explains: “The thing to which the prophet Habakkuk referred was, that God would bring upon them the Chaldeans, that would destroy the temple and nation. In like manner Paul says that God in that time might bring upon the nation similar calamities. By rejecting the Messiah and his gospel, and by persevering in wickedness, they would bring upon themselves the destruction of the temple, the city, and the nation. It was this threatened destruction doubtless to which the apostle referred.” It seems that Paul took a great deal of liberty in applying Habakkuk’s prophecy to those who would reject the Gospel message. But history has justified Paul’s application. Israel’s rejection of the Messiah resulted in a longer and more horrible captivity and dispersion than the Babylonian Captivity.

Paul’s message was initially well received. Luke reports that Paul and Barnabas were engaged in a great deal of counseling after the service, and they were invited to come back the next week and speak again. Evidently, word of Paul’s sermon traveled throughout the city and the next Sabbath the synagogue was filled to capacity.

It is difficult to determine what went wrong at that point. Luke states: “When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.” Evidently, what happened was that a large number of people who were gentiles and who had not converted to Judaism had gathered and Paul offered to them the same salvation he had preached to the Jews and converts to Judaism the week before. It seems that the message had not been accepted unanimously the first time. There probably had been some heated discussions the previous Sabbath, which caused Paul to address the “scoffers.” The controversy boiled down again to the point of

²⁹¹ John 1:29

²⁹² Acts 10:43

²⁹³ Gen. 6:14

²⁹⁴ Heb. 9:13,14

²⁹⁵ Rom. 3:25,26

²⁹⁶ Hab. 1:5

circumcision. Had Paul instructed the non-Jews to become Jewish converts by submitting to circumcision before offering them salvation in Jesus Christ, there probably would have been no disagreement.

So the opposition to Paul's message seems to have started on the first Sabbath. The NIV states that the Jews "talked abusively against what Paul was saying." The Greek word used is *blasphemeo*, which means, as we can guess, "to blaspheme." This seems to imply that the opponents rejected the notion that Jesus Christ was the expected Messiah.

Luke attributes the Jew's reaction to "jealousy." The Greek word is *zelos*, which has the meaning of "heat," or "zeal." It can convey the feeling of jealousy of a husband. *The Pulpit Commentary* compares the word jealousy with envy and states: "Neither word exactly expresses the *zelon*. The *indignation* of ver. 17, ... is nearer the sense; though jealousy of the influence of the two strangers may have entered into the fierce passion which was stirred up in the Jewish mind, as well as jealousy for their own religion, which they saw was being superseded by the doctrine of Paul."

Paul and Barnabas were not in the least intimidated by the strong opposition to their message. Their boldness stemmed from their spiritual authority as ambassadors of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul's eloquence grew richer in that he answered the opponents with, what may be considered, a touch of irony: "Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." These Jews did, of course, not consider themselves "unworthy" of anything. They deemed themselves too good for such a cheap Gospel. Corrie ten Boom tells the story of her return to Germany after WWII to preach the Gospel to the people who had been guards in the Nazi concentration camps. These men and women, who were guilty of inhuman cruelties, considered themselves above the simple message Miss ten Boom brought. They stated that they were used to more sophisticated theology and more profound truth. Corrie says that the Lord told her to bring them some chocolate, which at that time was still a rare commodity. The people took the chocolate and ate it eagerly. Corrie told them that their attitude toward chocolate was healthier than toward the Gospel; they ate it without considering themselves too good for candy and without asking profound questions.

Actually, only those who consider themselves unworthy are those who are candidates for salvation. Only those who say to God: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son"²⁹⁷ are worthy of the Father's embrace.

The rule for Paul's preaching had been clearly outlined by Jesus Himself. He had said to His disciples that: "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."²⁹⁸ Paul adhered closely to this principle and explaining the content of the Gospel in his Epistle to the Romans, he wrote that it "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."²⁹⁹

A lack of conviction of sin, which was the attitude exhibited by the Jews who opposed Paul's preaching, also blinds the eyes for the meaning of the Word of God. Paul's parting quote in answer to the opposition outlines God's eternal plan for His creation. Paul left them with a verse from Isaiah, the prophet they said to esteem so highly and whom they considered so little: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."³⁰⁰

In God's plan of salvation of this world, Israel as a nation was meant to be "a kingdom of priests," a truth which they had never fully understood. At the foot of Mount Sinai, God had said: "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."³⁰¹ God's chosen people never understood the purpose for which God had chosen them; they merely boasted in the fact that they were chosen.

The reaction of the gentiles was one of great joy. Luke states: "All who were appointed for eternal life believed." *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "This can only refer to the predestination or election of God, viewed as the moving cause of their faith." The question arises, of course, if we should see the shadow of Calvin in these words. Does this mean that man's salvation rests solely on God's predetermination and that man is not free to accept or to reject?

The Greek word rendered "appointed" is *tasso*, which means to arrange in an orderly manner," or "to assign to a certain position." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* explains that it is "a military term to place in orderly arrangement. The word 'ordain' is not the best translation here. 'Appointed,' as Hackett shows, is better. The Jews here had voluntarily rejected the word of God. On the other side were those Gentiles who gladly

²⁹⁷ Luke 15:18,19

²⁹⁸ Luke 24:47

²⁹⁹ Rom. 1:16

³⁰⁰ Isa. 49:6

³⁰¹ Ex. 19:5,6

accepted what the Jews had rejected, not all the Gentiles. Why these Gentiles here ranged themselves on God's side as opposed to the Jews Luke does not tell us. This verse does not solve the vexed problem of divine sovereignty and human free agency. There is no evidence that Luke had in mind an [absolute decree] of personal salvation. Paul had shown that God's plan extended to and included Gentiles. Certainly the Spirit of God does move upon the human heart to which some respond, as here, while others push him away." TLB may take a little too much liberty in rendering vs. 48: "When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and rejoiced in Paul's message; and as many as wanted eternal life, believed," but it probably gets closer to the meaning.

Luke includes an interesting reference to the role of women in the resistance against the Gospel. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Among the God fearers ... attending the synagogue were women of high standing. These the Jews influenced to bring pressure on their husbands to drive Paul and Barnabas out of the area. Here is an authentic touch of local color; women did not exercise such influence in cities of Greece as they did here in Asia."

In shaking off the dust of their feet, they literally obeyed Jesus' command, who had told His disciples: "If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them."³⁰² This ritual had a deep symbolic meaning; it established the relationship of the people to the land. The very soil of a country was considered to be blessed when the people lived in fellowship with God. On the other hand, the Scriptures state that the land would vomit out the people who desecrated that land by their sin. God had told His people: "If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you."³⁰³

Although the Lord's messengers went through a traumatic experience, they left behind a group of young believers who were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

The next target was Iconium which, according to *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, was "a populous city about 45 miles southeast from Pisidian Antioch, at the foot of mount Taurus, on the borders of Lycaonia, Phrygia, and Pisidia, and in later times largely contributing to the consolidation of the Turkish empire."

Paul visited Iconium also on his second missionary journey and, some scholars believe a third time. The first visit initially met with an overwhelming response to the message preached. The team adhered to the principle of bringing the Gospel first to those who attended the synagogue, which in this case also meant preaching to both Jews and Jewish converts. Although many responded positively, a stiff resistance was mounted against the team, which was initiated by the Jews who rejected the message, but which seems to have strongly influenced the Greek population of the city. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas divided the city into two camps. We do not read how the Jews poisoned the mind of the gentiles, but they probably suggested that accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be the collapse of their idol worship and, consequently, of their culture. The resisting Jews could hardly have influenced the gentiles by stating that the Gospel would mean the end of Judaism as they practiced it; that would have had no effect upon a pagan population. Although none of this is stated in detail, we can deduct that the Jews did not shy from using arguments that actually promoted heathenism in order to defeat the preaching of the Gospel. That made them doubly guilty in that they betrayed their own religion at the same time. This is what Paul referred to in his letter to the Thessalonians, where we read: "They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit."³⁰⁴

In spite of the enormous tensions their preaching generated in the city, Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, and the Holy Spirit allowed them to perform miracles, probably, consisting of supernatural healings.

It wasn't until a plot to assassinate the brethren was discovered that they left and went to Lystra and Derbe. They probably suffered some physical abuse before they fled, because Paul later mentioned Iconium in his letter to Timothy as one of the cities in which he suffered persecution. We read: "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings-what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured."³⁰⁵

The audience in Lystra must have been a mixed one also, as we can deduct from the reaction to a miracle of healing Paul performed.

A man who attended the service was a paraplegic from birth. The fact that he demonstrated "faith to be healed" suggests, first of all, that Paul may have elaborated in his sermon on the implications for the human body of Christ's resurrection. It also emphasizes that the faith of the sick person plays an important role in his healing. It is

³⁰² Luke 9:6

³⁰³ Lev. 18:28

³⁰⁴ I Thess. 2:15,16

³⁰⁵ II Tim. 3:10,11

an undeniable fact that the healing of the body has a psychological side. The Book of Proverbs concurs with this, saying: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."³⁰⁶ The healing of Aeneas in Lydda in which Peter had been instrumental seems to emphasize the faith of Peter, rather than of the sick person,³⁰⁷ which intimates that there are no fixed rules.

The healing of the paralyzed man in Lystra had an undesirable effect upon the preaching of the Gospel team. The gentiles of the city drew the conclusion from this instantaneous healing, that their gods, Zeus and Hermes, had come to them in human form. Our text does not specify that Paul invoked the name of Jesus in commanding this man to be healed. Some manuscripts, however, insert the words: "I say unto you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'stand upright on thy feet.'" It is quite likely that Paul pronounced such words, and that the implication of the invocation of the Name of Jesus was somehow lost on the audience.

Since the following commotion was carried on in a language which Paul and Barnabas did not know, they could, initially, not understand what the crowd intended to do with them. There is proof that there existed a local language in the region of Lystra and Derbe but no one knows what it was. Evidently, the majority of the population was, at least, bilingual.

The crowd's conclusion that Zeus and Hermes, otherwise called Jupiter and Mercury in Latin, had come down to visit the city may have been based on a known mythological legend. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The belief that the gods were come down in the likeness of men, and that these gods were Jupiter and Hermes, or Mercury, was most natural to Lycaonians, who were conversant with, and doubtless believed, the Phrygian legend of Philemon and Baucis, who entertained hospitably Jupiter and Hermes, when no one else would take them in, and whose cottage was by the gods turned into a temple (when all the neighborhood was drowned by a flood), of which they were made priest and priestess during life, and simultaneously metamorphosed into an oak and lime tree when their life ended."

We learn from this incident that Paul was the main speaker during these evangelistic campaigns and that Barnabas kept himself more in the background. Chrysostom conjectured from the people's reaction in Lystra that Barnabas was a large, athletic man, which was the reason he was taken for Jupiter; and that Paul was small in his person, and was, therefore, supposed to be Mercury. We should not accept this as Gospel truth and it is of little importance for the understanding of this portion.

Luke informs us that there was a temple of Zeus outside the city and that there was a priest who was specifically dedicated to this deity. So the crowd prepared a ceremony with sacrifices to honor Barnabas and Paul.

Someone must have translated for Paul and Barnabas, or in answer to their questions, told them in Greek what was happening. The two reacted rather violently to the information; they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd. We suppose that it was Paul who shouted the eloquent sermon about who they were and who the God was whom they represented. The effect of this extemporaneous preaching was, evidently, less than of the sermons preached in the synagogue, because the crowd could barely be contained in their efforts to bring the sacrifices.

The sight of these two men, with torn clothes, wildly gesticulating in a crowd whose passion had reached a peak, must have been quite a reversal of the concept of two gods coming to earth in human form. One wonders if the apostles, if we may use this title for Barnabas also, felt any temptation to yield to the worship that they were about to receive. Satan, undoubtedly, must have tried to batter their minds with illusions for glory, and power, and with the promise that all resistance against them would cease if they accepted this tribute. Their feeling of horror and repulsion, expressed in the tearing of the clothes, is evidence of the fact that the Holy Spirit was powerfully upon them.

When "the gods" refused the honor, the crowd turned against them. The episode coincided with the arrival of some Jews from Antioch and Iconium, from where Paul and Barnabas had fled for their lives. Finding a crowd in a volatile mood, they had no trouble turning the worship into an execution. Paul was dragged out of town and stoned to death, or so they thought. Luke does not explain how Barnabas escaped. If it is true that the people mistook him for Zeus because of his physical appearance, he may have commanded enough respect to be kept from being manhandled. It may also be that Barnabas, being the milder in character of the two, had been less controversial in the way he ministered the Gospel. The impression we get from Paul as he appears to us, both in Acts and in his epistles, is that he was an impulsive person who stated his convictions in a strong way and did not shy from conflict.

Whether Paul was clinically dead, or merely near death is impossible to ascertain. Luke's choice of words: "Thinking he was dead," suggests that Paul may have been in a coma, but that he had not actually died. Paul refers to this incident in his letter to the Corinthians where he catalogues his suffering for the cause of the Gospel: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned,

³⁰⁶ Prov. 17:22

³⁰⁷ Ch. 9:34

three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea.”³⁰⁸ This may also have been the moment of which he speaks in the same epistle: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows. And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”³⁰⁹

The people who stoned Paul must have left him without the thought that he needed to be buried. This allowed a group of faithful disciples to gather around him. They must all have been new believers, babes in Christ. Undoubtedly, they prayed and the Lord answered their faith. Paul not only came back to life, he was able to get up and walk back into the city. Although it seemed a very dangerous thing to do to return to a place where people have tried to kill him, Paul was probably safer after he had been declared dead than before. To see a person who has just been executed and left for dead appear in perfect health must have been the most fearful sight a crowd had ever witnessed. No one would have dared to touch this man again. Paul and Barnabas could even allow themselves to spend the night in Lystra. They returned to Lystra after having preached in Derbe. “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”³¹⁰

Luke gives no details of the time spent in Derbe; he only states that the team “won a large number of disciples.” There is no mention of opposition in that city. We must notice the amazing fact that Paul and Barnabas returned to the cities where people had plotted to kill them and where Paul had actually been executed. They had fled from Iconium to save their lives and now they returned. This indicates that a profound change had occurred in their attitude toward the dangers that faced them. They considered that strengthening and encouraging the new converts was a higher priority than self-preservation. They were willing to risk their lives for this. Paul must have said to himself that he had died already and the Lord had brought him back to life, consequently, nothing worse could ever happen to him.

He would later refer to this experience in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”³¹¹ Not many of us would be willing to follow in the footsteps of Paul and Barnabas. Fear of death can keep people from doing what the Lord wants them to do. Jesus’ words to His disciples are applicable here: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”³¹² Yet, some have paid with their lives for their preaching of the Gospel. God does not expect us to be heroes but He wants us to be obedient servants.

As mentioned earlier in our study, we believe that the words Paul and Barnabas used to encourage the disciples: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” sum up the essence of the Book of Acts. These words do not mean that suffering buys us entrance into the kingdom. The kingdom is ours through repentance and rebirth. Jesus said: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”³¹³ But it is not for nothing that Jesus also says: “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.”³¹⁴ If these two statements seem irreconcilable, we must remember that God did not make the gate small and the road narrow; He gives us the kingdom. The fact that we experience so much difficulty in squeezing through the gate and keeping our feet on the path is due to the swelling sin has caused in our lives. When God’s holiness reduces us to size, we will have no trouble entering and advancing.

In the context of hardship, the words “strengthening” and “encouraging” seem out of place. We tend to believe that “warning” would have been the appropriate word. Strengthening and encouraging relate to the understanding of the purpose of the hardship and to the goal of entering the kingdom. If hardship is placed in the context of the battle that has to be won, it acquires meaning. Weakness and discouragement are the result of

³⁰⁸ II Cor. 11:24,25

³⁰⁹ II Cor. 12:2-5

³¹⁰ Ps. 91:1

³¹¹ II Cor. 1:8-11

³¹² Matt. 10:28-31

³¹³ Luke 12:32

³¹⁴ Matt. 7:14

meaningless suffering. James penetrates to the core of the problem with the words: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."³¹⁵ If we don't understand the purpose of hardship, James' words become to us the most frustrating statement in the Bible. Understanding the purpose may not immediately result in "pure joy" but it will help us on the way.

The Greek word rendered "hardship" is *thlipsis*, "pressure." The KJV uses the word "tribulation." A good modern term is "stress."

Observe the practical approach of the Gospel team in their efforts to edify the young churches they had planted: They "appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." The churches were organized into well-functioning bodies of believers. The words "the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" refer to the faith of Paul and Barnabas. When they set out on this missionary journey, they believed that God would confirm their efforts and use their ministry to save souls. Their faith had been richly rewarded.

They retraced their steps back to Attalia where they boarded a ship and sailed to Antioch, which had become their home church and the base of their mission. We don't know how long the whole journey had taken; it had most likely covered several years. Traveling by sea and overland at that time was a time-consuming endeavor. Planting a church is never done overnight; it must have taken weeks and months for them to establish a fellowship of believers. As we saw, Luke mentions that they spent considerable time in Iconium, and we cannot imagine that, on their return, they hurried along while strengthening and encouraging the new believers. But when they left for Antioch they considered that their work was finished.

The first missionary convention in church history must have been a joyous occasion. Paul and Barnabas, evidently, reported their adventures in great detail; so much so that Luke, who entered the picture years later, was able to give us such a detailed report as we find in these last two chapters of his book.

This chapter ends with Luke's observation: "And they stayed there a long time with the disciples." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "How long the apostles tarried here we cannot tell; but we hear no more of them until the council of Jerusalem, mentioned in the following chapter, which is generally supposed to have been held in the year 51 of our Lord; and, if the transactions of this chapter took place in A.D. 46, as chronologers think, then there are five whole years of Paul's ministry, and that of the apostles, which Luke passes by in perfect silence. It is very likely that all this time Paul and Barnabas were employed in extending the work of God through the different provinces contiguous to Antioch; for Paul himself tells us that he preached the Gospel so far as Illyria, Rom 15:19, on the side of the Adriatic Gulf.... Many of the tribulations and perils through which the Apostle Paul passed are not mentioned by Luke, particularly those of which he himself speaks, 2 Cor 11:23-27. He had been five times scourged by the Jews; thrice beaten by the Romans; thrice shipwrecked; a whole night and day in the deep, probably saving his life upon a plank; besides frequent journeyings, and perils from his countrymen, from the pagan, from robbers, in the city, in the wilderness, in the sea, among false brethren, etc., etc. Of none of these have we any circumstantial account. Probably most of these happened in the five years which elapsed between the apostles' return to Antioch, and the council of Jerusalem."

B. Problem of the Gentile church, and council in Jerusalem 15:1-35

The heading "Problem of the Gentile church" may be better stated as "Problem of the church." It was the church as a whole, not just the gentile section that must come to terms with the question as to whether only Jews would be saved, and that one must first become a Jew by submitting to the rite of circumcision, which would comprise observing all of the ceremonial part of the Law of Moses. The problem, therefore, went well beyond the rite of circumcision; it involved the whole complex of observance of ceremony or spiritual renewal, of work versus grace.

We could wonder why God did not intervene by direct revelation so that no misunderstanding about the application of the Old Testament rite could be possible. Why did He leave it up to finite men to figure out the applications and the consequences? The Book of Proverbs suggests that God's silence is proof of our regal position in His kingdom. We read: It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings."³¹⁶

We cannot overstate the importance of the issue raised in this chapter. The matter of "works" versus "grace" has plagued the church from its very beginning and it is still a pressing issue at present. Satan has used the subject over the centuries to keep people out of the kingdom. We should note the slyness of his approach. The Law

³¹⁵ James 1:2-4

³¹⁶ Prov. 25:2

of Moses is an expression of the will and character of God, but the enemy has managed to use the matter of keeping the law to estrange people from God's grace.

It is not possible to enter too deeply into the problem in the context of our study of Acts. We must state, however, that one of the problems is the fact that often no distinction is made between the moral section of the law and the ceremonial one. None of the demands of the Ten Commandments, for instance, are abolished in the transition from the Old Testament to the New. As a matter of fact, with the exception of the Sabbath command, all of the commandments are repeated in the New Testament. The fundamental difference between the Old Testament and the New is the difference of sacrifice. The very fact that there was a ceremonial law, which made provision for the atonement of sins committed, implies that man would not be able to fulfill the moral demands of the law. The change in sacrifice, the difference between atonement by the blood of sacrificial animals and by the blood of Christ has brought about a fundamental change in the heart of man. The death of Christ in our behalf has opened the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit and the subsequent renewal of our inner man. Paul expresses this most powerfully in his Epistle to the Romans: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."³¹⁷ The people who preached circumcision completely failed to understand the radical change produced by the death of Jesus Christ and the implication of the new form of atonement. God did reveal the meaning of it to some of His servants. This is what Paul meant in his Epistle to the Galatians when he said: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."³¹⁸

The Pulpit Commentary observes: "The question thus raised nearly effected the disruption of the Church, and was the most serious controversy that had yet arisen. If the views broached by these Judaeon Christians had prevailed, the whole character of Christianity would have been changed, and its existence probably cut short."

As said above, the issue was not circumcision or uncircumcision but whether a person is saved by what he does for God or by what God does for him. Paul states his position clearly in his Epistle to the Corinthians: "This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts."³¹⁹

Why the matter first came to a head in the church of Antioch rather than in the church of Jerusalem is one of the unsolved mysteries of the Bible. It may be that the church in Jerusalem, being at the place where the temple was located, still participated in the temple rituals without asking questions about it. It had been taken for granted that gentiles who came to Jerusalem to worship God would submit to the rite of circumcision. The presence of Paul, to whom Jesus had given His special revelation regarding the meaning of grace, accounts for the resistance in the church of Antioch. Paul was, beyond doubt, the first theologian in the history of the church; maybe he is the only one.

Rather than risking a split in the church over the issue, the elders of the church decided to send a delegation to Jerusalem and ask that the apostles issue a declaration on the point. Thus occurred the first church council in history.

In traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas followed the Roman road that led along the coast of Palestine. This accomplished a double purpose: it made traveling easier and it allowed them to visit the existing churches on the way. They used the occasion to report the result of their missionary journey. Luke states: "They told how the Gentiles had been converted." *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "There was an especial reason for doing so, as it had a strong bearing upon the great controversy about to be decided at Jerusalem." If, in fact, their reporting took on the form of campaigning "their cause," they must have been less than naïf in the pursuit of their goal in traveling to Jerusalem.

This is the first instance in which the fact is mentioned that there were churches in Phoenicia. The reaction to their report is great gladness. The fact that gentiles had responded so overwhelmingly to the Gospel was accepted as a very positive factor. Evidently, these churches understood the command to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, the delegates give the same report as they had given to the church along the Roman road. They met with the apostles and the elders of the church. It is generally supposed that this was the

³¹⁷ Rom. 8:3,4

³¹⁸ Gal. 1:11,12

³¹⁹ I Cor. 7:17-19

occasion Paul speaks of in his Epistle to the Galatians, where he states: “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.”³²⁰

The reaction of the church as a whole was not as unanimously positive as it had been in the churches along the way. There was an immediate reaction from the side of the believers from among the Pharisees. It seems that, even before Paul and Barnabas had a chance to present the matter for which the church in Antioch had delegated them to Jerusalem, the opposition voiced its objections to the report of the conversion of the gentiles.

It is difficult to prove from Scripture that gentiles who accept the Gospel and become followers of Jesus Christ must submit to the rite of circumcision. The first instance in which circumcision is mentioned in the Bible is at the ratification of God’s covenant with Abraham. We read that God said to Abraham: “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner--those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”³²¹ From that time on, circumcision was regarded as a sign of a man’s belonging to the family of Abraham, particularly through the line of Isaac and Jacob. The Mosaic Law only mentions in passing the necessity of circumcision for a male child. In the context of the purification rites for a woman who gives birth to a male child, we read: “On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.”³²²

The above pertains exclusively to people descending in direct lineage from Abraham, via Jacob. The only mention of the need for circumcision for people from another race is in connection with the celebration of the Passover. “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it.”³²³

The Passover was the commemoration of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, which made them from a group of slaves into a free people. The only reason why a non-Israelite would want to participate in this celebration would be if he understood the spiritual significance of the exodus. If we understand that Jesus Christ is the real Passover Lamb who saves us from death and damnation, we have passed from the shadow into the reality. And if we pass from one shadow, we may as well pass from all the shadows that represent the sacrifice of Christ in the Mosaic Law. In that case, circumcision and practice of the rituals of the law have become redundant.

Thus the first church council met to discuss the implications of the conversion of the gentiles. It appears that the council was not limited to the apostles and the elders of the church, since we read in vs. 22 that “the whole church” decided on the matter. Luke states that Peter’s discourse was preceded by “much discussion.” The Greek word is *zetesis*, which implies “a searching after the truth.” According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, it “denotes, firstly, ‘a seeking’ ... then, ‘a debate, dispute, questioning,’ ” Evidently, ample opportunity was given to the opposing party to state its view. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “Though the apostles and elders were under the inspiration of the Almighty, and could by this inspiration have immediately determined the question, yet it was highly necessary that the objecting party should be permitted to come forward and allege their reasons for the doctrines they preached; and that these reasons should be fairly met by argument, and the thing proved to be useless in itself, inexpedient in the present case, and unsupported by any express authority from God, and serving no purpose to the Gentiles, who in their uncircumcised state, by believing in Christ Jesus, had been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.”

Evidently, after the speakers had run out of arguments, Peter rose and recounted what happened during his visit to the house of Cornelius. He had told the same story earlier shortly after it had happened, when he had to defend himself against the accusation that he had entered the house of a gentile.³²⁴ Cornelius’ conversion had at that point already become history, having happened approximately 10 years earlier.

Peter appeals to the call God had placed upon his life. He had been entrusted with the keys of the kingdom to open the door of the Gospel to the gentiles, according to Jesus’ promise: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be

³²⁰ Gal. 2:9

³²¹ Gen. 17:10-14

³²² Lev. 12:3

³²³ Ex. 12:48

³²⁴ See ch. 11:1-18

loosed in heaven.”³²⁵ This is the only place in the Book of Acts where the expression “the message of the gospel” is used.

The indisputable point Peter made is that God had given the Holy Spirit to people who were uncircumcised. Keywords in his discourse are “God, who knows the heart, ... made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.” The profound implication is, among other things, that circumcision ought to reflect the condition of the heart and that the rite in itself has no value unless it symbolizes an inner renewal. The real circumcision is the circumcision of the heart. Paul formulates this more precisely in his Epistle to the Romans: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”³²⁶ Later he stated the same truth even more succinctly in his letter to the Philippians: “For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.”³²⁷

Another profound truth that is implied in Peter’s words is that it is the Holy Spirit who purifies a person’s heart. He does this, obviously, by the application of the blood of Christ to the human soul. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews expresses this as follows: “If the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean, how much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”³²⁸ Man cannot cleanse himself from his sin. When a human being offers himself to God, the Holy Spirit takes upon Himself the responsibility for his cleansing. That is why Jesus said to His disciples: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”³²⁹

Peter uses rather strong language by saying that demanding that the gentiles would submit to the rite of circumcision amounts to putting God to the test. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Chrysostom who said: “Why do you try God’s patience by your provocation in putting an unbearable yoke upon the necks of those who believe? Or, ‘as if he had not power to save by faith.’ ” Peter calls the Law of Moses “a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear.” That is a formidable expression! It is generally interpreted that Peter speaks here about the ceremonial law, not the moral law. But for the sinful nature of man, the moral law is just as impossible to bear as all the implications of the ceremonial law.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary illustrates the burden of the yoke of the law with a story in the Midrash about what the demands of the law, taken to their extremes, could do to a poor widow: “ ‘There was ... a widow in our neighborhood who had two orphan children: she had one field; and, when she began to plow it, one came and said, Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together. When she went to sow it, he said, Thou shalt not sow thy field with divers seeds. When she began to reap, and to gather the sheaves together, he said, leave a handful and the corners of the field for the poor. When she prepared to thresh it, he said, Give me the wave-offering, and the first and second tithes. She did as she was commanded, and then went and sold her field, and bought two ewes, that she might clothe herself and family with the wool, and get profit by the lambs. When they brought forth their lambs, Aaron came and said, Give me the firstlings, for the holy blessed God hath said, All the first born, whatsoever openeth the womb, shall be thine. She yielded to his demands, and gave him two lambs. When shearing time came, he said, Give me the first fruits of the wool. When the widow had done this, she said, I cannot stand before this man; I will kill my sheep and eat them. When she had killed the sheep, Aaron came and said, Give me the shoulder, and the jaws, and the ventricle. The widow said, though I have killed my sheep, I am not delivered from this man; I therefore consecrate the whole to God. Then Aaron said, ALL belongs to me, for the holy blessed God hath said, everything that is consecrated in Israel shall be his, i.e. the priest’s. He therefore took the whole carcasses, and marched off, leaving the widow and her orphan daughters overwhelmed with affliction.’ This is a terrible picture of the requisitions of the Mosaic ritual; and, though exaggerated, it contains so many true features that it may well be said, this is a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear.”

Peter’s final answer to the Pharisee converts is: “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” This concurs with Paul’s statement in Galatians: “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”³³⁰

³²⁵ Matt. 16:18-19

³²⁶ Rom. 2:28,29

³²⁷ Phil. 3:3

³²⁸ Heb. 9:13,14

³²⁹ John 15:3

³³⁰ Gal. 2:15,16

The Christian Pharisees realized, maybe better than anyone else at that time, that the Gospel ultimately meant the end of Judaism, as they knew it. It would even mean the end of their Jewish culture as it was expressed in the celebrations of the festivals and the observances of their customs. Messianic Jews of our day still celebrate various feasts that are rooted in Old Testament tradition. This is, of course, not wrong. But since the feasts also are a shadow of the reality of Jesus Christ, they have lost their intrinsic meaning. Paul illustrates this best in Second Corinthians, where he says: “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.”³³¹

Peter’s statement opened the way for the testimony of Paul and Barnabas who reported on their missionary journey during which God confirmed the validity of the conversion of the gentiles by a series of miracles. Luke uses two different words to describe the miracles, which the NIV renders with “miraculous signs and wonders.” The Greek words are *semeion* and *teras*. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines *semeion* as “a sign, mark, token, as signs of divine authority.” *Teras* is described as “something strange, causing the beholder to marvel.” Both words refer, evidently, to the same event, but the one describes God’s intention, and the other man’s reaction. *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament* observes: “Three times (Acts 14:27; 15:4,12) Paul is described as telling the facts about their mission work, facts more eloquent than argument ... One of the crying needs in the churches is fuller knowledge of the facts of mission work and progress with enough detail to give life and interest. The signs and wonders which God had wrought among the Gentiles set the seal of approval on the work done through ... Barnabas and Paul.”

The assembly ends with a statement by James, who apparently presided over the meeting. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “He was evidently President of the Council, and is generally called Bishop of Jerusalem. The rest either argued on the subject, or gave their opinion; James alone pronounced the definitive sentence.” Scholars do not agree on who this James was. He either was James, the son of Alpheus, or James the brother of Jesus. The majority leans towards the latter.

The NIV’s rendering: “how God at first showed his concern” seems strange as the translation of the Greek word *episkeptomai*, which means: “to inspect, to select, to go to see, or to relieve.” The context suggests the meaning of “choosing. God decided to make some of the gentiles His chosen people as He had done with Israel.

The value of James’ statement is in the fact that he relates the various experiences of gentile conversion to the written Word of the Old Testament. It is true that the baptism with the Holy Spirit of Cornelius and his family was more than a subjective feeling, but still it was an event on the experimental level. The danger of experiences is that they can be misleading unless the source is clearly recognized. Unless what we feel and go through can be compared to the written Word of God, we may find ourselves on thin ice. The church has suffered greatly by some experiences of people that could not be verified by Scripture.

James’ quotation is from the Book of Amos, where we read: “ ‘In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,’ declares the LORD, who will do these things.”³³²

The Hebrew text differs substantially from the Greek text as we find it in Acts; it even differs slightly from the Septuagint from which it was evidently quoted. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* observes: “As James quoted them as a prophecy of the calling of the Gentiles into the church of God, it is evident the Jews must have understood them in that sense, otherwise they would have immediately disputed his application of them to the subject in question, and have rejected his conclusion by denying the premises. But that the words were thus understood by the ancient Jews, we have their own testimony. In Sanhedr. fol. 69, we have these remarkable words: ‘Rabbi Nachman said to Rabbi Isaac, ‘Whence art thou taught when Bar Naphli will come? He saith unto him, ‘Who is this Bar Naphli?’ The other replied, ‘He is the Messiah.’ ‘Dost thou then call the Messiah Bar Naphli?’ ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘for it is written, In that day I will build again the tabernacle of David, ... which is falling down.’ This is evidently a quotation from Amos 9:11, and a proof that the Jews understood it to be a prophecy concerning the Messiah.”

The words: “that have been known for ages” are no longer part of the quotation. As a matter of fact some text critics believe that they are spurious, since they are not found in some of the older manuscripts. Whether James said this or not does not change the fact that the conversion of the gentiles had been part of God’s eternal plan. Salvation was offered to the Jews first, but they were never meant to be the only recipients.

It is interesting that the word “tent” or “tabernacle” is used to describe the house of David. The Hebrew word *cukkah*, which Amos used, is a temporary dwelling, such as was constructed at the Feast of Tabernacles. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes: “As the stately palace supplies a figurative

³³¹ I Cor. 5:7,8

³³² Amos 9:11,12

representation of the greatness and might of the kingdom, so does the fallen hut, which is full of rents and near to destruction, symbolize the utter ruin of the kingdom. If the family of David no longer dwells in a palace, but in a miserable fallen hut, its regal sway must have come to an end. The figure of the stem of Jesse that is hewn down, in Isa 11:1, is related to this; except that the former denotes the decline of the Davidic dynasty, whereas the fallen hut represents the fall of the kingdom.” The use of the Greek word as equivalent in the New Testament, however, opens another perspective. *Skene* means “a tent or cloth hut,” rendered by the KJV, “habitation, tabernacle.” A word related to this, *skenoō*, is found in John’s statement: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”³³³ We may, therefore, see in “David’s tent” a reference to the Incarnation. It is the fact that the Word became flesh that opened the door for the conversion of the gentiles.

God had promised to build a house for David: “The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”³³⁴ David’s fallen hut did not show much resemblance to the house God had promised to build for him. Yet, the One of whom Isaiah said: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering”³³⁵ turned out to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the One whose kingdom will never end.³³⁶

James speaks with the voice of authority, but what he says, obviously, represents the consensus of the whole congregation. The conclusion to which the church had come was that gentiles should not be forced to submit to the rite of circumcision and, by implication, observe the ceremonial part of the Mosaic Law. The four points they were required to observe are pollution of idols, sexual immorality, eating animals that died by strangulation, and eating of blood. The reason for these stipulations seems to be, not the imposition of another law, but to create a basis for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Gentiles. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes correctly: “There remained another problem, that concerning fellowship between Jew and Gentile. Gentile practices were strongly offensive to Jews and to Jewish Christians. Therefore, as a *modus vivendi* and an expression of Christian charity, James recommended that Gentile Christians abstain from certain practices that would offend their Jewish brethren.” Although the present day church of Jesus Christ does not face this particular problem, peaceful coexistence still does not come naturally. Even milder forms of difference that typify the generation gap of our time, such as the use of the organ or the guitar music during the worship service, hymns versus choruses, or the lectern instead of the pulpit are able to spit churches. James would suggest to us that we find a “*modus vivendi*” as an expression of Christian charity in that both generations give and take enough to preserve the unity of the body of Christ.

The Pulpit Commentary states: “The four prohibitions seem to have been a temporary arrangement adapted to the then condition of the Church, with a view to enabling Christian Jews and Gentiles to live in brotherly fellowship. The Jew was not to require more of his Gentile brother: the Gentile was not to concede less to his Jewish brother.”

Some scholars have wondered why the demand for abstinence from sexual immorality is found in a list that mainly concerns itself with the ceremonial law. It is true, of course, that fornication violates the sanctity of marriage, which destroys the meaning of marriage as an image of the unity of the body of Christ. Speaking about the intimacy between husband and wife, Paul said: “ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery-but I am talking about Christ and the church.”³³⁷ The main reason for the inclusion of fornication in the list of things that pertain to idolatry seems to be that, in many cases, services in idol temples were places of immorality. Temple prostitutes were often part of the rituals.

The prohibition of the eating of blood predates the Mosaic Law. After the flood, God said to Noah: “You must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.”³³⁸ This proscription was given in a wider context than of the eating of meat only. Evidently, before the flood all men were vegetarians. We read that God said: “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

³³³ John 1:14

³³⁴ II Sam. 7:11-13

³³⁵ Isa. 53:3

³³⁶ Luke 1:33

³³⁷ Eph. 5:31,32

³³⁸ Gen. 9:4

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”³³⁹ Although our text does suggest consumption of blood, it does not speak specifically of eating it. Some commentators believe that the command also covers murder and manslaughter. The main reason for the prohibition was, of course, the fact that animal blood was the exclusive means of atonement in the Old Testament. The fact that the blood of animals can no longer be used for this purpose in the present dispensation has opened the subject for debate as to whether Christians are allowed to consume blood or not. Paul’s statements such as: “Food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do,”³⁴⁰ and: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”³⁴¹ would give us to understand that the matter is no longer relevant.

As suggested above, the main reason for these stipulations was a matter of testimony and unity of fellowship. The presence of Jews in most cities of the Roman Empire and the moral influence their presence had upon daily life was an established fact. The conversion of the gentiles did not constitute an acceptance of Judaism, but neither ought it to give the impression that it stood for a new religion that had no relation to the Jewish faith. The church of Jerusalem wanted to do everything in its power to also keep the door open for the conversion of Jews all over the world.

The church as a whole decided to send two of their own congregation with Paul and Barnabas to take a letter, containing the church’s conclusion, back to Antioch. The two chosen were Judas and Silas. Silas would play an important role in the remainder of Luke’s account.

The letter is addressed, not only to the church of Antioch and the surrounding area, but also to Cilicia where Paul and Barnabas had spent most of their time during their first missionary journey. Evidently, the controversy had already spread to that area, or the council wanted to prevent it from spreading there.

The phrase: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” endued the letter with ultimate authority and finality. The statement made by the synod was “ex cathedra.” The implication of this wording cannot be overstated. It means that those, who would continue to preach that converts from among the gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved, opposed the command of the Holy Spirit. It means that anyone who tries to add anything to the doctrine of salvation by grace opposes the Spirit of God. Yet, the words, “it seemed good” do not constitute a command. They seem to leave the door open to anyone with an uneasy conscience to do whatever he wants, with the exclusion of idolatry, in order to find peace.

The congregation in Antioch received the letter with joy and it became a stimulus for the church to grow in depth if not in numbers. Judas and Silas played an important part in this ministry of encouragement by serving the church with their gift of prophecy. Whether this meant that they passed on messages that were divinely revealed to them or that they expounded the Old Testament in the light of the coming of the Holy Spirit, we are not told. We don’t know either how long the two spent there, but we know they did return to Jerusalem after a while. Their testimony was of particular importance because, as representative members of the church in Jerusalem, they were impartial in the dispute that had brought to a head the question concerning the conversion of gentiles.

During their stay Paul and Silas must have cultivated a bond of special fellowship, which later resulted in their teaming up for Paul’s second missionary journey.

C. Second mission, Asia Minor and Europe 15:36-18:22

The beginning of the second missionary journey recorded by Luke evinces the principle that building up new converts in the faith is important. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “The stability of the first Christian missions, as well as their rapid progress, must be ascribed in a large degree to the wise union of the conservative with the aggressive principle on which the apostle conducted them. The first Gentile converts must have been extremely rude in knowledge, and all inexperienced in the management of a Christian congregation, even of the smallest dimensions. But besides the instructions which they would receive at their first reception of the Gospel, it will be remembered that they were revisited on the apostle’s return, confirmed in the faith, exhorted to steadfastness, and faithfully warned of the cost of discipleship; that elders were ordained over every cluster of believers; and that on parting with them they were solemnly commended to the Lord with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:21-23). Then, after a long interval, during which the hearts of the missionaries yearned after them, a fresh journey was projected and carried out, for the express purpose of revisiting their converts; and doubtless this visit would contribute largely to the consolidation and growth of those young churches.

³³⁹ Gen. 9:3-6

³⁴⁰ I Cor. 8:8

³⁴¹ Rom. 14:17

In like manner, the churches which were afterward gathered out of Corinth, Ephesus, etc., were revisited once and again, and to them were addressed those Epistles which, though they have become the heritage of all the churches of Christ, were designed in the first instance for the instruction and direction of the churches whose names they bear. Thus anxiously did the first great missionaries of the Cross watch over and cherish the work of their hands, 'lest in any way the tempter should have tempted them, and their labor have been in vain' (1 Thess 3:5); and if one would see into the very heart of those model missionaries, as they 'travailed in birth again' for their converts, let him read the second and third chapters of the First Epistle to the Thessalonians. And should not the churches of our day—with all their missionary agents abroad, and missionary directors or committees at home—study to imbibe the same spirit, and act upon the same principle in the case of their converts?"

The rupture between Paul and Barnabas over their disagreement to take along John Mark, however, marred the good intention of the apostles. Luke frankly speaks of "a sharp disagreement." Evidently, neither of the men was willing to give in. The Greek word used is *paroxusmos*, which has the double meaning of "incitement" (to good), or "dispute" (in anger). According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* it means: "a sharpening of the feeling, or action."

There has been much speculation among scholars about the meaning of the issue that divided the two men. We do not know why Mark left Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia. Some have suggested that Mark, as a Jew, had reservations about the conversion of the gentiles. Others believe that he was homesick, or was unwilling to leave his mother uncared for in Jerusalem. None of this can be substantiated. The NIV states that Mark had "deserted" them. The Greek word used is *aphistemi*, which does not have a favorable meaning.

The question as to who was right in this dispute cannot be solved either. It is true that Paul's attitude toward Mark changed in later years, but that may be due to the fact that Mark had changed also. We find Mark in Paul's company when the latter is in prison. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes: "My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas."³⁴² And shortly before his death, Paul writes to Timothy: "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."³⁴³ Probably after Paul's death, Mark joined Peter, who may have been his spiritual father. Peter mentions Mark in his First Epistle: "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark."

The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary states about Mark: "Information about Mark's later life is dependent on early church tradition. Writing at an early date, Papias (A.D. 60-130), whose report is followed by Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215), tells us that Mark served as Peter's interpreter in Rome and wrote his gospel from Peter's remembrances. Of his physical appearance we are only told, rather oddly, that Mark was 'stumpy fingered.' Writing at a later date (about A.D. 325), the church historian Eusebius says that Mark was the first evangelist to Egypt, the founder of the churches of Alexandria, and the first bishop of that city. So great were his converts, both in number and sincerity of commitment, says Eusebius, that the great Jewish philosopher, Philo, was amazed."

The Antioch church evidently approved of Paul's choice of Silas as a partner, because we read that the brothers commended them to the grace of God before they set out on their missionary journey, which was Paul's second. The fact that we do not read anything about a commissioning of Barnabas and Mark does not necessarily mean that the church disapproved. Since Luke joins Paul's company in the next chapter, it is logical that the narrative focuses on that team in the rest of his book.

Since Silas was new at this, Paul was clearly in the lead as they set out on their travel. Luke indicates this by using the third person singular "he went through." Traveling from Syria to Lystra, Paul passed by his native Tarsus, but nothing is mentioned about his visit there.

The main focus in Luke's narrative at the beginning of this journey is on Paul's encounter with Timothy, who would play such an important role in Paul's future ministry.

Paul's circumcision of Timothy is a clear indication of the apostle's pragmatic attitude toward the problem that had been the topic of discussion at the Jerusalem synod. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: "Because Timothy was half Jew, to make him acceptable as a traveling companion to the Jews to whom they would minister, Paul circumcised him. Although the young man had been brought up by his mother in the faith of the Old Testament (2 Tim 3:15), the Jews looked upon him as the uncircumcised son of a Greek. On the other hand, Gentiles would have regarded him as a Jew because of his religion. As a man professing adherence to the Jewish religion but who remained an uncircumcised Gentile, Timothy would have been offensive to the Jews Paul met in city after city and to whom he first preached the Gospel. Paul circumcised him as an act of expediency and not of religious principle.

³⁴² Col. 4:10

³⁴³ II Tim. 4:11

No conflict exists in the fact that Paul steadfastly refused to circumcise Titus (Gal 2:3); for Titus was altogether a Gentile, and there was no cultural reason to circumcise him. Timothy was circumcised therefore not as a Christian but as a Jew. This is an application of the principle that Paul expressed in 1 Cor 9:20: ‘And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law that I might gain them that are under the law.’ Where no essential principle was involved, Paul applied the principle of expediency and of conciliation in a way that many later Christians cannot understand or appreciate. It was probably at this time that Timothy was set aside for his mission by the elders in Lystra (1 Tim 4:14).”

Paul’s team at this time must have consisted of himself, Silas, and Timothy; if there was anyone else, Luke does not mention it. We are told that they “traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia.” This has given rise to a “North Galatia theory” and a “South Galatia Theory.” The name Asia may refer to the northern part of the province, which Paul and his companies were prevented from entering at this time. Historians tell us that Gauls who had inhabited the region, had invaded the place in the 3rd century B.C. It is generally supposed that Paul established the church in Galatia to which he later addressed his epistle by that name.

We don’t know what form the opposition by the Holy Spirit to further penetration of the region took. In the Galatian Epistle, Paul mentions: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.”³⁴⁴ The apostle’s health may have been the reason for the change in plans. We would expect, though, that Luke, the physician, would have given more details if a sickness were the reason that prevented Paul traveling. The details are too scant to build a theology of health in the ministry upon them.

The apostle’s efforts to enter Bithynia were likewise thwarted by “the Spirit of Jesus.” This verse is the only place in the New Testament where the Holy Spirit is thus identified. It is interesting to observe that spiritual guidance can take a negative form, as it did in this case. This implies that God sometimes uses frustration to lead His servants to the place where He wants them to be. As we can imagine, Paul and Silas must have been frustrated in seeing the doors they meant to enter close one by one. We suppose that the apostolic team prayed for guidance as to where the Lord wanted them to go; it could be, however, that they had taken guidance for granted and ceased to look to the Lord for every next step they had to take, so that the Holy Spirit had to slam doors in their faces. These negative experiences pushed the team to the coastal city of Troas. Troas was an important port city at that time, which Paul would visit several times later on subsequent travels.

We don’t know how long the team stayed in Troas, but we get the impression that Paul had the vision of the Macedonian man begging him to come to Macedonia, soon after their arrival. It seems that, after an extended period of frustration, things all of a sudden moved very fast.

Paul’s dream marks the most momentous point in European history, maybe even in the history of the whole world. Whether it was a dream or a vision is not explained. The Greek word *horama* suggests something supernatural, but the fact that it came to Paul in the night could easily make it a dream. Paul found no difficulty in interpreting what he saw. The words “Come over to Macedonia and help us” did allow no different interpretation but a literal one. Scholars have argued whether the person Paul saw was a human being or an angel. The great Dutch sage, Grotius, thought that this was “the guardian angel of Macedonia,” the same one Daniel saw in his vision,³⁴⁵ but there is little ground for this opinion.

At this point in the narrative, Luke joins the company in a most inconspicuous way. The only indication is in the change of the personal pronoun “they” to “we.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on vs. 10: “In this verse we first remark the very important introduction of the pronoun ‘we’ into the narrative, marking the presence of the historian himself, and showing that he first joined St. Paul at Troas. He went with him to Philippi (ver. 12), and there he appears to have stopped till St. Paul returned there in his third missionary journey on his way from Achaia to Jerusalem (Acts 20:5, 6), where we find him still with the apostle (Acts 20:17, 18). We again find him with St. Paul at Caesarea, while he was a prisoner there (Acts 27:1), and he accompanied him on the voyage to Rome, which is the last place where we hear of him (Acts 27:2, 3. etc.; 28:2, 11, 14-16; Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:24). It is quite characteristic of Holy Scripture that things are told, or appear on the face of the narrative, without any explanation. Who Luke was, what brought him to Troas, how he became a companion of St. Paul, whether as his medical adviser or otherwise, we know not. His Christian modesty forbade his speaking about himself.”

Luke’s description of the crossing from Troas to Neapolis suggests that he must have been a seasoned traveler. The NIV reads that they “sailed straight,” which is the translation of the Greek word *euthudromeo*, a nautical term for laying a straight course. Later in the account of the shipwreck, we will find that the narrative abounds with technical terms, indicating Luke’s thorough knowledge of seafaring.³⁴⁶ *The Jamieson, Fausset, and*

³⁴⁴ Gal. 4:13

³⁴⁵ Dan. 10:12,13,20,21

³⁴⁶ See ch. 27

Brown Commentary remarks: "Howson observes that the wind must have set in strong from the south or south-southeast, to bring them there so soon, as the current is strong in the opposite direction; and they afterward took five days to what they now did in two (Acts 20:6)."

The team traveled from Neapolis to Philippi, which the text calls "the leading city of that district of Macedonia." These words have been the subject of much discussion among scholars, since it is historically known that Philippi was not the capital of Macedonia, but Amphipolis was. Philippi took its name from Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. It was the site of several important battles in the history of the Roman Empire. The place also had importance because of some important gold mines in its vicinity. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Philippi may have been the place of Luke's residence. That may have been the reason that the team targeted that city for their first campaign.

If there were any Jews in Philippi their number must have been very small, because we do not read that there was a synagogue in the city. Paul and his companions had to look for a place outside the city where people gathered for prayer. If it is true that Luke was a citizen of the place and that he was not familiar with the fact that people prayed at the river side, it would suggest that he was not a Christian before he met Paul in Troas.

Some commentators believe that there may have been a chapel or some other kind of structure at the side of the river where the Jews gathered, but others think that Luke refers simply to an open-air prayer meeting. The Greek word *proseuche*, primarily means, "prayer." The Greek text reads literally: "we went out[side] the city by a river side where prayer was wont to be made." The suggestion that Paul spoke to the women who had gathered before the beginning of the actual service does not seem to find any basis in the text. We rather get the impression that the only people who had come to pray were a small group of women. *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* quotes Furneaux, who remarked that: "The 'man of Macedonia' turned out to be a group of women." The commentary adds: "Macedonian inscriptions show greater freedom for women in Macedonia than elsewhere at this time and confirm Luke's story of the activities of women in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea."

The adversary outdid himself in efforts to discourage the apostolic team at the onset of their European campaign. Paul's vision of the Macedonian man would have given one the impression that the people of Macedonia were spiritually starved and that Paul and his companions would be given a warm welcome. But the sight of only a few women as his first audience did not discourage the apostle. Neither would the satanic attack that came in the form of the fortune-telling girl or the subsequent imprisonment dampen the spirit of the team. It is likely that Paul recognized Satan's strategy and concluded from this that the Lord had a rich harvest waiting. As opposition by the powers of darkness increases, we may usually expect that God is planning things that are important enough for the devil to oppose.

Luke singles out one woman in the crowd by the name of Lydia. This does not necessarily mean that she was the only one to respond to the preaching of the Gospel. Lydia was also the name of a region in Macedonia, which causes some scholars to think that it may not have been the lady's name but a reference to her place of origin. But Lydia was also a common name, and there is no reason to believe that this was not the name of the woman in question. Lydia was a businesswoman, "a dealer in purple cloth." This probably made her a member of the upper class. The Greek word rendered "purple" was originally used for the purple fish from which the color was extracted. Archeological finds have confirmed the existence of the dye and its permanence. Thyatira boasted a guild of purple artisans in ancient times.

Lydia was a convert to Judaism, as were probably the other women who attended the prayer meeting. The fact that God opened Lydia's heart does not imply that she had no part in this herself. The expression fits in the same category as the one in Exodus where we read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.³⁴⁷ Before God hardened Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh had already hardened his own. In the same way we may suppose that Lydia had opened her heart to the Lord earlier and that the Lord made this a permanent condition for her when she responded to the Gospel. Paul describes this interaction between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit when he writes in Romans: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."³⁴⁸ It is also true that no one is able to respond to the Word of God without the help of the grace of God administered by the Person of the Holy Spirit. This confirms Jesus' words in John's Gospel: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me."³⁴⁹

We do not learn how much time elapsed between Lydia's confession of faith and her baptism and the baptism of the members of her household, but there is a strong suggestion that the rite was performed during this

³⁴⁷ See Ex. 9:12; 10:1,10,27; 11:10; 14:8

³⁴⁸ Rom. 8:16

³⁴⁹ John 6:44,45

first meeting. The presence of the river certainly facilitated this. We do not find any indication in the Book of Acts that the apostles required a lengthy period of instruction between the moment of confession and baptism. The second baptism, mentioned later in this same chapter, confirms this, and that was the baptism of a person, or persons, who had never been exposed to God's revelation of Himself through Judaism. There is no reason to deduct from the mention of Lydia's household, and later from the jailer's, that infant baptism was practiced, as *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests.

The absence of a mention of Lydia's husband leaves us clueless as to Lydia's status. She may have been a widow, or even divorced. If her husband was not present because he was not a convert, we would suppose that he would yet have to say something about who would be invited to stay at his house. There is a touch of humor in Lydia's invitation. If the apostles had not considered her to be a believer, they would certainly not have baptized her. Her strong desire to entertain the Gospel team is proof of her understanding of Christian hospitality and also of a hunger for more teaching. The use of the Greek word *parabiazomai*, rendered "persuaded" seems to indicate that the team members did not immediately accept the offer.

Luke does not indicate how much time Paul and the team members spent in Philippi. The encounter with the demon possessed slave girl must have occurred at least one week after Lydia's conversion and baptism. The prayer meetings at the riverside were probably only held on the Sabbath. We are told that the girl announced who Paul and his companions were and what their message was and that "she kept this up for many days."

The spirit of divination that possessed this girl is called in Greek *pneuma Puthon*. According to *the Strong's New Exhaustive Concordance*, Putho was the name of the region where Delphi, the seat of the famous oracle, was located. The soothsaying spirit was called Python, based on the myth of Apollo's slaying of a serpent by that name. *Barnes' Notes* explains: "Python, or Pythios, was one of the names of Apollo, the Grecian god of the fine arts, of music, poetry, medicine, and eloquence. Of these he was esteemed to have been the inventor. ... The name Python is said to have been given him because, as soon as he was born, he destroyed with arrows a serpent of that name, that had been sent by Juno to persecute Latona; hence, his common name was the Pythian Apollo. ... In the celebrated oracle at Delphi, the priestess of Apollo pretended to be inspired; became violently agitated during the periods of pretended inspiration; and during those periods gave such responses to inquirers as were regarded as the oracles of the god." In speaking the oracles the priestess, evidently, turned into a ventriloquist. Whether this was the case with the slave girl also, we are not told.

The girl's performance in announcing to the people that Paul and the Gospel team were proclaiming the way of salvation, constituted a very clever strategy by the devil to counteract the work of the Holy Spirit. Some people would think that this kind of free publicity ought to have been welcomed by the apostle, but Paul recognized the source and understood the danger. We read in connection with Lydia's conversion that the Lord opened her heart. Satan would and could never open someone's heart in a way that would save the person. This demonic propaganda would lead people into a dead end alley. What the girl said was objectively true, but when Satan speaks the truth he is more dangerous than when he lies. There is a Dutch saying that if the fox preaches about the passion of Christ, the farmer should watch his chickens. Satan's proclamation of the Gospel was not meant for the salvation of souls. In Mark's Gospel we read an analogous situation in which a demon reveals the identity of Jesus Christ. We read: "A man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!' 'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!' The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek."³⁵⁰ Paul may have had this incident in mind when he decided to exorcise the girl. This is the only instance we know of that Paul cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus. The demon left the girl immediately.

We understand from vs. 19 that the masters of the girl used her to foretell the future to people who paid them a sum of money. Since demons cannot know the future, the whole matter must have been a fraud. This does not mean that the girl was not demon possessed. After her deliverance, she was, evidently, no longer able to fall into a trance and the demonic voice was no longer heard. The owners (she must have belonged to more than one person) became furious when they realized that their source of money making had dried up. As long as Paul and Silas only preached another religion, they did not care, but when they were hit in their pocketbook they became enraged.

In dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrates in the market place in such a way that the crowd got involved, they caused a public disturbance. Ironically, that was the charge against Paul and Silas. The mention of the fact that Paul and Silas were Jews suggests that there must have been a great deal of racial tension and prejudice in Philippi.

The accusation that preachers of the Gospel advocate different customs is usually unfounded. Anthropologists have accused missionaries of disturbing the culture of primitive tribes in modern times. The fact is

³⁵⁰ Mark 1:23-26

that when people turn from idols and satanic worship to the living God, their lives change and they themselves conclude that they can no longer observe the practices they adhered to in their heathen lifestyle.

We do not read that Paul and Silas were given the opportunity to defend themselves, or that Paul revealed himself to be a Roman citizen whom it was unlawful to scourge, as he did later in Jerusalem.³⁵¹ Had Paul made this appeal in Philippi, he would not have been flogged, but Silas would have. Paul, evidently, decided to share his partner's fate, rather than let Silas suffer alone. The Jewish law limited flogging to 39 strokes but the Roman law knew no such limitations. Paul and Silas were probably beaten to an inch of their lives. After that their broken bodies were thrown into a dungeon where their feet were secured into a stock, with their legs extended far apart. We can hardly overestimate the intensity of their suffering. Their physical condition would have given them ample reason to be utterly dejected and depressed. The demon Paul had cast out of the slave girl may have come back to haunt them at this time, bringing with him a whole host of hell.

To counter this attack of Satan, the apostles decided to go over to the attack, which they did by singing at the darkest hour of the night. The apostle may have remembered David's words: "By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me--a prayer to the God of my life."³⁵² Or Elihu's, who said to Job: "Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night?"³⁵³

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary quotes Neander who wrote: "In these midnight hymns by the imprisoned witnesses for Jesus Christ, the whole might of Roman injustice and violence against the Church is not only set at naught, but converted into a foil to set forth more completely the majesty and spiritual power of the Church, which as yet the world knew nothing of. And if the sufferings of these two witnesses for Christ are the beginning and the type of numberless martyrdoms which were to flow upon the Church from the same source, in like manner the unparalleled triumph of the spirit over suffering was the beginning and the pledge of a spiritual power which we afterward see shining forth so triumphantly and irresistibly in the many martyrs of Christ who were given up as a prey to that same imperial might of Rome."

The Greek word used is *humneo*, which means: "to sing a hymn." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "As the word here employed ... is that used to denote the Paschal hymn sung by our Lord and His disciples after their last Passover (Matt 26:30), and which we know to have consisted of Ps 113-118, which was chanted at that festival, it may have been portions of the psalms--so rich in such matter--which our joyous sufferers chanted forth. Nor could any be more seasonable and inspiring to them than those very six psalms, which every devout Jew would no doubt have by heart."

The singing of Paul and Silas was an act of defiance, a counter attack. There was no human reason for singing under those circumstances. The condition of their bodies as well as their surrounding were hardly conducive to this. Paul could have easily concluded that, if this was the result of giving in to the invitation by the man from Macedonia: "Come over to Macedonia and help us," it was not worth the effort. But the apostles understood that what they experienced was an effort by Satan to prevent them from carrying out God's plan for Europe and the world. Their hymn singing was their counter attack upon the satanic empire. The praise of God disarms the enemy and it heals the human spirit. The apostles did not sing because they felt happy but because they were miserable. They sang because they believed that God was in control. They praised God because Satan considered them enough of a threat to his power to direct all the batteries of his firepower upon them. As circumstances press upon us and we feel tempted to surrender to gloom and despair, it is a good principle to praise God, even if our better judgment argues against it.

Luke specifically mentions that the other prisoners heard the singing and listened to it. To hear the sound of music coming from the deepest dungeon in the darkest hour of the night must have been a ray of light in the darkness of their souls. They must have understood that these men were not living in the same kind of world as they. It was obvious that these two were not in prison for the same reason as the others. The fact that they felt bound to their cells in spite of the fact that the powerful earthquake had loosened their chains proves the compelling testimony of the apostles' prayer and praise.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary sees in the earthquake and its effect upon the inmates a spiritual lesson, which may be legitimately applied: "Thus God bore a miraculous testimony of approbation to his servants; and, by the earthquake, and loosing the bonds of the prisoners, showed, in a symbolical way, the nature of that religion which they preached: while it shakes and terrifies the guilty, it proclaims deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison-doors to them that are bound; and sets at liberty them that are bruised. And yet so eminently

³⁵¹ See ch. 23:24-28

³⁵² Ps. 42:8

³⁵³ Job 35:10

did God's providence conduct everything, that not one of the prisoners made his escape, though the doors were open, and his bolts off!"

When the earthquake awakened the jailor, he drew the only logical conclusion that could be drawn under the circumstances, which was that all the prisoners for whom he was responsible with his own life, had escaped. Rather than facing court marshal and subsequent execution, he decided to take his own life. Guards in the Roman Empire paid with their own lives for prisoners who escaped. When Peter supernaturally escaped from Herod's prison, the king had the guards executed.³⁵⁴ Paul must have been able to see the man as he drew his sword, and his shout saved his life.

It is worthy of note to see that the jailor was more shaken by the earthquake than anybody else. He fell before the feet of the apostles, still trembling. His question: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" can easily be misconstrued as an inquiry about the salvation of his soul, but it is highly unlikely that this is what the man meant. He knew that he would still be held responsible for the condition of his prison caused by the earthquake and the potential of escape of all the prisoners. As he had not taken his own life, he would still face a court marshal. The salvation he asked about was probably how to face his dilemma. Most commentators, however, believe that the man's question pertained to his spiritual salvation, since he was informed about the charges against the apostles and the events that preceded it. Yet, I believe that we must be careful not to interpret the question in the light of our knowledge of salvation, which this man could hardly have grasped.

There can be no doubt about it whether this man's soul was saved or not. The question is how he came to this point of spiritual enlightenment. I believe that the apostles met him at the point of his need as he felt it at that moment. His concern at this point was probably not the fires of hell, but the loss of his physical life by the sword of a Roman executioner. To this fear, the apostles replied that, if he recognized Jesus as the Lord of his life, his new Master would save his life and that of his whole family. The next step in the man's understanding was, undoubtedly, an awareness of sin and the application of God's atonement by the blood of Jesus. This truth was explained to him and his family as the apostles explained the Word of God to them, prior to their baptism that same night.

The first assurance the Holy Spirit gave this man was that his life was no longer in jeopardy. The experience of being delivered of his fear prepared his heart for the understanding of his deepest need and the accepting of the real salvation, of which salvation from the Roman sword was only a shadow.

In presenting people with the Gospel, we must always endeavor to meet them where they are. We may not always be able to connect with them by presenting *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Jesus shows us the way in His dealing with the Samaritan woman. When the woman asked Him: "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water," Jesus answered: "Go, call your husband and come back."³⁵⁵ This, and the ensuing conversation made her understand that He was the Messiah her people had been waiting for.

The transformation of the jailor's heart is evinced in what he did for the prisoners. We don't read what happened to the other inmates whose chains had come loose, but we may suppose that, at some point, they were secured again. Paul and Silas, however, were taken into the man's house where he washed their wounds and fed them a meal. The apostles' physical condition must have been rather pitiful. They had been beaten within an inch of their lives and had spent several hours of misery in a very painful position with their legs in the stocks. Their joy in the Lord may have lessened their suffering, but it had not healed their bleeding wounds. Seeing them by the light of a torch or an oil lamp triggered pity in the heart of this man, who must have been used to seeing people in this condition. It was, after all, his job to throw people in prison who had been flogged.

Commentators have speculated about the baptism that was administered to the man and his family in the middle of the night. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* sees in it proof that not all baptism was done by emersion. Others believe that it implies infant baptism. Since the text does not clarify any details, we can only speculate about these points.

Luke does not explain what moved the magistrates to release the apostles so suddenly the next day. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes a New Testament manuscript, the Codex Bezae, which reads: "And when it was day, the magistrates came together into the court, 'and remembering the earthquake that had happened, they were afraid, and they sent the sergeants, etc.' " From a text-critical point of view this reading may not be reliable, but it gives a logical explanation of the reason for the change of mind of the local authorities. The superstitious Romans considered earthquakes to be a sign of the anger of the gods, and the powerful one that shook the city in the middle of the night must have given the magistrates second thoughts about their hasty decision of the previous day.

The magistrates tried to cover up their mistake by silently ordering Paul and Silas to leave the city, but Paul did not acquiesce to this. As we said earlier, there is no indication that Silas was a Roman citizen. If they both were,

³⁵⁴ See ch. 12:19

³⁵⁵ John 4:15,16

their public beating could easily have been prevented. Paul's statement: "even though we are Roman citizens," therefore, must be construed as pertaining to himself only. As the apostle shared in the beating for Silas' sake, so here he includes his brother in the privilege of his citizenship. There was no reason for him to give a detailed explanation for the benefit of the authorities, and the embarrassed party asked for none.

One of the reasons for the apostle's assertion of his rights may have been for the benefit of the young church they would leave behind. The realization that the magistrates had been wrong would give a certain legality to the church and lift the veil of suspicion that was upon them. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "This is to be done particularly where the honor of religion is concerned, and where by it the gospel will be promoted. A Christian may bear much as a man in a private capacity, and may submit, without any effort to seek reparation; but where the honor of the gospel is concerned; where submission, without any effort to obtain justice, might be followed by disgrace to the cause of religion, a higher obligation may require him to seek a vindication of his character, and to claim the protection of the laws. His name, and character, and influence belong to the church. The laws are designed as a protection to an injured name, or of violated property and rights, and of an endangered life. And when that protection can be had only by an appeal to the laws, such an appeal, as in the case of Paul and Silas, is neither vindictive nor improper. My private interests I may sacrifice, if I choose; my public name, and character, and principles belong to the church and the world, and the laws, if necessary, may be called in for their protection."

Paul's answer to the authorities caused alarm. A delegation of higher rank came to request the apostles politely to leave the city. The apostles took their time in doing so. Legally, the authorities had no right to expel a Roman citizen from a town. The team must have considered that it was better for them to leave. They went to Lydia's house where they held a meeting and preached the Gospel for the encouragement of those who would remain. It is supposed that both Luke and Timothy stayed behind. Luke must have joined the apostles again in Troas, where another "we" section begins in the book.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary concludes: "Great and lasting good was done by this visit to Philippi: a church was there founded, and the members of it did credit to their profession. To them the apostle, who had suffered so much for their sakes, was exceedingly dear; and they evidenced this by their contributions to his support in the times of his necessity. They sent him money twice to Thessalonica, Phil 4:16, and once to Corinth, 2 Cor 11:9, and long afterward, when he was prisoner in Rome, Phil 4:9,14,18. About five or six years after this, Paul visited Philippi on his way to Jerusalem, and he wrote his epistle to them about ten years after his first journey thither. The first members of the church of Christ in this place were Lydia and her family; and the next in all probability were the jailor and his family. These doubtless became the instruments of bringing many more to the faith; for the false imprisonment and public acquittal of the apostles by the magistrates must have made their cause popular; and thus the means which were used to prevent the sowing of the seed of life in this city became the means by which it was sown and established. Thus the wrath of man praised God; and the remainder of it he did restrain. Never were these words more exactly fulfilled than on this occasion."

The church of Philippi was established as a bridgehead for the Gospel in Europe. It constituted an invasion by the light in the kingdom of darkness. It took a fierce battle but it brought a permanent victory. From there the attack upon the enemy proceeded and from there, as in a regular military campaign, the army was provisioned. Paul maintained a warm and intimate fellowship with the believers in that city. His Epistle to the Philippians is evidence of the character of this relationship.

As the apostles continued their journey, they passed through two important cities in Macedonia, Amphipolis and Apollonia, where they apparently did not minister, the reason being that no Jews were living in those cities. The first synagogue they found in Thessalonica. True to his principle that the Jews had the right to hear the Gospel before it was preached to the gentiles, Paul spent three weeks preaching in the Sabbath services. The NIV uses the word "reasoned," which is the translation of the Greek word *dialegomai* from which the English word "dialogue" is derived. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines it: "to think different things with oneself, to ponder, to dispute with others." His method of presenting the Gospel was, evidently, not in the form of simply preaching a sermon but a question and answer session in which the audience was stimulated to think through the truth that was presented to them and come to the conclusion that the apostle's interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies was correct. Paul appealed to the mind of his hearer before appealing to their heart.

The mention of the three Sabbaths does not imply that Paul only spent three weeks in Thessalonica. His exhortation against idleness, particularly in the second epistle he later wrote to this church, suggests that he spent an extended period in that city. We read: "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do

not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'"³⁵⁶

As we saw earlier, the major problem in the Jewish mind was the fact that the Messiah would not have come victoriously. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul calls Christ's crucifixion "a stumbling block to Jews."³⁵⁷ *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* observes: "This is Paul's major premise in his argument from the Scriptures about the Messiah, the necessity of his sufferings according to the Scriptures, the very argument made by the Risen Jesus to the two on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27). The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah was a passage in point that the rabbis had overlooked. Peter made the same point in Acts 3:18 and Paul again in Acts 26:23. The minor premise is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead." And *The Pulpit Commentary* adds: "The fulfillment of prophecies relating to the Messiah in the person of Jesus is like the fitting of a key to the intricate wards of the lock, which proves that it is the right key. "

It seems that, although a few of the Jewish members of the congregation were convinced, the greater response came from the gentile converts to Judaism, among whom there was an important number of women. This explains the reaction of the Jews who did not accept Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies. They understood, what many Jewish Christians in other places already knew, that the Gospel meant the end of Judaism, which would ultimately eliminate the Jewish culture also. The Jews would then have no longer have anything to distinguish themselves from gentile believers, and they were too proud of their distinction to give this up without a fight. Their way of defending themselves, however, was no compliment to their heritage; they used people of ill repute to start a riot in the city, which focused on the people who adhered to the Gospel.

The result was almost a repeat of the scene that had taken place in Philippi, with the exception that, in this case, Paul and Silas could not be located. It could be that word of the riot that had taken place in Philippi had reached Thessalonica also, although the two cities were approximately 100 miles apart. If the riot in Philippi had been an inspiration for this one, the instigators had not taken into account the fact that it had actually worked in favor of the apostles.

Jason, in whose house the apostles had probably been staying, must have judged the situation correctly and hid the apostles at the place where they would not be found. This act of wisdom made him the prime object of the mob's wrath. *The Pulpit Commentary* states about him: "If, as is very probable, the Jason here mentioned is the same person as the Jason of Romans 16:21, it would seem that he joined the apostle, either at this time or on his visit to Macedonia mentioned in Acts 20:3, and went with him to Corinth, where the Epistle to the Romans was written. He was a relation ... of St. Paul's, and doubtless a Jew. *Jason* was a Romanized form of the name *Jesus*, or *Joshua*, as we see in the case of the high priest, the brother of Chins (Josephus, 'Ant. Jud.' 12. 5:1). It was borne also by Jason of Cyrene, the Jewish historian (2 Macc. 2:23), and by another mentioned in 1 Macc. 7. 1:17, etc. St. Luke seems to introduce Jason as a well-known person."

The accusation against Paul, Silas, and their followers was that they "caused trouble all over the world." The Greek word used is *anastatoo*, which means: "to drive out of home," or "to disturb." The KJV renders it: "turn upside down." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments rather ironically that it was: "The very character our forefathers had for preaching that Gospel, in every part of the land, by which the nation has been illuminated, the mob disciplined into regularity and order, and the kingdom established in the hands of the best of monarchs."

The accusation against Jason was that he had taken Paul and Silas into his home. He could hardly be accused of causing trouble all over the world, having probably lived in Thessalonica most of his life.

The accusation against Jesus had been that He was a king.³⁵⁸ In the Roman Empire, proclaiming oneself or someone to be a king would be an act of treason. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "This incident illustrates why the epistles of Paul as well as the Acts have relatively little to say about the kingdom of God. Much has been made of the fact that Paul almost never designates Jesus as King but rather calls him Lord. It has sometimes been said that Jesus is King of Israel but Lord of the Church, and that these two are entirely different concepts. This incident suggests that Paul laid little emphasis upon the kingship of Jesus and the kingdom of God because these ideas, familiar and precious to Jews, were subject to misunderstanding by Romans and suggested a rival political power. Such sedition was the charge brought against Jesus by Pilate (Luke 23:2). Rome was tolerant of many things but not of suspected sedition. Therefore Paul proclaimed Jesus to the Gentiles as Lord—a religious concept that was both familiar and acceptable to them and carried no political implications."

Making Jason post a bond made him responsible for the departure of the Gospel team from the city and for the cessation of the preaching of the Gospel. This seems to have been a satanic effort to stop Paul and Silas from

³⁵⁶ II Thess. 3:7-10

³⁵⁷ I Cor. 1:23

³⁵⁸ See John 18:33-37; 19:12-15

further evangelizing in Thessalonica. It may be that this is what Paul referred to in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, when he wrote: ‘For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us.’³⁵⁹ Apparently Paul was never allowed to return to Thessalonica, but this did in no way hinder the spreading of the Gospel from that city. In his First Epistle, Paul refers to the fact that Thessalonica became a center of evangelism for the whole region. We read: “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”³⁶⁰ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* furthermore states that Paul’s team was strengthened by some of the converts made in that city. We read: “Among these converts were in all probability Aristarchus and Secundus, natives of Thessalonica, whom we afterward find accompanying Paul to Asia at the close of his 3rd missionary journey (Acts 20:4). The former of them was, indeed, one of the apostle’s most constant companions; we find him with Paul at Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and on his journey to Rome (Acts 27:2), while in two of his Epistles, written during his captivity, Paul refers to Aristarchus as still with him, his fellow-prisoner (Col 4:10; Philem verse 24). Gaius, too, who is mentioned in conjunction with Aristarchus, may have been a Thessalonian (Acts 19:29).”

So Paul and Silas were whisked away at night and they proceeded to travel to Berea, a city about 45 miles west of Thessalonica. At Berea Paul continued his strategy in beginning his ministry to the Jews by preaching in the synagogue during a Sabbath service. The Bereans distinguished themselves in taking Paul’s interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures seriously. Luke commends them for their nobility of character, which implies their intelligent reaction to Paul’s preaching. They checked the Scriptures for themselves to see if what Paul said was true. God, evidently, does not want us to swallow any kind of preaching without investigating whether it is the Word of God or not. The Gospel appeals to our minds before it penetrates the heart. A Gospel that remains in the head without breaking through to the heart, however, will never cause a conversion. On the other hand, a penetration of the heart that does not involve the mind is not much better. I like the phrase coined by Ravi Zacharias: “Let My People Think!”

The NIV’s “more noble character” is the translation of the one Greek word *eugenes*, which literally means, “well-born.” It is the same word used in Jesus’ Parable of the Ten Minas, which speaks of a nobleman who becomes king.³⁶¹ In the context of Luke’s narrative, it is used for nobility of the mind. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “It was a maxim among the Jews, that ‘none was of a noble spirit who did not employ himself in the study of the law.’ ” *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* adds: “They received the word with all readiness of mind; they were very willing to hear it, presently apprehended the meaning of it, and did not shut their eyes against the light. They attended to the things that were spoken by Paul, as Lydia did, and were very well pleased to hear them. They did not pick quarrels with the word, nor find fault, nor seek occasion against the preachers of it; but bade it welcome, and put a candid construction upon every thing that was said. Herein they were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica, but walked in the same spirit, and in the same steps, with the Gentiles there, of whom it is said that they received the word with joy of the Holy Ghost, and turned to God from idols, 1 Thess 1:6-9. This was true nobility. The Jews gloried much in their being Abraham’s seed, thought themselves well-born and that they could not be better born. But they are here told who among them were the most noble and the best-bred men—those that were most disposed to receive the gospel, and had the high and conceited thoughts in them subdued, and brought into obedience to Christ. They were the most noble, and, if I may so say, the most gentleman-like men. ... Virtue and piety are true nobility, true honor; and, without these... what are pedigrees and pompous titles worth?”

The Pulpit Commentary remarks: “Note the immense advantage which the preachers and the hearers had in the previous knowledge of the Scriptures gained by the Bereans in the synagogue. Note also the mutual light shed by the Old and New Testaments the one upon the other.”

In spite of the more favorable climate that Paul and Silas found in Berea, no church was ever planted in that city; whereas, in Thessalonica a church came into existence that became a lighthouse for the whole area.

Paul’s stay in this spiritual oasis cannot have lasted long. It must not have taken the enemy long to search him out and uproot him. The brothers in Berea must have known about Paul’s experience in Thessalonica, for as soon as there was any sign of unrest caused by the infiltration of Thessalonian elements, they sent Paul on his way to Athens. The Greek text is not very specific about the details of this journey. It appears that Paul, accompanied by some Berean believers, went to Athens by ship, while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. There must have been considerable concern about Paul’s safety and Athens was considered the safest place for the apostle to hide. It was the center of civilization in the Roman Empire and the cradle of philosophy. The names of Pericles, Demosthenes,

³⁵⁹ I Thess. 2:18

³⁶⁰ I Thess. 1:8

³⁶¹ See Luke 19:12

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are connected with that city. No Jewish rabble-rousers could ever instigate a riot there against a Jewish preacher.

We get the impression that Paul must have felt rather lost in this metropolis. This is evinced in his request for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. It is doubtful that this wish was ever realized. In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul writes: "So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith."³⁶² We know that Silas and Timothy joined Paul again in Corinth.³⁶³

Athens derived its name from Athena or Minerva to whom the city was dedicated. The Parthenon contained the magnificent gold and ivory statue of the goddess, which is now in the British museum. Any visitor to Athens would be impressed by the overwhelming manifestations of the historic monuments that testified to the greatness of the human mind. Paul failed to be impressed. Focusing on the greatness of God, he saw in Athens' splendor a manifestation of human lostness, superstitious ignorance, and rebellion. The NIV describes his reaction as: "he was greatly distressed." The KJV reads: "his spirit was stirred in him." And TLB reads: "he was deeply troubled."

Luke describes Athens as being "full of idols." The Greek word used is *kateidolos*. *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* explains: "The word, which occurs only here in the New Testament, and nowhere in Classical Greek, means 'full of idols.' It applies to the city, not to the inhabitants." Quoting G. S. Davies, from his book *Paul in Greece*, the *Commentary* continues: "We learn from Pliny that at the time of Nero, Athens contained over three thousand public statues, besides a countless number of lesser images within the walls of private houses. Of this number the great majority were statues of gods, demi-gods, or heroes. In one street there stood before every house a square pillar carrying upon it a bust of the god Hermes. Another street, named the Street of the Tripods, was lined with tripods, dedicated by winners in the Greek national games, and carrying each one an inscription to a deity. Every gateway and porch carried its protecting god. Every street, every square, nay, every purlieu, had its sanctuaries, and a Roman poet bitterly remarked that it was easier in Athens to find gods than men."

There is nothing harmless in idolatry. It is true that the Bible mocks the worship of manmade idol statues as a proof of man's stupidity. But behind every idol hides a demon and idol worship opens the door to demonic entrance. Paul must have been very much aware of the presence of the enemy in Athens. The open manifestation of his being there must have been more disgusting to the apostle than the opposition in Thessalonica and Berea. Yet, in his address to the philosophers, later in this chapter, Paul ignores the enemy and appeals to the lucid mind of his hearers.

Adhering to his principles of evangelism, Paul begins in the Jewish synagogue. No details are given about his preaching there. Luke uses again the word *dialeptomai*, from which the English word "dialogue" is derived. The same word is used in the context of his preaching in Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus.³⁶⁴ The discussions in the synagogue were, of course, held on the Sabbath, but during the weekdays Paul spent time at the market place, where he must have found many Jews also. Jews have always played an important role in the commerce of this world. But at the market, he found a larger audience and he thus caught the ear of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary states about those people: "These were the followers of Epicurus, who acknowledged no gods except in name, and absolutely denied that they exercised any government over the world or its inhabitants; and that the chief good consisted in the gratification of the appetites of sense. These points the Epicureans certainly held; but it is not clear that Epicurus himself maintained such doctrines. [And of the Stoics] These did not deny the existence of the gods; but they held that all human affairs were governed by fate. They did not believe that any good was received from the hands of their gods; and considered, as Seneca asserts, that any good and wise man was equal to Jupiter himself. Both these sects agreed in denying the resurrection of the body; and the former did not believe in the immortality of the soul."

They called Paul by the not very flattering name of "a babbler." *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "babbling" as "to talk enthusiastically or excessively," or "to utter meaningless sounds." The Greek word is *spermologos*, which according to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, "signifies literally, a collector of seeds, and is the name of a small bird that lives by picking up seeds on the road. The epithet became applied to persons who collected the sayings of others, without order or method, and detailed them among their companions in the same way. The application of the term to prating, empty, impertinent persons was natural and easy, and hence, it was considered a term of reproach and contempt, and was sometimes used to signify the vilest sort of men."

³⁶² I Thess. 3:1,2

³⁶³ ch. 18:5

³⁶⁴ See ch. 17:2; 18:4,19

Luke's account of Paul's encounter with the Epicures, Stoics, and other philosophers is not devoid of humor and some irony. Besides his mention of the epithet "babbler" given to Paul, he describes their rather ignorant reaction to the Gospel of Jesus' victory over death as "advocating foreign gods." This is followed by the priceless remark: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." The high discipline of philosophy had become a fad in Athens. It was considered "cool" to utter philosophic sounding words and phrases. Luke seems to indicate that Athens had strayed far from the lofty heights of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It had vulgarized the brilliance of these human minds.

It was in this setting that one of the most brilliant of the Lord's apostles presented his apology of the Gospel of salvation of man's soul. Paul may have given a definition of Christ's followers as being: "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth,"³⁶⁵ but this does not mean that he was without talent himself.

His contact with the philosophers at the market place earned him an introduction to the Areopagus. *Barnes' Notes* calls the place: "the most celebrated tribunal in the world." According to Greek mythology, it was the place where the god Mars had been tried by a court of twelve gods, for the murder of Halirrhothius, son of Neptune. It was the place where Socrates had been condemned to death for his "sedition" of the youth of Athens. Although Paul was not on trial in that sense, the fact that he stood on historical ground and was facing people who were considered the "think tank" of the world at that time, must have been an awe inspiring experience. It was also an ideal position to preach the Gospel to the world. No preacher could wish for a better opportunity to be given.

Paul's performance is a masterpiece of contextual preaching and correct psychological approach. The content of his message is very different from his dialogues with the Jews in the setting of a Sabbath service in a synagogue. Such preaching would have been meaningless at this place and before this audience. Paul spoke to his listeners on their level and in their language. Proving that Jesus is the Christ by quoting from Old Testament prophecies would have been pointless in this situation.

The Pulpit Commentary, in its Homiletics Sections, comments: "The actual conduct of St. Paul was as modest as it was wise, and as dauntless as it was modest. Looking around him at the altars of the gods, he seized upon the one favorable aspect of them — their witness to a worshipful spirit in the people towards the Unseen. Gathering from Greek literature a true description of the relation of man to the living God, he proceeded with wonderful simplicity and force to enunciate those truths of natural religion which an untainted reason perceives and approves. And then, rising to those higher truths which are the domain of revelation, he preached, as he had done before in the Agora, Jesus and the resurrection. He bade them repent of their sins done in ignorance; he told them of the coming of the day of judgment; he spoke to them of the awful Judge, and of his unerring righteousness. There was no faltering in his speech, no watering down of the severity of the gospel, no wincing at the subtle wits or the pretentious wisdom of those who heard him. He spoke as a man who knew that he had the truth of God, and that that truth would prevail. And such should ever be the attitude of the Christian teacher before the powers of the world. Humble, charitable, confident, and firm; owning all that is good and beautiful and true in the world around him, but always feeling, and acting as if he felt, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is better and truer and more beautiful than all; valuing true wisdom, and prizing the great gift of reason as the brightest jewel of our human nature; yet always remembering that in our fallen state reason could bring no remedy for sin nor cast a light upon the world to come; but that the only Name whereby we may be saved is the Name of Jesus, and that he alone has abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

The question whether there was really in Athens one altar dedicated to an unknown god has been a point of much debate among scholars. Jerome speaks of "altars," instead of one only. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* suggests that the altar may have referred to an anonymous god, rather than to an unknown one. The concept of an anonymous deity could be traced to the Jewish worship of YHWH, since the Jews would never pronounce the Name for fear of sinning against the second commandment of the Decalogue by using the Name of the Lord God in vain.³⁶⁶ *Barnes' Notes* observes that ancient historians attested to the existence of such an altar. We read: "The term 'unknown God' was used in relation to the worship of the Athenians. Lucian, in his *Philopatriis*, uses this form of an oath: 'I swear by the unknown God at Athens,' the very expression used by the apostle. And again he says (chapter xxix. 180), 'We have found out the unknown God at Athens, and worshipped him with our hands stretched up to heaven, etc.'"

If the Athenians had erected an altar to YHWH because they did not want to leave out any deity, they placed the Almighty on the same level as the idols, thus honoring Him less than they intended to. This would have

³⁶⁵ I Cor. 1:26

³⁶⁶ See Ex. 20:7

distressed Paul more than the presence of the multitude of altars. But it also gave him a very natural entrance for the presentation of the truth.

If, in fact, the unknown deity refers to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Paul had a much easier task in proclaiming the Gospel than appears from the surface of the text. Then the main topic of his discourse was to state that the anonymous God of the Jews does have a Name, a Name which not only distinguishes Him from other deities but also places Him infinitely above all of them. This God had proclaimed by the mouth of Isaiah: "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols."³⁶⁷

The sound psychology in Paul's approach to his audience is that he does not begin to accuse them negatively of the error of their ways, but commends them positively for their desire to search the unknown. After all, including an unknown God in an existing worship is a commendable admission of ignorance, rather than a sin to be condemned.

We don't know how much of a creation legend still existed among the Greek in Paul's day. We find that people all over the world possess myths about creation and a Creator. Some of the Stone Age tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, acknowledged the existence of the Creator. Every thinking human being must grapple with the mystery of the existence of his person and the matter that surrounds him. According to *Barnes' Notes*: "The Epicureans held that matter was eternal, and that the world was formed by a fortuitous concourse of atoms." Darwin's theory of evolution may be older than most people think.

The basic premises of philosophy pertain to the search for God, the mode of creation, the origin of man, the mystery of death, the matter of ethics, and the meaning of history. Paul covers all these points in his discourse.

The opening words of Paul's address have been subject to various interpretations. The NIV reads: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." The KJV gives a more negative impression with: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious." The Greek word in question is *deisidaimonesteros*, which may be rendered: "more religious than others." *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* explains: "This rendering and that of the English Revised Version (1885): 'somewhat superstitious,' are both unfortunate. The word is compounded of [deidoo], 'to fear,' and daimoon... 'a deity.' It signifies either a religious or a superstitious sentiment, according to the context. Paul would have been unlikely to begin his address with a charge which would have awakened the anger of his audience. What he means to say is, 'You are more divinity-fearing than the rest of the Greeks.' This propensity to reverence the higher powers is a good thing in itself, only, as he shows them, it is misdirected, not rightly conscious of its object and aim. Paul proposes to guide the sentiment rightly by revealing him whom they ignorantly worship. The American revisers insist on 'very religious.' The kindred word *deisidaimonia* ... occurs in Acts 25:19, and in the sense of religion, though rendered in the King James Version 'superstition.' Festus would not call the Jewish religion a superstition before Agrippa, who was himself a Jew. There is the testimony of the Ephesian town clerk, that Paul, during his three years' residence at Ephesus, did not rudely and coarsely attack the worship of the Ephesian Diana. 'Nor yet blasphemers of your goddess' (Acts 19:37)." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* quotes Thayer, who suggests that Paul uses it "with kindly ambiguity."

In his introduction, Paul refutes the accusation (if it can be called that) that "he seemed to be advocating foreign gods." In identifying the unknown god with the Creator of the universe, Paul must have connected to a known concept among his audience of the existence of a Creator. In referring to creation, he used the word *kosmos*, which is identical to our "cosmos" and includes the whole universe in its intelligent design. This identification of the unknown deity with the God of creation was at the same time a covert attack on the prevailing idolatry of the city. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "It is a striking instance of St. Paul's unflinching boldness and fidelity to the truth, that he should expose the hollowness of heathen worship, standing within a stone's throw of the Parthenon and the temple of Theseus and the countless other temples of gods and goddesses, which were the pride and glory of the Athenian people."

The great difference between God and idols is that God created man, but man created the idol. Since the Creator is always greater than His creation it makes the idol less than man and God too great for man to comprehend. Paul may have thought of Solomon's words at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"³⁶⁸

In the "Homily" Section of *The Pulpit Commentary*, we find the following outline of Paul's sermon, as given by W. Clarkson entitled: THE DIVINE RELATION TO MANKIND. "We not only want to know generally

³⁶⁷ Isa. 42:8

³⁶⁸ I Kings 8:27

who and what God is; we also and equally want to know what is the particular relation in which he stands to us. And what, we ask, does he desire we should be to him? Here is the answer:

1. He is the Maker of the world in which we live: he 'made the world and all things therein' (ver. 24).
2. He is the Divine Benefactor from whom all blessings flow: 'He giveth to all life,' etc. (ver. 25).
3. He is the Divine Provider and Arranger of all human affairs (ver. 26). His intelligence has foreseen, and his wisdom directed everything.
4. He is the Father of all human spirits: 'We are also his offspring' (ver. 28). And we are so in that
 - (1) he is the Author (ver. 26) of our common humanity (ver. 26);
 - (2) he is sustaining us all in constant existence: '*In him we live,*' etc. (ver. 28);
 - (3) he is deeply interested in us, and desires our approach to him; he has so wrought that men should '*seek him, if haply they might feel after him and find him.*' He desires to be sought and found of us, that we may commune with him and rejoice in him, that we may attain to his likeness and prepare for his nearer presence."

Paul calls the unknown God, the YHWH of the Jewish religion, "the Lord of heaven and earth." Evidently, this title was applied to Him in the heathen world. We find it several times in the Book of Daniel. In addressing King Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel said: "The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory."³⁶⁹ We may assume, therefore, that the Athenians were familiar with this title; the existence of this Supreme Being must not have been foreign to them.

In thus emphasizing the supremacy of God, Paul implicitly condemns idolatry without ever stating the point. His approach leaves it to his audience to draw their own conclusions and to come to their own condemnation. In spite of the fact that, as the apostle states later on, "We are his offspring," man does not stand on equal footing with the Creator, and He does not depend upon our acts of worship. Paul wanted to lead his hearers to the point where the apostle John leads us in describing his vision of heaven: "There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."³⁷⁰ But that is a long way to go for most human beings.

The purpose of all preaching must be to bring people into a deeper fellowship with God. Conviction of sin is an important step in that direction. Strangely enough, to evoke this conviction the Bible emphasizes the fact that God is our Creator. In dealing with Job, for instance, God reveals Himself, not as the Judge or even the Redeemer, but as the Lord of creation. This brings Job to the place where he confesses: "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."³⁷¹ The acknowledgment of the Creator implies that man is the bearer of His image. With this acknowledgement comes the conviction that the image is marred and broken. A comparison of the image and the original makes clear that man has made a caricature of what he was meant to be. That is ultimately what conviction of sin is all about. Paul was correct in his approach.

The discovery that God does not exist by our good graces but we exist by His grace is fundamental to all that follows. To exist by the grace of God means both to be very vulnerable and to be perfectly safe. We do not live in this world as autonomous beings. The psalmist expresses it thus: "These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; *when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.* When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."³⁷²

We don't know how much the Greek knew about the creation story as recorded in Genesis. They may have been familiar with it through the presence of the Jews in the city. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "The Athenians had a foolish notion that they were self-produced, and were the aboriginals of mankind. Lucian ridicules this opinion, ... The Athenians say that the first men sprung up in Attica, like radishes." *Barnes' Notes* adds: "All the families of mankind are descended from one origin or stock. However different their complexion, features, or language, yet they are derived from a common parent. ... This passage affirms that all the human family are descended from the same ancestor; and that, consequently, all the variety of complexion, etc., is to be traced to some other cause than that they were originally different races created. ... The design of the apostle in this affirmation was probably to convince the Greeks that he regarded them all as brethren; that, although he was a Jew, yet he was not enslaved to any narrow notions or prejudices in reference to other people. It follows from the truth here stated that no one nation, and no individual, can claim any preeminence over others in virtue of birth or blood. All are in this respect equal; and the whole human family, however they may differ in complexion, customs, and laws, are to be regarded and treated as brethren. It follows, also, that no one part of the race has a right to enslave or oppress any

³⁶⁹ Dan. 2:37

³⁷⁰ Rev. 4:2,3

³⁷¹ Job 42:6

³⁷² Ps. 104:27-30

other part, on account of difference of complexion. No one has a right because: He finds his fellow guilty of a skin not colored like his own; and having power to enforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause to doom and devour him as his lawful prey.”

Excessive national pride and chauvinism are among the universal sins of mankind. All over the world we find people who consider themselves better than their neighbors. The saying: “If you’re not Dutch, you’re not much” is one example. The Nazi philosophy in Hitler’s Germany was founded upon Nietzsche’s preaching of the “Superman.” Among the Stone Age tribes of New Guinea, we find tribes that called themselves “Lords of the earth” and “the real people.”

The one Creator and oneness of the human race suggests also a condemnation of the concept of national and local deities. People inhabit countries and regions, not by the authority of the god of the place but by assignment of the God of heaven and earth. He caused the dispersion of mankind at the confusion of languages at Babel. The Genesis account states: “From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.”³⁷³

God also decides the place of our birth and of what race we will become a member. The purpose of these limitations that are put upon each of us at birth is: “so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” Or, as the TLB renders so beautifully: “His purpose in all of this is that they should seek after God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” The picture is of a blind person who is groping his way through life in search of meaning. In connection with this, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The teaching, therefore, of the passage is that, though God was very near to every man, and had not left himself without abundant witness in his manifold gifts, yet, through the blindness of the heathen, they had to feel their way uncertainly toward God. In this fact lies the need of a revelation, as it follows ver. 30, etc. And hence part at least of the significance of such passages as, ‘Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord’ (... Ephesians 5:8); ‘Who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (1 Peter 2:9); ‘God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6), and many more like passages.”

Every one of us is surrounded by mysteries of life into which God intends us to delve. He wants us to ask questions. Children tend to do this more than grownups. In growing older, we are inclined to lose our curiosity and leave the mysteries for what they are. One of the reasons for Jesus’ use of some parables, I believe, was to arouse again this curiosity and to stimulate groping for meaning. In a way, God plays “hide-and-seek” with us, so that we would stretch out our hands and use our feet on the path of life. If we do, we find. Jesus promises us in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”³⁷⁴ God is never far away. To search is part of our human dignity. Solomon gave us the proverb: “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.”³⁷⁵

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary comments on Paul’s quotation from Greek poetry: “Probably he means not only Aratus, in whose poem, entitled Phaenomena, the words quoted by Paul are to be found literatim, ... but also Cleanthus, in whose Hymn to Jupiter the same words ... occur. But the sentiment is found in several others, being very common among the more enlightened philosophers. By saying your own poets, he does not mean poets born at Athens, but merely Grecian poets, Aratus and Cleanthus being chief.

With Jove we must begin; nor from him rove;
Him always praise, for all is full of Jove!
He fills all places where mankind resort,
The widespread sea, with every sheltering port.
Jove’s presence fills all space, upholds this ball;
All need his aid; his power sustains us all.
For we his offspring are; and he in love
Points out to man his labor from above:
Where signs unerring show when best the soil,
By well-timed culture, shall repay our toil, etc.

Aratus was a Cilician, one of Paul’s own countrymen, and with his writings Paul was undoubtedly well acquainted, though he had flourished about 300 years before that time.”

The words: “For in him we live and move and have our being” express beautifully the mode of our existence and our relationship to the Creator. *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “Thus, Paul traces our dependence on him

³⁷³ Gen. 11:9

³⁷⁴ Matt. 7:7,8

³⁷⁵ Prov. 25:2

from the lowest pulsation of life to the highest powers of action and of continued existence. It would be impossible to express in more emphatic language our entire dependence On God.”

The logic of Paul’s argument is irrefutable. If we are related to God, God cannot be a sculpture. A statue is the product of human craft; and the one who makes it is greater than what he makes. So must the Creator of human beings be greater than His creations.

Idol worship, however, is more complicated than that. It is true that the Bible mocks idolatry. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah ridicule the worship of statues.³⁷⁶ But idolatry is generally more complex than the mere worship of a piece of wood, stone, or metal. The animistic idol worshipper believes that a spirit that has power to execute the wishes of the one who prays inhabits the matter before him. The essence of idolatry is not only the folly man who bows down to what is lower than he, but it is also intercourse with demons. There is no doubt about it that Paul understood this. In writing to the church in Corinth, he clearly states: “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”³⁷⁷ It is also true that most idol worshippers have moved away from the more sophisticated animistic concept of matter inhabited by spirits and simply concentrate on the dead matter. In any case, the idol is less than man. Lifeless matter is less than any living being, and since man is created in the image of God, man is more than any angel, fallen or not. In bowing down to an idol, man always debases himself.

Paul captures the concept of idol worship in the word “ignorance.” This is a loaded word, spoken before an audience consisting of philosophers. The same is true of the word “repent.” The Greek word *metanoeo* means literally: “to think differently,” or “to reconsider.” The word has a moral connotation. Paul admonishes his audience to repent of their ignorance because ignorance is sin. They could have known the truth about God but they decided not to. They were ignorant by choice. Behind Paul’s words lurks the truth of the devious condition of the human heart. We choose to be ignorant because we know that searching for God will lead us to acknowledge His supremacy and His claim upon our lives. Finding God means to surrender to Him. It means the end of our rebellion.

The arguments Paul presented lead up to the Day of Judgment, which urges mankind to repentance. As a student who prepares for exams by studying, so every human being ought to prepare himself for judgment by repentance. It has been stated that Paul could not have chosen a better place to preach the judgment to come than the Areopagus, the place of judgment. Paul’s preaching of judgment to come is not unique. John the Baptist introduced the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven by preaching repentance. He shouted to his audience: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”³⁷⁸ And Jesus also began His public ministry by preaching repentance.³⁷⁹ He announced judgment when He said: “And [God, the Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”³⁸⁰ And: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”³⁸¹ Judgment is an integral part of the coming of the Kingdom.

Judgment will not primarily consist in God reading the riot act to men. Every human being, created in God’s image, when confronted with the character of God, will condemn himself because the image of God no longer resembles the original. When Isaiah saw God in His glory, he cried: “Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”³⁸²

As far as we know, Paul never got to the point of explaining God’s provision for man’s sin. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that Paul would have preached the Gospel if he had not been interrupted at this point. Without conviction of sin, however, there is no place for atonement. God’s Good News, to be effective, must

³⁷⁶ See Isa. 44:13-20; Jer. 10:3-5

³⁷⁷ I Cor. 8:4-6

³⁷⁸ Matt. 3:10-12

³⁷⁹ See Matt. 4:17

³⁸⁰ John 5:27-29

³⁸¹ Matt. 25:31-33

³⁸² Isa. 6:5

always be preceded by judgment. On the other hand, no true conviction of sin is possible without the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' words: "When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."³⁸³ Even in John the Baptist's preaching there was an allusion to the Holy Spirit and His ministry of conviction.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: "It has often been maintained that in Athens Paul attempted the intellectual approach and tried to be a philosopher among the philosophers rather than preaching the simple gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not a valid criticism, for the heart of the early Christian proclamation was the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this was Paul's central emphasis in Athens. No message could have been more unpalatable to Greek philosophers than that of bodily resurrection from the dead and a day of judgment. A message of personal immortality in a disembodied state would have been acceptable, but the assertion of bodily resurrection was 'untactful.' Paul did not water down his gospel; he proclaimed the truth that struck at the very heart of Greek philosophy." The words "simple Gospel" are in fact an oxymoron; there is no simple Gospel. God's plan of salvation is one of the most involved and complicated strategies ever devised. What is simple is the application of it upon the lives of human beings. The fact that we can put electricity to our use by simply flipping a switch does not mean that electricity itself is simple.

Jesus' resurrection is presented as proof of His appointment to the judgment seat of the universe. Why was the mention of a resurrection from the dead so repulsive to these people? Why would most people accept death as a logical conclusion of life and at the same time abhor it? Our reaction to death proves that death is unnatural; we sense that we were not created to die and, consequently, we fight it. If death is our enemy, then resurrection must be the logical conclusion to our problem. Evidently, the philosophers of the Areopagus had never gone far enough in thinking about life and death.

The relationship between Jesus' resurrection and judgment defines the issue of sin. Sin always begins in the spiritual realm; it originated with Satan, a spiritual being. Sin is conceived in the mind and executed in the body. As James says: "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."³⁸⁴ Eve and Adam finalized their rebellion against God in the act of eating, physically tasting and consuming, the forbidden fruit. Our bodies play a decisive role in committing sin. The apostle Paul states: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."³⁸⁵ Hence, there must be a resurrection.

As mentioned before, we do not read that Paul ever had an opportunity to present the Gospel of God's grace. We must not forget, however, that the apostle had earlier given his testimony at the market place, which was the reason he had been invited to present his arguments at the Areopagus. The fact that some people believed that Paul had been advocating "foreign gods" had triggered the curiosity of the philosophers. There can be no doubt but Paul must have mentioned the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in his previous arguments. But the audience's reaction to the mention of Christ's resurrection prevented him from presenting further details.

It is a bitter irony that human intelligence can present such an obstacle to finding the truth. When my brother-in-law wanted to divorce his first wife, I talked to him about his need for allowing Christ into his life. His answer was that the Gospel was not for him because he was an intellectual. Some intellectuals lack wisdom. A real intellectual recognizes the source of his intelligence and acknowledges, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding."³⁸⁶

The sneering of some of the philosophers, probably mainly the Epicureans, at Paul's preaching of the resurrection proves that their search was, ultimately, not for truth. Their scoff was a sign of rebellion against their Creator. God responds with His own mocking of man's wisdom with His divine foolishness. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."³⁸⁷

³⁸³ John 16:8-11

³⁸⁴ James 1:14,15

³⁸⁵ II Cor. 5:10

³⁸⁶ Ps. 111:10

³⁸⁷ I Cor. 1:20,21,25

Athens was one of the few places Paul visited where he left no church behind. Although the fruit of Paul's ministry in Athens was extremely scant, some souls were saved. Luke mentions the names of "Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others," whose names are not given. *The Pulpit Commentary* writes about Dionysius the Areopagite: "The earliest notice we have of him in ecclesiastical writers is the well-known one of Eusebius, 'Eccl. Hist.,' 3. 4., in which he says, 'We are told by an ancient writer, Dionysius the pastor of the diocese of Corinth (ob. 178 A.D.), that his namesake Dionysius the Areopagite, of whom St. Luke says in the Acts that he was the first who embraced the faith after St. Paul's discourse in the Areopagus, became the first bishop of the Church in Athens.' Eusebius repeats the statement in his long notice of Dionysius of Corinth, in 4. 23. Other uncertain traditions speak of him (Suidas) as one who rose to the height of Greek erudition, and as having suffered a cruel martyrdom (Niceph., 3:11). 'The works which go by his name are undoubtedly spurious.' ... Damaris; 'wholly unknown,' ... but certainly not the wife of Dionysius, as Chrysostom ... and others have thought ... And others with them. These would seem to be but few from St. Luke's way of mentioning them, and from our hearing nothing more in the Acts about the Church at Athens. It is remarkable that this small number of converts coincides with the weakness of the synagogue at Athens — too weak to persecute, and too weak to make proselytes among the Greeks of Athens. It [seems] clear that nowhere else had St. Paul won so few souls to Christ. And yet God's Word did not return to him wholly void. The seed fell on some good ground, to bring forth fruit unto eternal life."

We don't know how much time Paul spent in Athens; it may have been several months. The apostle proceeds to travel to Corinth, about 40 miles west of Athens. This journey could be made either by land or by sea. The first mode would involve a two-day journey, the latter one day sailing along the southern coast of the Greek isthmus. *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* states about Corinth that it was: "Famed for its commerce, chiefly due to its situation between the Ionian and Aegean seas, on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnese with Greece. In Paul's time it was capital of Achaia, and seat of the Roman proconsul (Acts 18:12). Its people had the Greek love of philosophical subtleties. The immorality was notorious even in the pagan world; so that 'to Corinthianize' was proverbial for playing the wanton. The worship of Venus, whose temple was on Acrocorinthus, was attended with shameless profligacy, 1,000 female slaves being maintained for the service of strangers."

In Corinth, Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple expelled from Rome. The Jewish historian Josephus does not refer to this, but the Roman historian, Suetonius, mentions the edict of the Emperor Claudius that drove the Jews out of Rome. Suetonius' statement brings up a very interesting point. He declares that the emperor took the measure because of Jewish riots instigated by a certain "Chrestus." Some scholars believe that *Chrestus* may be a corruption of the word *Christos*, which is Greek for "Christ." This suggests that, at that time, there were Christians in Rome who faced the same strong opposition Paul experienced from the side of the Jews. Since Luke mentions visitors from Rome to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, there is a good possibility that the Gospel was preached in Rome even before Paul set out on his missionary journey.

In Corinth, Paul began exercising his trade of tentmaker. He must have done this earlier in his missionary journeys, but this is the first time we find mention of it. Evidently, his support was running out and he had to provide for his needs by working. *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* explains that it was a common phenomenon for a Jew to have learned a skill that would earn him a living. We read: "It was a Rabbinical principle that whoever does not teach his son a trade is as if he brought him up to be a robber. All the Rabbinical authorities in Christ's time, and later, were working at some trade. Hillel, Paul's teacher, was a woodcutter, and his rival was Shammai, a carpenter. It is recorded of one of the celebrated Rabbis that he was in the habit of discoursing to his students from the top of a cask of his own making, which he carried every day to the academy." It was evidently his occupation that brought him in contact with Aquila and Priscilla in whose house he boarded.

Scholars have different opinions about the kind of work Paul did. The Greek word translated "tentmaker" is *skenoipoios*, which means: "a manufacturer of tents." *Barnes' Notes* comments: "There have been various opinions about the meaning of this word. Many have supposed that it denotes 'a weaver of tapestry.' Luther so translated it. But it is probable that it denotes, as in our translation, 'a manufacturer of tents, made of skin or cloth.' In Eastern countries, where there was much travel, where there were no inns, and where many were shepherds, such a business might be useful, and a profitable source of living."

Paul refers several times to the fact that he used his trade to support his ministry. At his farewell from the elders of Ephesus, he said: "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions."³⁸⁸ To the church in Corinth, he wrote: "We work hard with our own hands."³⁸⁹ And in his

³⁸⁸ Ch. 20:34

³⁸⁹ I Cor. 4:12

epistle to the Thessalonians, we read: “Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.”³⁹⁰

Paul’s tent making in Corinth was a temporary measure to tide him over till Silas and Timothy would arrive from Macedonia, because after that, we read that the apostle preached fulltime instead of only in the synagogue during the Sabbath.

The word “tentmaker” has taken on a new meaning in missiology. It no longer means simply being bivocational while preaching the Gospel, but working in restricted countries as a Christian professional for the purpose of bringing a Gospel witness to places that are inaccessible to conventional missionary work.

It is difficult to trace the movements of Silas and Timothy. Some scholars believe that they actually joined the apostle in Athens and returned from there to Berea, after having advised Paul that he should not go back to Macedonia. We find, however, little support for this theory. From Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians, we know that he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica.³⁹¹

As elsewhere, Paul did not lack opposition to the message he preached in Corinth. Luke tells us that the Jews opposed Paul and became so abusive that Paul decided to no longer minister in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Initially, their abuse must have been verbal. The Greek word used is *blasphemeo*, which means: “to blaspheme.” This suggests that the person they ridiculed was not Paul but Jesus. When Paul left the synagogue he “shook out his clothes.” We read that Nehemiah used this symbolic action: “I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!’”³⁹² Paul followed Jesus’ advice given to the twelve: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”³⁹³ His verdict: “Your blood be on your own heads!” refers to the Word of God to Ezekiel, where we read: “When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.”³⁹⁴ We also find the same expression during Jesus’ trial. After Pilate washed his hands, indicating that he took no responsibility for Jesus’ condemnation, the people shouted: “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”³⁹⁵

The implication of Paul’s words is that those who are presented with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and turn down the offer of God’s pardon for their sins, face condemnation through their own fault. There is an ironic twist in the shouts of the people at Jesus’ crucifixion and Paul’s conclusion about the Jews in Corinth. The people who shouted: “Let his blood be on us and on our children,” actually invoked the covenant of God, without meaning to do so. If, in fact, Jesus’ blood is upon us, we will be saved. If our own blood is upon our heads, we are heading for eternal damnation.

As in previous instances, the Jews’ rejection of the Gospel opened the apostle’s way to minister to the gentiles. That Paul did not do this lightly is clear from his report to the believers in Thessalonica about this and similar incidents. We read in his First Epistle: “For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.”³⁹⁶ How deeply this affected him can be seen in his Epistle to the Romans, where we read these moving words: “I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”³⁹⁷

Some scholars, among them Calvin, believe that Paul changed his lodging from the home of Aquila and Priscilla to the home of Titius Justus. A more logical interpretation seems to be that, when Paul left the synagogue, Titius Justus opened his home to Paul to continue his preaching and instruction. The location of Justus’ home, next

³⁹⁰ I Thess. 2:9

³⁹¹ I Thess. 3:2

³⁹² Neh. 5:13

³⁹³ Matt. 10:14

³⁹⁴ Ezek. 3:18,19

³⁹⁵ Matt. 27:25

³⁹⁶ I Thess. 2:14-16

³⁹⁷ Rom. 9:1-4

to the synagogue, made it an ideal locale to draw people from all strata of society. It was easily accessible to those who had attended the synagogue and more inviting to gentiles who did not. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The conversion of Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue (see 13:15) together with his family must have been a blow to the Jews and given a great impetus to Paul’s mission. The baptism of Crispus is mentioned in 1 Cor 1:14.”

Paul obviously needed encouragement, which the Lord provided for him in a vision at night. The Greek word *horama* does not refer to a natural dream but to a supernatural vision. It is the same word used to describe Jesus’ transfiguration.³⁹⁸ The opposition may have brought back to the apostles the traumatic experiences of beatings and stonings such as he had undergone in other places. Jesus assures him that no such thing would happen to him in Corinth. The reason given is: “Because I have many people in this city.” The question comes to mind why God allowed Paul to be physically abused in one place but puts him under His wing of protection at another. The answer given here does not seem to relate to God’s ability or inability to protect. We read in the words “I have many people in this city” that there would not be enough people who hated Paul to the point where he would be subjected to that kind of abuse. Some theologians read the doctrine of predestination into these verses, but the context does not seem to allow this. As the Lord assured him of His protection, Paul was able to spend an extended time of one-and-a-half year in Corinth, enabling him to lay down a solid foundation for the church in that city. Whether these eighteen months include the previous period during which Paul lectured in the synagogue or only covers the time from the vision up to the arrival of the new proconsul Gallio, is uncertain. Paul’s stay in Corinth was only exceeded by his time in Ephesus, where he spent three years.³⁹⁹

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary writes about the arrival of Gallio: “At the end of this period of time, a new proconsul came to the province of Achaia, of which Corinth was the capital city. Such provinces were under the supervision of the Senate and were governed by proconsuls, who filled a two-year term. Gallio [was] the brother of the philosopher Seneca. This provides the one relatively certain date in Paul’s career, for Gallio arrived in Corinth in July of either 51 or 52, probably the former. Paul had already been in Corinth for a year and a half. The Jews seized the opportunity to try the mettle of this new proconsul, hoping that he might yield to their pressure. An unfavorable verdict from a Roman governor against Paul would have been effective not only in Corinth but throughout the entire province. Therefore they instigated a riot and brought Paul before Gallio’s judgment seat, accusing the evangelist of propagating a religion that was contrary to the Roman law. Roman law recognized Judaism as a legitimate religion. The Jews accused Paul of teaching a new religion that was contrary to Judaism and therefore contrary to Roman law.” *The Pulpit Commentary* argues that the date of Gallio’s arrival at Corinth is far from certain. Luke’s text also does not seem to concur with *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary’s* assumption that Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth before the proconsul arrived.

The proconsul dismissed the charges against Paul and had the courtroom cleared. The Lord’s protective hand, evidently, still rested on the apostle, because we don’t read that the crowd attacked him after the closing of the procedure. He must have slipped out from among the mob. Their anger then focused on the leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes. The older versions insert the word “Greeks” in the text, although this does not seem to be in the Greek text.

Opinions vary about what actually happened here. Sosthenes had, obviously, replaced Crispus as leader of the synagogue, after the latter had embraced the Gospel. It seems logical to conclude that the reason for the mob’s anger was that Sosthenes had also become a Christian. Some scholars, however, believe that Sosthenes’ roughing up was a reaction to the negative outcome of the trial. Whether this Sosthenes is the same person Paul mentions in the heading of his First Epistle to the Corinthians⁴⁰⁰ cannot be established. The name was apparently a common one.

The vow with the accompanying shaving of the head, which Luke mentions in vs. 18, has divided Bible scholars into two camps, both comprising people of considerable repute. We find, for instance, Chrysostom, Grotius, and Erasmus in one faction, and Jerome and Augustine in the other. The construction of the Greek text allows for the application of the vow to either Paul or Aquila. If Aquila was the one who had made the vow, there would, as *The Pulpit Commentary* asserts, be little reason to mention the fact in an account that deals almost exclusively with the apostle Paul. Most commentators agree that the vow was not the Nazarite vow regulated by Moses.⁴⁰¹ Paul may have made the vow because of some danger in which he found himself, or because of sickness. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It further appears, from certain passages in the Mishna, that, if any one had a Nazarite vow upon him outside the limits of the Holy Land, he could not fulfill such vow till he was come to the Holy Land, to

³⁹⁸ Matt. 17:9

³⁹⁹ See ch. 20:31

⁴⁰⁰ See I Cor. 1:1

⁴⁰¹ See Num. 6:1-21

Jerusalem; but it was allowable in such case to cut his hair short... and as some say to take it with him to Jerusalem, and there offer it at the same time that he offered his sacrifice and shaved his head ... It would seem, therefore, that either in a severe illness or under some great danger ... St. Paul had made such a vow; that he had been unwilling to cut his hair short at Corinth, where he was thrown so much into the society of Greeks, and therefore did so at Cenchreae just before he embarked for Syria; and that he made all haste to reach Jerusalem in time for the Passover, that he might there accomplish his vow.”

It has been observed that Paul’s taking of a vow, with the accompanying ritual of shaving his head, indicates an inconsistency of attitude. Why would the man who argued so vehemently against observation of the ritual law, submit to its rituals himself? Studying Luke’s account of Paul’s behavior, however, we note that the apostle was consistently inconsistent. For instance, while he took an extremely strong stand against those who preached circumcision, he circumcised Timothy.⁴⁰² Paul was on all accounts a very pragmatic Christian. We also note that the taking of a vow does not conflict with the Gospel of grace, which Paul preached.

Leaving Silas and Timothy behind in Corinth, Paul sailed to Ephesus, accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla. The crossing of the Aegean Sea must have taken ten to fifteen days. Since both Cenchrea and Ephesus were flourishing centers of commerce, this sea route was one of the busiest of its time. Thus Paul was allowed to visit, however briefly, the city that was denied to him by the Holy Spirit two years before.⁴⁰³ His stay in Ephesus was short; some think only one Sabbath. Paul had an opportunity to present the Gospel in the synagogue, which, apparently, was well received. Josephus mentions that there was a large number of Jews in Ephesus, and the Jews in that city had the privilege of obtaining Roman citizenship. The empire probably recognized the importance of the role they played in the economic affluence of the place.

Paul, evidently, felt that he could leave the congregation of Ephesus safely in the hands of Aquila and Priscilla, so that he could rush off to Jerusalem, promising that he would return. Some of the older manuscripts insert the words: “I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem.” Although the more reliable sources omit this, it gives a good reason for Paul’s hasty departure and establishes a connection with the vow the apostle had made.

Vs. 22 of this chapter stands out for its brevity. There is almost universal agreement among scholars that the church Paul went up to greet was the mother church in Jerusalem. The Greek word *anabaino*, which means: “to go up” is often used to indicate a journey to Jerusalem. The same word is used, for instance, in the verse: “Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem...”⁴⁰⁴ This was probably Paul’s fourth visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. Paul’s second missionary journey ended in Antioch, where it had begun.

D. Third mission, Asia Minor and Europe

18:23-21:17

Luke does not mention whether anybody accompanied Paul as he set out to revisit the churches in Asia Minor. It is, therefore, likely that the apostle was alone. It must have been a long and lonely journey from Antioch to Ephesus. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*: “The entire journey would thus be considerably more than a thousand miles, a journey of forty days exclusive of all stoppages. Six months probably must have elapsed between his departure from Antioch and his arrival at Ephesus.” Paul passed, and probably, tarried at Tarsus, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Asian Antioch, before arriving at Ephesus. Again, Luke passes over this extended period in the apostle’s ministry, without any comment. Instead, he takes us back to Ephesus to introduce us to a new character who must have played an important role in the spreading of the Gospel at that time: Apollos.

One would wish again that Luke had been more specific and had given us more details about this remarkable man. We only read that he was a Jew from Alexandria and that he knew of the preaching of John the Baptist. Alexandria was an important center of learning at that time and it had a large Jewish community. Philo states that it numbered approximately one million Jews. The city was the birthplace of the famous Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (LXX), which was instrumental in the spreading of Judaism and the Gospel in the ancient world. There are many unanswered questions about Apollos. We would like to know how much he knew about John the Baptist’s preaching and how he knew it. We understand from the scanty remarks of Luke that John’s preaching was known both in Alexandria and Ephesus.⁴⁰⁵ Luke says about Apollos: “He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

⁴⁰² See ch. 16:3

⁴⁰³ See ch. 16:6

⁴⁰⁴ Matt. 20:17

⁴⁰⁵ See also ch. 19:1-7

It is difficult for us, who live in an age of instant information, to imagine that news could only spread in the ancient world with the speed of a donkey or a sailboat. Which parts of the history of salvation were missing in Apollos' understanding of the Gospel, is not mentioned. In comparing the information about Apollos with the story in the next chapter, where Paul baptizes the twelve disciples in the Name of Jesus, after which they are filled with the Holy Spirit, we wonder if Apollos had a similar experience. We do not read about Apollos' baptism, neither about his being filled with the Spirit. Without that experience, however, this man could hardly have played a role of any importance in the early church. In Paul's words: "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."⁴⁰⁶ Yet, Paul credits Apollos with the building up of the church in Corinth. We read in his First Epistle: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow."⁴⁰⁷ Apollos was one of the three men with a brilliant mind in the Book of Acts, Paul and Luke being the other two.

It seems that Priscilla took the initiative in taking the great preacher aside and informing him that his knowledge of the subject he preached about was lacking. Aquila may, initially, have been too intimidated by Apollos to brave such a confrontation. It speaks well of the humility of Apollos that he was, not only, willing to be instructed by people who were, obviously, lower in class than he was, but also that he accepted being instructed by a woman. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments: "It is disgraceful to a man to be ignorant, when he may acquire wisdom; but it is no disgrace to acquire wisdom from the meanest person or thing. The adage is good: Despise not advice, even of the meanest: the gagging of geese preserved the Roman state." We trust that Clarke's unflattering reference to the geese in connection with Priscilla's speaking to the great man is not meant as an intentional insult to the lady.

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary comments: "The most accomplished theologian may learn from the humblest private Christian what is of more value than all his learning. The pity is, that as there are few such who would, like Apollos, sit at the feet of a Priscilla and Aquila, so there are not many who, like that couple, would venture to put any such to the test. Nevertheless, humility and teachableness are the unfailing characteristics of sanctified learning; and those Christian teachers who are prepared to learn from anyone, are pretty sure to be rewarded with what their books have failed to teach them, from some who have studied in a higher school. And if so, then private Christians, male and female, conscious of the possession of truth to which their teachers have not attained, have a duty to discharge to them from which they do not well entirely to shrink. 'It is instructive (says Lechler) that a man so important and influential in the apostolic age as Apollos, should have been indebted to a plain married couple for his special preparation for the ministry, and for his introduction into positive Christian truth.' "

Apollos went from Ephesus to Achaia, particularly to Corinth, where he, unintentionally, influenced the church to the point that it almost caused a church split. Paul refers to this in his First Epistle to that church with the words: "For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men?"⁴⁰⁸ It seems that Apollos was pained by this carnal reaction to his ministry. At the end of the same epistle, Paul writes that Apollos was unwilling to return to Corinth. We read: "I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity."⁴⁰⁹ And *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* observes: "Jerome states that Apollos remained at Crete until he heard that the divisions at Corinth had been healed by Paul's epistle; then he went and became bishop there."

We don't know if Paul and Apollos ever met in person. Paul's urging of Apollos may have been done by letter. There is no indication that there was ever any feeling of jealousy on the side of the apostle toward this man.

In introducing Apollos to us, Luke also introduces, in his inimitable way, the matter of the disciples who only knew of the baptism of John, which is the topic of the first 7 verses of chapter 19.

Many questions surround the encounter, with the ensuing dialogue and action, of Paul and the twelve disciples of John the Baptist. Some suppose that these were people who had come to Ephesus with Apollos, but there are no indications in the text that this is so. The similarity between their condition and Apollos', however, is undeniable. Paul's questions to them and their answers shed some light on what the lack in Apollos' understanding may have been. Their answer: "We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" can hardly be interpreted as if they didn't know about the existence of the Holy Spirit. Being disciples of John the Baptist, they must have been familiar with John's words: "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."⁴¹⁰ The most logical interpretation of their answer seems to be that they were unaware of the fact that the Holy Spirit had come down on

⁴⁰⁶ Rom. 8:9

⁴⁰⁷ I Cor. 3:6

⁴⁰⁸ I Cor. 3:4

⁴⁰⁹ I Cor. 16:12©

⁴¹⁰ Luke 3:16

believers in Jesus on the day of Pentecost. Any disciple of John must also have known that the Baptist had identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”⁴¹¹ Having repented of their sins (which was the essence of John’s baptism) and knowing that Jesus would take away their sin, they knew enough Gospel truth to have assurance of salvation. This does not necessarily mean that they knew about the cross and the empty tomb, and as we saw, they definitely did not know about Pentecost. These same areas of ignorance may have been the blank spots in Apollos’ understanding.

Although this is not clearly stated, we may assume that these people made a public confession of the surrender of their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ; otherwise their baptism in the Name of Jesus would have been inappropriate. Whatever puzzling factors there may be in the record of this event, the importance of baptism is very clear. This act of obedience to Jesus’ command, as part of the Great Commission, is a necessary testimony subsequent to a personal surrender.

This does not mean that Paul’s imposition of hand, after which these people experienced their personal Pentecost, is necessarily a paradigm for all who receive the Holy Spirit. Their receiving the gift of tongues and prophecy should not be interpreted as essential proof of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, as some people interpret it. This event marks the crossing of a specific threshold, as was the case with the conversion of the Samaritans in chapter eight.⁴¹² The experience of these twelve people, as well as of Apollos, marked a transition from one dispensation to another: a major step in the history of salvation.

It is not clear whether the above incident marked the beginning of Paul’s work in Ephesus or whether it occurred somewhere during the extended time he spent there. As was his custom, Paul began his ministry in the synagogue. The fact that he was able to do this for a period of three months indicates that the reception of his message was generally favorable. The NIV states that: “some of them became obstinate.” The Greek word used is *skleruno*, which can be translated: “to indurate,” or: “render stubborn.” Paul uses the same word in his Epistle to the Romans in the context of the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh.⁴¹³ The opposition, however small it may have been, must have been disturbing enough for Paul to relocate to “the lecture hall of Tyrannus,” which was probably a public lecture room.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary comments: “One text says that Paul taught from 11 A.M. until 4 P.M., when business was ordinarily suspended. He practiced his trade during the morning and preached the Gospel during the heat of the day.”

In the Homiletics Section of *The Pulpit Commentary*, we read: “The founding of a Church at Ephesus, the capital city of Proconsular Asia — a great center of Greek and Asiatic life, civil, religious, and commercial, the seat of the famous temple of Artemis, the place of concourse of all Ionia for its celebrated games — is one of those great epochs in the history of Christianity which arrest the attention and demand the consideration of the Christian reader. Not above two years (if so much) had elapsed since the Holy Ghost had expressly prohibited the preaching of the Word in Asia, for reasons which we know not; but now that prohibition is removed, and, after a preliminary movement by Apollos, we find St. Paul planting his foot firmly on the soil of Asia, and taking possession in the Name of the Lord Jesus. The banner which he then set up has never been taken down to this present hour. What the influence of the great success of St. Paul’s ministry at Ephesus upon other Asiatic cities may have been, we have no means of knowing in detail; but that it was very great and widespread we learn from the tenth, twentieth, and twenty-sixth verses of this chapter. The first, second, and third chapters of the Revelation of St. John supply further important evidence, both as regards Ephesus itself and the other Churches of Asia; and so do the two Epistles of St. Paul to Timothy. From hence St. John exercised his jurisdiction over the whole of the Churches of Asia.”

The city of Ephesus must have been a center of powerful demonic activity, very similar to Galilee in the early days of Jesus’ ministry, as mentioned by Matthew. Matthew’s Gospel records the reason for Jesus’ settling in that area: “Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali- to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles- the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’”⁴¹⁴

Indications of this demonic activity were the practice of sorcery by a number of people, who would later confess their sins and burn their paraphernalia, as well as the activity of exorcists who practiced their trade in the city. This must also have been the reason that the Holy Spirit allowed Paul to perform such extraordinary miracles of physical and spiritual healing. If it were not for the fact that Luke, the physician, recorded the incidents, we would

⁴¹¹ John 1:29

⁴¹² See ch. 8:14-17

⁴¹³ See Rom. 9:17,18

⁴¹⁴ Matt. 4:13-16

probably discount the reports about the means that were used for healing as folk superstition. We find a similar situation in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, where God used Peter to draw public attention to the Gospel by endowing that apostle with a remarkable gift of healing. Luke recorded then: "As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed."⁴¹⁵

It is an undeniable fact that God sometimes bestows a gift of healing to certain persons to tear down demonic strongholds. The ministry of Johan Blumhardt in the German village of Möttlingen in the nineteenth century comes to mind. Blumhardt's gift of healing became evident after the casting out of a demon from a girl by the name of Gottliebin Dittus. Similar manifestations of divine power have been observed in Europe prior to and after World War II. It should be noted, however, that such events usually mark a strategic point in the history of the Kingdom and that what is paramount is the coming of the Kingdom, while the healings are peripheral side effects. God, evidently, intended to transform the city of Ephesus from a center of satanic power into the headquarters of the Holy Spirit, from where the Gospel could spread into the whole province of Asia Minor.

Luke illustrates the effectiveness of Paul's preaching by citing an incident of some itinerant Jewish exorcists, seven sons of a certain priests named Sceva. The historian Josephus attests to the fact that exorcism was widely practiced at that time and that incantations were used that were attributed to King Solomon. The historicity of the latter can, however, not be verified. The fact that these sons of Sceva decided to use the words that Paul spoke when driving out demons speaks well for the apostle's ministry. When exorcism is practiced, there are always some who are charlatans who use tricks to deceive people. Some witchdoctors among primitive people are known to resort to such practices. This does not deny the reality of demons or of demon possession. Whether the sons of Sceva had any real spiritual powers or not cannot be determined. Their grave mistake was that they believed the invocation of the Name of Jesus to be no more than any other incantation. And since they probably had observed that Paul used it with much success, they decided to try to do the same themselves. They did not understand that only those who belong to Jesus can release the power of Jesus' Name. There are some comical features in the tragedy that occurs. If these exorcists were, in fact, fakes they must have been taken aback by the fact that the demon answered by acknowledging both Jesus and Paul.

A human being is never a match for a demon. Unless we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, Satan will have no difficulty to devour us as a lion does his prey. But if we have placed ourselves under the authority of Jesus, the enemy will respect the uniform we wear. The evil spirit's question to these men: "Who are you?" is one of utter contempt. I once heard the story of a man who prayed: "Lord, let my name be known in hell!" When he was questioned about this prayer, he answered: "I know that God knows my name. But when I meet the devil, I don't want him to be able to say to me: 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' " We must make sure that our names are not only written in the Lamb's Book of Life but also in the registers of hell.

The Greek is very vivid in its description of the incident. The man possessed by the demon leaped on them (*Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* reads: "spring upon like a panther), and "mastered" them. One of the most embarrassing things for a human being is to be forced to leave a house naked. The demoniac exposed their nakedness, not merely in the physical sense of the word.

As a result of this incident, a widespread spiritual awakening occurred in the city. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "This fear produced by the putting forth of God's power paralyzed for a time the enemies of the gospel, and enabled believers, as it were, to take possession of their new heritage, just as the miracles at the Red Sea and the destruction of Sihon and Og paralyzed the courage of the Canaanites and enabled the Israelites to take possession of their land (Joshua 2:9-11)." We do not read any further about the man who was possessed by the demon. Spiritual revivals often occur after the powers of darkness are defeated in an area. It is quite possible that the demon-possessed man was delivered through Paul's ministry, but Luke does not mention this. It is also not implied that all who feared became believers. We do read, however, that those who believed and had a history of witchcraft had a public burning of their paraphernalia. They realized, as did some of the tribal people in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, among whom we worked as missionaries, that one cannot have fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, without burning the bridges that connect one to the world of evil spirit. Recognition of the lordship of Jesus draws a sharp line between light and darkness.

It is interesting to see that the burning was done publicly; it was meant to be a testimony to the world. When we take our stand on the Lord's side, it is of great value to make a public statement about it.

⁴¹⁵ Ch. 5:15,16

Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament explains about the book burning that these were books "containing magical formulas. Pagan writers often allude to the Ephesian letters. These were symbols, or magical sentences written on slips of parchment, and carried about as amulets. Sometimes they were engraved on seals."

These documents seem to have been grossly overpriced. The NIV records the estimated value as being "fifty thousand drachmas." TLB translates this for us: "Someone estimated the value of the books at \$10,000." The high price of these documents is derived from the fact that the people who possessed them, and used them for exorcism, would charge for the use of the secret incantations they contained. It was also understood that, as *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "magical secrets lost their potency when they were made public." We should note that, for many people in Ephesus, conversion to faith in Jesus meant great financial loss. Those that decided to follow Jesus understood that the loss of their means of livelihood would be abundantly compensated by the salvation of their soul. After all: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"⁴¹⁶

At the height of this tremendous awakening, while Paul was, so to speak, riding the crest, the apostle decides to leave. Luke describes Paul's plans as wanting to go to Macedonia and Achaia, visit Jerusalem and eventually go to Rome, with a view to begin a new missionary work in Spain. This urge to push back the horizon is typical for Paul's great vision of the Lord's work.

It is generally understood that Paul wrote his First Epistle to the Corinthians while in Ephesus. We read in it: "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you-for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me."⁴¹⁷

Before Paul had an opportunity to put his travel plans into effect, Satan launches another major offensive. Paul's preaching of the Gospel had caused a definite change in the spiritual infrastructure of the city of Ephesus. The fact that people stopped buying replicas of the silver shrines of Artemis had hurt the pocketbooks of the silversmiths of the city.

Artemis, or Diana as the KJV calls her, was the goddess of hunting and fertility. One statue represents her with a great number of breasts. The temple in Ephesus dedicated to her name was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The silversmith Demetrius who addresses a meeting of fellow craftsmen instigates the disturbance by stating, first of all, that he and his colleagues are in danger of losing their livelihood, because of Paul's preaching against idolatry. As a last line of argument, he presents the warning that Artemis will lose her throne in Ephesus. The arguments are presented in the order of their importance: financial loss, exposition of fraud, and loss of a deity. In order to push their case effectively, the craftsmen present their grievances not in defense of their pocket book, which was their only reason for discontent, but in the spiritual form of the defense of the divinity of their idol.

Ephesus' affluence rested on the popularity of her goddess. Few people may have cared about the honor of Artemis, but they were concerned about the way her fall would affect the market. The shout "Great is the Artemis of the Ephesians" is generated by the labor union of silversmiths and in no time it sweeps over the whole city, bringing all its citizens in the street. The frenzy of the mob usually tends to confuse the issues. The first victims in mass demonstrations are usually the principals. Luke tells us: "The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there." Soon, the race issue became a factor, because when Alexander tries to address the crowd to restore order, he is shouted down because they recognized him as a Jew. At that point, a higher spiritual power intervenes to manipulate mass psychosis to his own advantage. Satan leads the crowd in a two-hour chant of the chorus: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Finally, when oxygen and blood sugar begins to run low, the city clerk manages to address the mob.

His Greek title is *ho grammateus*. TLB addresses him as "the mayor." *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* explains: "Ephesus was a free city and elected its own officers and the recorder or secretary was the chief magistrate of the city, though the proconsul of the province of Asia resided there. This officer is not a mere secretary of another officer or like the copyists and students of the law among the Jews, but the most influential person in Ephesus who drafted decrees with the aid of the *strateegoi* ... had charge of the city's money, was the power in control of the assembly, and communicated directly with the proconsul. Inscriptions at Ephesus give frequently this very title for their chief officer and the papyri have it also. The precise function varied in different cities. His name appeared on the coin at Ephesus issued in his year of office."

⁴¹⁶ Matt. 16:26

⁴¹⁷ I Cor. 16:5-9

The city clerk reminds the crowd that the city of Ephesus is universally known as the guardian of Artemis' temple. The Greek word *neokoros* literally means "temple sweeper." This became an honorary title, eventually applied to the whole city. The words "which fell from heaven" as applied to the image of the goddess, are the translation of a single Greek word *diopetes*, meaning "sky-fallen." The KJV renders it: "which fell down from Jupiter." Some scholars believe that the statue was actually a meteorite, others that it was so ancient that nobody knew from where it came or who had made it. The speaker suggested that, since the fame of the city was so well established, there was no reason for the commotion. Also, since there was no proof that the people who had been dragged to the front had committed any crime, the Roman authorities could misinterpret the mass demonstration as a riot against the government.

In some versions, the clerk calls Artemis "your goddess." The NIV reads "our goddess." *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "If the A.V. is right, perhaps we may see in the phrase 'your goddess' an indication that the town-clerk himself was more or less persuaded by St. Paul's preaching, that 'they are no gods which are made with hands,' and did not care to speak of Diana as his own goddess. It appears also that St. Paul had not launched out into abuse of the heathen gods in general, or Diana in particular, but had preached the more excellent way by faith in Jesus Christ, to draw them from their idols (...1 Thessalonians 1:9)."

The chapter ends with Luke's, rather ironic, remark that the city clerk "dismissed the assembly," giving the riotous shouting of the mob a legal cachet.

The information given in the first three verses of chapter twenty is probably the scantiest in all of Luke's record. Fortunately, several details can be gathered from Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians and from his Epistle to the Romans.

Luke merely states that Paul said good-bye to the disciples in Ephesus and left for Macedonia. Evidently, he had planned to do so and informed the church in Corinth accordingly: "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia."⁴¹⁸ Thus ended the extended stay in Ephesus, as far as we know, the longest of any in the apostle's travels. Luke does not mention the crossing by ship of the Aegean Sea. We know that he visited Troas and stayed there to preach, which he had not done when he landed there on his way to Philippi, after receiving the "Macedonian call."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary provides is with some details, gathered from Paul's writings: "From his Epistles we gather the following most interesting particulars: First, That, as might be expected from its position on the coast, ... he revisited Troas; and whereas on his former visit he appears to have done no missionary work there, he now went there expressly 'to preach Christ's Gospel,' and found 'a door opened unto him of the Lord' (Jesus) (2 Cor 2:12), which he entered so effectually as to lay the foundation of a church there (as appears from Acts 20:6-7, below).

Secondly, That he would have remained longer there, but for his uneasiness at the non-arrival of Titus, whom he had dispatched to Corinth to finish the collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem, which Paul wished to take with him (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8:6); but still more, that he might bring him word what effect his first Epistle to that church had produced.

Thirdly, That in this state of mind, afraid of something wrong, he 'took leave' of the brethren at Troas, and went from thence into Macedonia. No doubt it was the city of Philippi that he came to-landing at Neapolis, its seaport ... as appears by comparing 2 Cor 11:9, where 'Macedonia' is named, with Phil 4:15, where it appears that Philippi is meant. Here he found the brethren, whom he had left on his former visit in circumstances of such deep interest, a consolidated and thriving church, generous and warmly attached to their father in Christ, under the superintendence, probably, of our historian, 'the beloved physician.' ... All that is said by our historian of this Macedonian visit is contained in the second verse of this chapter,—that he 'went over those parts and gave them much exhortation.'

Fourthly, Titus not having reached Philippi so soon as the apostle, 'his flesh had no rest, but he was troubled on every side: without were fightings, and within were fears' (2 Cor 7:5).

Fifthly, At length Titus arrived, to the joy of the apostle, the bearer of better tidings from Corinth than he had dared to expect (2 Cor 7:6,13), but chequered by painful intelligence of the efforts of a hostile party to undermine his apostolic reputation there (2 Cor 11, etc.)

Sixthly, Under the mixed feelings which this produced, he wrote (from Macedonia, and probably Philippi) his Second Epistle to the Corinthians ... dispatching Titus with it, and along with him two other unnamed deputies, expressly chosen to take up and bring their collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem, and to whom he bears the beautiful testimony, that they were 'the glory of Christ' (2 Cor 8:22-23).

⁴¹⁸ 1 Cor. 16:5

Seventhly, It must have been at this time that he penetrated as far as to the confines of 'Illyricum,' lying along the shores of the Adriatic (Rom 15:19). He would naturally wish that his second Letter to the Corinthians should have some time to produce its proper effect before he revisited them, and this would appear a convenient opportunity for a northwestern circuit, which would enable him to pay a passing visit to the churches at Thessalonica and Beroea though of this we have no record."

The place where he spent three month was probably the city of Corinth. Luke speaks of "Greece" which, in this context, is a rather unusual name given to the region. Whether the plot against his life was conceived in that city, or somewhere else, as the apostle set out to return to Syria, is not clear. The threat made him decide not to board ship but to travel over land back to Macedonia. At his point, Luke introduces himself again in the story in a typical inconspicuous way, simply by using the word "we." Most of the names mentioned in vs. 5 show up again in some of the apostle's epistles, sometimes with a slight change of name or spelling. Luke's record of the travel is too concise to determine if all of them accompanied Paul to Jerusalem or whether some left him in Asia.

The incident described in verses 5-12, evidently, took place at Troas. It was the Sunday evening before the group's departure for Asia and Jerusalem and Paul preached a long sermon stretching till midnight. Luke seems to suggest that Paul's long talk was rather unusual and was prompted by the fact that he was leaving the next day.

As far as we know, Eutychus is the only person in the Bible whose name is immortalized because he fell asleep during a sermon! Actually, his fame rests upon the fact that he fell to his death and was resurrected. There can be no doubt about it but Eutychus was dead when he hit the ground. Paul's comment: "Don't be alarmed, He's alive!" may be interpreted as: "Do not start a death wail! He lives!" Paul's throwing himself on the boy's body is reminiscent of Elijah's resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath⁴¹⁹ and Elisha's raising of the dead son of the Shunammite woman.⁴²⁰ Luke clearly mentions the incident to emphasize the miracle, not merely to say that Eutychus survived the fall.

Some scholars have made much of the fact that Luke mentions the many lamps in the room. These were, of course, oil lamps and they were not necessarily all lit at the same time. Some must have served as standbys and were only lit when others ran out of oil. We would expect that, when a sermon goes on for hours and hours, more than one person would fall asleep before midnight. This may have been the case, but the others were, evidently, not sitting in a windowsill.

It is not clear why Paul decided to make the trip from Troas to Assos overland instead of boarding the ship. The apostle was obviously in a hurry, wanting to arrive in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. But this cannot have been the reason for taking this shortcut, since he joined up with the rest of the company in Assos. The distance between the two places was approximately 20 Roman miles; the Roman mile is 142 yards less than our mile. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "In sailing southward from Troas to Assos, one has to round Cape Lectum, and keeping due east, to run along the northern shore of the Gulf of Adramyttium, on which it lies. This is a sail of nearly 40 miles; whereas by land, cutting right across in a southeasterly direction, from sea to sea, by that excellent Roman road which then existed, the distance was scarcely more than half."

The farewell with the elders of the church of Ephesus is one of the most moving sections in the Book of Acts. Paul presents the representatives of the church he established with a thorough apology (in the original sense of the word) of his doctrine and lifestyle. *Barnes' Notes* observes about Paul's address: "The discourse which follows is one of the most tender, affectionate, and eloquent which is anywhere to be found. It is strikingly descriptive of the apostle's manner of life while with them; evinces his deep concern for their welfare; is full of tender and kind admonition; expresses the firm purpose of his soul to live to the glory of God, and his expectation to be persecuted still; and is a most affectionate and solemn farewell. No man can read it without being convinced that it came from a heart full of love and kindness; and that it evinces a great and noble purpose to be entirely employed in one great aim and object-the promotion of the glory of God, in the face of danger and of death."

Everything Paul says to the elders of the Ephesian church leads up to his exhortation to them to "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." This is the heart of the apostle's charge to these men. He sets his own life as an example to be followed. To the Corinthians he would say the same: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."⁴²¹

Paul's mention of his humility reveals that his concept of humility differs from ours. We tend to think that any mention of our own humility is self-defeating. To say: "I am humble" is considered to be a demonstration of pride. The Greek word used is *tapeinophrosune*, which is a compound of two words *tapeinos* (depressed or

⁴¹⁹ I Kings 17:21,22

⁴²⁰ II Kings 4:34,35

⁴²¹ I Cor. 11:1

humiliated) and *phren* (the mind or cognitive faculties). Paul uses the same word in the Epistle to the Philippians in the verse: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in *humility* consider others better than yourselves,” followed by: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”⁴²² Humility presupposes an elevated position. Christ’s humility is evinced in the fact that He left His place of equality with God to enter this world “in the likeness of sinful man.”⁴²³ Humility is not self-depreciation; it presupposes an awareness of rank and dignity. Someone on the bottom floor of life cannot be humble; he is merely base.

The first prerequisite for leadership in the church is humility expressed in lifestyle. Jesus emphasized this repeatedly in His teaching of the disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁴²⁴

The next characteristic Paul emphasizes is “tears.” Spiritual leaders must be compassionate. In this also, Jesus sets the example. We read about Him: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”⁴²⁵ In the early days of the Salvation Army, one of their missionaries reported to General William Booth that his efforts to preach the Gospel met with severe opposition. Booth replied by sending a telegram, which read: “Try tears!” God wants us to be deeply emotionally involved in the work we do for Him.

This is followed by an absence of fear. Several times, the apostle had been the object of a plot to assassinate him. As far as we know, there were no specific plots against Paul’s life in Ephesus, although there may have been during the riot instigated by Demetrius; but Paul clearly speaks of Asia, not merely Ephesus. The tensions these threats must have created did not keep the apostle from preaching the Gospel. Whether “from house to house” means that Paul did door-to-door evangelism or whether this means that he had meetings in private homes as opposed to only public meetings is not clear.

The heart of Paul’s message is summed up in the words “repentance” and “faith.” The Greek words are *metanoia* (for repentance) and *pistis* (for faith). *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* states about “repentance”: “In the OT, ‘repentance’ with reference to sin is not so prominent as that change of mind or purpose, out of pity for those who have been affected by one’s action, or in whom the results of the action have not fulfilled expectations, a ‘repentance’ attributed both to God and to man, e. g., Gen 6:6; Ex 32:14 (that this does not imply anything contrary to God’s immutability, but that the aspect of His mind is changed toward an object that has itself changed...)

In the NT the subject chiefly has reference to ‘repentance’ from sin, and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. The parable of the Prodigal Son is an outstanding illustration of this. Christ began His ministry with a call to ‘repentance,’ Matt 4:17, but the call is addressed, not as in the OT to the nation, but to the individual. In the Gospel of John, as distinct from the Synoptic Gospels, referred to above, ‘repentance’ is not mentioned, even in connection with John the Baptist’s preaching; in John’s gospel and 1st epistle the effects are stressed, e. g., in the new birth, and, generally, in the active turning from sin to God by the exercise of faith John 3:3; 9:38; 1 John 1:9, as in the NT in general.”

About “faith” the same *Dictionary* observes: “The main elements in ‘faith’ in its relation to the invisible God, as distinct from ‘faith’ in man, are especially brought out in the use of this noun and the corresponding verb, *pisteuo*; they are (1) a firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth, e. g., 2 Thess 2:11-12; (2) a personal surrender to Him, John 1:12; (3) a conduct inspired by such surrender, 2 Cor 5:7. Prominence is given to one or other of these elements according to the context. All this stands in contrast to belief in its purely natural exercise, which consists of an opinion held in good ‘faith’ without necessary reference to its proof. The object of Abraham’s ‘faith’ was not God’s promise (that was the occasion of its exercise); his ‘faith’ rested on God Himself, Rom 4:17,20-21.”

Paul’s preaching about “faith in our Lord Jesus” refers to the atonement of our sins by His death and our justification and sanctification before God through His resurrection.

Having said this, the apostle shares his conviction that his visit to Jerusalem will probably end in his death. It sounds contradictory that he seems not to know what will happen to him, and at the same time, that he knows he will end up in prison with fatal results. We understand this to mean that Paul knew what the end would be but he did not know how it would happen.

⁴²² Phil. 2:3,5

⁴²³ See Rom. 8:3

⁴²⁴ Matt. 20:25-28

⁴²⁵ Matt. 9:36

The NIV reads Paul's words as being "compelled by the Spirit." This conveys the sense of the Holy Spirit urging Paul to go to Jerusalem. Most older translations read that Paul was "bound in the spirit," suggesting that the apostle's human spirit, not the Holy Spirit obliged him to go. Commentators are divided about the meaning of the words. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: "This does not mean (as Erasmus, Grotius, and Bengel interpret it), 'knowing by the prophetic spirit that I am to be bound, and so feeling myself already bound, as a prisoner of Jesus Christ'-with which the following words do not all accord. Nor yet are we to take 'the spirit' here to mean the Holy Spirit, as the Greek fathers and others generally understood it. The usual phraseology of the apostle leads us to take the expression in the simple sense of an 'internal pressure,' the result of that higher guidance which shaped all his movements, and which in the present case, while all-powerful in itself, left him in the dark as to what was to happen to him at Jerusalem, as expressed in the next clause." I see no reason not to read in these words the strong leading of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit led our Lord in a similar way, as we read: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil."⁴²⁶

The Holy Spirit's leading in Paul's life seems to have been a very complex matter. When the Lord commissioned Ananias to go and pray for Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus, He said: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."⁴²⁷ Those words were undoubtedly passed on to Paul. He knew what the general pattern of his service to Christ would be like. At various points, other well-meaning people tried to dissuade him from pursuing what the Spirit led him to do. But Paul knew better what was expected of him than others did. He understood that he had a debt to pay back for his persecution of Jesus in the time of his ignorance. The grace of God in Paul's life did not mean that the need for restitution had been cancelled. For some of us, there is a fee to be paid for cancelled sin.

The Spirit's warning was probably also meant to test Paul's willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Lord. If people who give their life for their country are considered to be heroes, how much more those who die in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ! When David realized: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints," he responded: "O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains."⁴²⁸ How merciful that God hides the future for us most of the time!

Paul considered his primary task not to preach, or even to interpret the Old Testament prophecies pertaining to the coming of Christ, but "of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." He did all of that, but only for the purpose of proving that an encounter with Jesus Christ means a transformation of a person's life, of which he was a prime example. To Timothy he would write: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."⁴²⁹ Our preaching will only be effective in as much as it is backed up by our life.

As was said above, all this leads up to Paul's charge to these elders of the church who are responsible as shepherds of the Lord's flock. Paul, first of all, declares himself to be innocent of their blood. These words are a reference to God's Word to Ezekiel. God had said to that prophet: "When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."⁴³⁰

No one is saved merely for his own benefit. Our salvation is never only a free ticket to heaven. If our salvation does not result in the salvation of others, or at least, if it does not give us a burden for the salvation of others, we may have believed in vain.⁴³¹

The NIV renders Paul's words: "For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." Most of the older versions translate the Greek word *boule*: "counsel." This cannot mean, of course, that the apostle knew

⁴²⁶ Matt. 4:1

⁴²⁷ Acts 9:15,16

⁴²⁸ Ps. 116:15,16

⁴²⁹ I Tim. 1:15,16

⁴³⁰ Ezek. 3:18-21; see also 33:2-9

⁴³¹ See I Cor. 15:2

the whole counsel of God as pertains to everything there is to be known. *Barnes' Notes* correctly observes: "It means here the will or purpose of God, as revealed in regard to the salvation of people."

From the viewpoint of textual criticism, vs. 28 is one of the most controversial verses in the whole book of Acts. The two points of contention are the words "overseers" and "church of God." "Overseers" is the translation of the Greek word *episkopos*, which the KJV renders "bishop" in all other places where it is found, except here.⁴³² The use of the word "bishop" has triggered endless debates about the function and authority of ecclesiastic offices, which we will not discuss here. The problem of the translation "church of God" is that not all known manuscripts have these words. Some read "church of the Lord." The difficulty with "church of God" is that it suggests that it was God, the Father, who bought the church with His own blood and since the Father is revealed in Scripture as Spirit, He has no blood. We are not in a position to choose between readings of Greek manuscripts, and such an analysis would fall well beyond the scope of our study. Since Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity, the words ought not to present any theological problem. Even if it were true that "God" in this verse could only be applied to the Father, and that Paul considered the blood of Jesus to be the Father's blood, the implication would lead us into the mysteries of the Trinity that are too deep for us to enter.

The importance of this passage for us is that Paul clearly states that shepherding the Lord's sheep must always begin with shepherding oneself. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" begins at home. We cannot lead others into a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ than we have ourselves. The word "watch" also suggests outward dangers against which one must find protection. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "Ministers are beset with unique dangers and temptations, and against them they should be on their guard. In addition to the temptations which they have in common with other people, they are exposed to those special to their office arising from flattery, and ambition, and despondency, and worldly-mindedness. And just in proportion to the importance of their office is the importance of the injunction of Paul, to take heed to themselves."

The command "Be shepherds" suggests a response to the challenge of the call of God. These words are actually not found in the Greek text which reads in the Interlinear Transliterated Bible: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which you Ghost the Holy hath made overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with blood his own." TLB paraphrases this: "And now beware! Be sure that you feed and shepherd God's flock-his church, purchased with his blood-for the Holy Spirit is holding you responsible as overseers." The thrust of Paul's charge is that a pastor should feed his congregation, which means that he should be faithful in teaching them the Word of God. *Barnes' Notes* adds the following insight-full comment: "To take heed to ALL the flock the rich and the poor, the bond and the free, the old and the young. It is the duty of ministers to seek to promote the welfare of each individual of their charge not to pass by the poor because they are poor, and not to be afraid of the rich because they are rich. A shepherd regards the interest of the tenderest of the fold as much as the strongest; and a faithful minister will seek to advance the interest of all. To do this he should know all his people; should be acquainted, as far as possible, with their unique needs, character, and dangers, and should devote himself to their welfare as his first and main employment."

In writing to Titus, Paul specifies the characteristics an elder of the church must demonstrate to qualify for his God-given task: "An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless-not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."⁴³³ And Peter adds to this: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'⁴³⁴

The mention of the bride price, "bought with His own blood," should inspire each pastor with a holy awe when considering the often motley crowd the Holy Spirit has entrusted to his care. It is of the utmost importance that a pastor realizes that God considers His church to be the "pearl of great value" for which "He sold everything" in

⁴³² See Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; I Peter 2:25 (all KJV)

⁴³³ Titus 1:6-9

⁴³⁴ I Peter 5:1-5

order to buy it.⁴³⁵ What the pastor sees with his own eyes is often far removed from the image John saw in Revelation of “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”⁴³⁶ It requires a lot of faith to be a good shepherd of God’s flock!

Paul’s vision of the future of the church in Ephesus was not optimistic. It is bitter irony that the church in which the apostle spent the most time to establish would, more than any other, become the prey of the enemy and be destroyed from the inside out. It was to this church that the glorified Lord would, only a few decades later, have the apostle John write: “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”⁴³⁷

Paul may have received supernatural insight that prompted him to sound this warning. He must have been familiar with Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”⁴³⁸ He may have recognized some of the telltale symptoms in the lives of those he addressed, knowing the fruit their lives would bear or not bear. Trying to remedy some of the dangers, he wrote to Timothy: “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God’s work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.”⁴³⁹ Some of the people he embraced were wolves in sheep’s clothing. In this also the apostle would experience some of the agony his Lord felt when during the intimacy of the Last Supper He announced Judas’ betrayal. John writes: “After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.’”⁴⁴⁰

Against the background of this apostolic warning, the following words acquire a deeper meaning: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Even wolves in sheep’s clothing can become part of the flock and become sanctified members of the Lord’s body. Paul was himself the prime example of what God’s grace could do to transform a life.

Paul’s parting words: “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing” are reminiscent of Samuel’s farewell speech to the people of Israel. The apostle may have intentionally phrased his words as a quotation. The last of Israel’s judges is recorded as having said: “ ‘Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right.’ ‘You have not cheated or oppressed us,’ they replied. ‘You have not taken anything from anyone’s hand.’ Samuel said to them, ‘The LORD is witness against you, and also his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.’ ‘He is witness,’ they said.”⁴⁴¹ Paul’s manual labor while sojourning in Ephesus did not only provide for his own support but also, at least in part, for the support of the church he had planted. Such a policy would be unheard of in modern times; as a matter of fact, it would be contrary to all church planting strategy. In our day, a church is considered healthy when it is self-supporting. And although a bi-vocational pastor is no unusual phenomenon, a church-supporting pastor certainly is. Paul’s lifestyle proves that the difference between a shepherd and a savage wolf can be easily determined when one considers a church’s budget.

But the apostle’s words go well beyond the matter of financial support; they give evidence of a loving pastoral heart. This is expressed in the quotation of the Lord Jesus’ unwritten statement: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Most commentators agree that these words are not found in any of the Gospels. They may, however, be a paraphrase of: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a

⁴³⁵ See Matt. 13:45,46

⁴³⁶ Rev. 21:2

⁴³⁷ Rev. 2:4,5

⁴³⁸ Matt. 7:15-20

⁴³⁹ I Tim. 1:3-7

⁴⁴⁰ John 13:21

⁴⁴¹ I Sam. 12:3-5

ransom for many.”⁴⁴² After all, giving of material things is only meaningful if it is motivated by love. In his Epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle wrote: “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”⁴⁴³ What Paul says here, therefore, means that it is more important to give love than to receive it.

The parting scene is one of the most moving moments in the whole Book of Acts. The whole group kneels down in the sand and while they pray, the tears flow freely. The apostle’s tears were probably the first to fall. Separation from loved ones is one of the most difficult experiences in life. As a missionary, who had to leave his children behind, I can testify to this. As a French proverb states: “Leaving is a kind of dying.”

The Pulpit Commentary observes beautifully: “It is impossible to part with this most touching narrative, of such exquisite simplicity and beauty, without a parting word of admiration and thankfulness to God for having preserved to his Church this record of apostolic wisdom and faithfulness on the one hand, and of loving devotion of the clergy to their great chief on the other. As long as the stones of the Church are bound together by such strong mortar, it can defy the attacks of its enemies from without.” The same *Commentary* quotes Chrysostom who observed about the opening words of chapter 21: “He shows the violence of the parting by saying, ‘Having torn ourselves away.’”

From this prayer meeting on the beach at Miletus, Luke takes us to another prayer on a beach in Tyre, giving meticulously details of the ship’s journey. Luke’s description of the voyage is laced with nautical terms, indicating his familiarity with sailing. Their first ship took them along the coast from Miletus to Patara, where they transferred to another vessel, which made a beeline to Tyre. At Tyre the ship’s cargo had to be unloaded, which took one week, giving the apostle and his company ample time to visit with disciples, who urged Paul not to continue to Jerusalem because of the dangers the Holy Spirit revealed that would await the apostle.

As we noted earlier, this strange tension between the Spirit’s personal guidance to Paul and what the same Spirit revealed to fellow believers, seems hard to reconcile. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states the problem most clearly: “The prophetic gift in this case (says Chrysostom) was the gift of knowledge, not the gift of wisdom; for while the knowledge of sad things to befall the apostle at Jerusalem was of the Spirit, the entreaty not to go there was of themselves.” The Holy Spirit revealed to these disciples knowledge of the dangers to which Paul would be exposed, to test their compassion and generate prayer, and also to test the apostle’s determination and willingness to obey unconditionally. Although one should never take godly counsel lightly, spiritual guidance is ultimately a very personal matter. Sometimes, mere human compassion can be manipulated by Satan, as in the case of Peter’s attempt to dissuade his Lord from going to the cross. Matthew records this dramatic confrontation: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”⁴⁴⁴ There can be no doubt, however, but the disciples’ concern about Paul’s safety was not demonically inspired.

No details are given of the one-day visit with the disciples at Ptolemais; Luke takes us straight to Caesarea. Some commentators believe that the 30-mile journey from Ptolemais to Caesarea was made over land. There the group stays with Philip, the deacon who had been part of the early church in Jerusalem and whose role in bringing the Gospel to Samaria and in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch is described in earlier chapters. Luke calls him “Philip, the evangelist” to distinguish him from the apostle by the same name. The author of *Barnes’ Notes*, however, believes that the title evangelist is not only used to differentiate between the two Philipases. We read: “This word properly means one who announces good news. In the New Testament it is applied to a preacher of the gospel, or one who declares the glad tidings of salvation. It occurs only in two other places, Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5. What was the precise rank of those who bore this title in the early Christian church cannot perhaps be determined. It is evident, however, that it is used to denote the office of preaching the gospel; and as this title is applied to Philip, and not to any other of the seven deacons, it would seem probable that he had been entrusted with a special commission to preach, and that preaching did not pertain to him as a deacon, and does not properly belong to that office. The business of a deacon was to take care of the poor members of the church, Acts 6:1-6. The office of preaching was distinct from this, though, as in this case, it might be conferred on the same individual.”

⁴⁴² Matt. 20:28

⁴⁴³ I Cor. 13:3

⁴⁴⁴ Matt. 16:21-23

The mention of Philip's four virgin daughters who had the gift of prophecy has given rise to many questions among theologians and, according to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the early church fathers furnish confusing and, sometimes, contradictory information about the sisters.

The fact that the Holy Spirit has given the gift of prophecy to women cannot be denied. Paul clearly speaks of the legitimacy of women prophesying under certain conditions.⁴⁴⁵ Whether this contradicts the injunction in his Corinthian Epistle is certainly open for debate. We read: "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."⁴⁴⁶ Paul's point seems to be more that women should be careful not to cause public embarrassment to their husbands than to prevent them from praying and speaking edifying words during a church service. We should be careful not to impose values and customs that were relevant in one place and in one century upon other times and conditions without contextualizing the issue. If, for instance, it would be improper for a man to pray with a covered head in the church of Corinth,⁴⁴⁷ this would certainly not be the case in Jerusalem, where no male believer would think of praying in public without a hat.

Although Luke does not mention this specifically, there is a suggestion that Philip's daughters may have given a prophecy about Paul's upcoming imprisonment in Jerusalem, which would give relevance to the mention of the gift the Holy Spirit had given them. Agabus' prophecy is then a continuation of the warnings given to Paul and his fellow believers about the dark days that would ahead.

Paul and Agabus knew each other from the church in Antioch where Agabus had pronounced a prophecy about the coming famine.⁴⁴⁸ In the dramatization of his prophecy, Agabus followed the tradition of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel who had been commanded by the Lord to give their prophecies as object lessons. The reaction of both the bystanders and Paul to Agabus' prophecy indicates how deep their mutual love was. They plead with Paul not to go to Jerusalem and Paul remonstrates that their response breaks his heart, but it does not change his resolve and the company concludes that it may, indeed, be the Lord's will that the apostle would go through the trials that were predicted.

One wonders why in this case, the future was not kept hidden from Paul and his friends as it usually is for most of us. The general guideline Jesus gives us is: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."⁴⁴⁹ The warnings were, obviously, not given for the purpose of generating worry, but to strengthen determination. Paul's attitude, evinced in the words: "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" is fundamentally different from Peter's statement: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."⁴⁵⁰ Not only did Paul understand what was ahead of him and Peter didn't, but Peter's utterance was based on carnal self-confidence, whilst Paul's confidence was in the grace of God that would allow him to testify to the truth of the Gospel before kings and governors.

In Jerusalem, the group takes its abode in the home of a certain Mnason, who was originally from Cyprus. That seems to be the most logical meaning of the Greek text, which is open to various interpretations. The believers receive Paul with love and respect. The next he met with the leadership of the mother church, of which James was evidently the first among equals.

V. Extension of the church to Rome **21:18-28:31**

A. Rejection of the Gospel by Jerusalem **21:18-26:32**

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary introduces this last section of the Book of Acts: "Luke has related the extension of the church from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria until a semi-independent Gentile church was established in Antioch. From Antioch the Gospel was carried by Paul on three missions through Asia and Europe. Evangelistic and missionary work was undoubtedly being carried on during this time by other apostles. We have, for instance, no account of the evangelization of Egypt, with its great center, Alexandria. Luke is concerned only to trace the main outlines of what he considers to be the most significant line of expansion-toward Rome. There remains only the need to record Paul's mission of taking the Gospel to Rome. It is evident that it was not Luke's purpose to record the initial evangelization of Rome nor the beginnings of the church there, for he tells how

⁴⁴⁵ See I Cor. 11:5

⁴⁴⁶ I Cor. 11:5

⁴⁴⁷ 1 Cor 11:4,7

⁴⁴⁸ See ch. 11:28

⁴⁴⁹ Matt. 6:34

⁴⁵⁰ Matt. 26:35

Christian brethren welcomed Paul upon his arrival at the capital (Acts 28:15). We know that Paul had written a letter to the church at Rome (Rom 1:7), but Luke gives us no record of how the Gospel originally came to the Imperial City. Since Luke's purpose was not to describe the initial evangelizing of Rome, it possibly was to show that although Paul first preached the kingdom of God to the Jews, he turned to the Gentiles when the Jews rejected his message (Acts 28:24-31). The geographical extension of the church was not Luke's main interest; it was rather the movement of redemptive history from the Jews to the Gentiles. In keeping with this purpose, Luke devotes considerable space to the record of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, not because the visit was important in itself, but because it showed the final rejection of the Gospel by Jerusalem."

Bible scholars disagree about the identity of the James mentioned in this verse. He was obviously not the apostle who was beheaded in chapter twelve of this book. Some think that he was the same person who presided over the synod that gathered to discuss the matter of circumcision of the gentiles in chapter fifteen; others believe he was not. There is also no agreement on the question whether he was the one Paul calls "James, the Lord's brother,"⁴⁵¹ or whether this means that he was Jesus' cousin or half brother. The matter is not of great importance to our study.

The leadership of the Jerusalem church assured Paul of their full support of his ministry as well as of the apostle's stand on the principle of circumcision of the gentile believers. We can hardly overstate the importance of the problems that could so easily have divided the church. The matter as to whether gentiles must become Jews in order to be saved had earlier been settled by the synod. But the question as to whether Jews should become gentiles was far from being solved. The early church clearly understood that the Gospel could and would, eventually, mean the end of Judaism. The matter is still a very relevant question to Messianic Jews in our day. The concern of the early church was that, although they agreed with Paul's stand on the issues, they were afraid the general public would misunderstand Paul's policies. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: "Paul's position of letting expediency determine principle in certain areas is so delicate a matter that many have not understood him and have accused him unnecessarily of radical inconsistency."

The issue presented to Paul was much more complicated than appears on the surface. It is one thing for Jews who believe in Jesus as their Messiah to continue celebrating the Old Testament feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Tabernacles, and others, it is quite another matter to continue bringing animal sacrifices for the atonement of one's sins. It is true that Paul was asked to participate in the rite that accompanied the making of a Nazarite vow, not to bring any sacrifice as a sin offering or guilt offering, but the question is where one can draw the line. From the Epistle to the Hebrews we get the impression that only a few years later, the Messianic Jews had abandoned the observance of the ritual law, or at least part of it, for which they were severely persecuted. We have read earlier that Paul had personally taken a vow and cut off his hair,⁴⁵² so we may assume that the apostle could hardly consider opposing the suggestion for the sake of the testimony of the church.

Evidently, Paul was asked to play the role of the wealthy benefactor. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "As regards the transaction recommended by James, Kypke (quoted by Meyer) says, 'It was a received thing among the Jews, and was reckoned an act of eminent piety, for a rich man to undertake to bear, on behalf of poor Nazarites, the expense of those sacrifices which they had to offer when they shaved their heads at the expiration of their vow.' Josephus seems to allude to the custom, and to speak of King Agrippa as acting in accordance with it, when he says of him that he ordered great numbers of Nazarites to be shaved ... The sacrifices were costly, consisting of three beasts, one for a burnt offering, another for a sin offering, and a third for a peace offering."

One wonders how much James and the elders of the Jerusalem church leaned on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their advice to Paul. Paul had probably informed them about the prophecies that had foretold his imprisonment in Jerusalem. We may, therefore, see in the advice given an effort to forestall or avoid what God had predetermined. There was, in principle, little difference between the previously uttered prophecies and this given counsel. Why Paul ignored the prophecies and accepted the counsel is not clear. He may have felt that what he was asked to do was James' responsibility. He must also have been unwilling to interfere in the policies of the mother church. From the fact that James' ploy did not work, we conclude that it had not been divinely inspired.

Paul's presence in Jerusalem was, obviously, a known fact. The Asian Jews were probably people from Ephesus who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost since they recognized Trophimus who was from that city. Their assumption that Paul had defiled the temple by bringing a gentile in the section that was reserved for Jews only was completely unfounded. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* explains: "The temple area included a vast court of the Gentiles in which non-Jews were free to come and go. Between this outer court and the court of Israel was a low parapet with inscriptions warning Gentiles not to venture into the court of Israel on pain of death. Two of these

⁴⁵¹ Gal. 1:19

⁴⁵² Ch. 18:18

inscriptions have been found.” It was not difficult for the Jews from Ephesus to incite a riot; it had worked in Ephesus and the atmosphere in Jerusalem was even more combustible.

As soon as Paul was dragged out of the temple square, the gates to the sanctuary were closed so that no blood would be spilled inside. The crowd, being whipped into a frenzy, proceeded to beat Paul with the intent to kill him. They would, undoubtedly, have succeeded if the Roman military had not intervened. We learn later that the name of the commander was Claudius Lysias, who was not a born Roman. Paul must have understood this, and addressing him in Greek, instead of in Latin, he immediately caught his attention.

We can hardly blame the officer for not understanding the cause of the riot. As in most riots, the rioters themselves didn’t know what they were rioting about. The officer’s reference to an Egyptian who organized an insurrection is well documented by Josephus. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “The history to which Claudius Lysias refers is taken from Josephus, ... and is in substance as follows: An Egyptian, whose name is not known, pretended to be a prophet, and told his followers that the walls of Jerusalem would fall down before them, if they would assist him in making an attack on the city. He had address enough to raise a rabble of 30,000 men, and with these advanced as far as the Mount of Olives; but Felix, the Roman governor, came suddenly upon him, with a large body of Roman troops, both infantry and cavalry: the mob was speedily dispersed, four hundred killed, two hundred taken prisoners, and the Egyptian himself, with some of his most faithful friends, escaped; of whom no account was ever afterwards heard.”

The diplomatic way in which Paul addressed the Roman officer must have given the man the impression Paul might be able to quiet the unruly mob, which initially he did. Paul gives evidence of a fearless character. Anyone who just went through the experience of being beaten within an inch of his life is naturally shaken up. The fact that Paul was composed and capable of addressing a hostile crowd coherently must have made a heroic impression. We can imagine the scene: a man whose letters, according to the testimony of others, “are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing,”⁴⁵³ covered with blood, in torn clothes, facing a murderous mob. It was enough to command complete silence. This mass of shouting, bloodthirsty murderers understood that they were outnumbered by one man. After the first word spoken in Aramaic you could hear a pin drop.

Paul’s use of Aramaic, probably spoken without a foreign accent, identified him as one of the crowd. The reference to Gamaliel also served the purpose of taking away the impression that this man was a foreigner who had no right to be in the temple area. In mentioning all the factors he had in common with the people who accused him and wanted to kill him, Paul managed to sway the attention of the crowd, at least temporarily, in his favor. Paul even identified himself with their rage, stating that he also understood their hatred because he himself had hated and killed. Some of those present may have remembered the zealous and fanatical young Pharisee of earlier decades.

In giving the details of his conversion in his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul presented the Gospel to the people who wanted to kill him. The story of his experience of the forgiveness of his sins could have led some of those present to reach for this hope themselves. It is interesting to observe that Paul calls Ananias of Damascus “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there,” thus giving greater legitimacy to his conversion and healing. The words: “the God of our fathers” tie the Gospel message to the Old Testament and the rich heritage of Judaism.

There is no other record in the Book of Acts of Paul’s vision in the temple. This must have occurred on his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion and prior to his being commissioned for his missionary journey, together with Barnabas, by the church of Antioch. Some scholars believe that this is the vision Paul refers to in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, where we read: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows. And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”⁴⁵⁴ Paul’s report here, however, can hardly be called: “inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”

This unique report of an intimate conversation between Paul in trance and the glorified Jesus is the more interesting in that Paul argues here with the Lord instead of obeying without question as he had done on the road to Damascus. The implication is twofold: 1) the logical reaction of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to his conversion ought to be that the radical character of his conversion would convince them and 2) that the supernatural nature of the command given to Paul would make any human contradiction impossible. In other words, Paul told them: “I was naïf enough to think that you would be convinced by the evidence.” They were not!

⁴⁵³ II Cor. 10:10

⁴⁵⁴ II Cor. 12:2-4

Israel had never come to terms with the fact that lay at the basis of God's revelation of Himself to them: "you will be for me a kingdom of priests."⁴⁵⁵ They never saw themselves as God's bridge to the rest of the world. They believed that God's revelation made them exclusive. Paul's reminder to them of God's original call infuriated them to the point where they were willing to kill in order to protect their "exclusive rights."

To the Roman military, the whole scene was incomprehensible. Yet, the commander had to make a report to his superiors in which the reasons for his intervention were stated; so he ordered Paul to be flogged in order to obtain a confession from him. *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament* comments: "Lysias was as much in the dark as ever, for Paul's speech had been in Aramaic and this second explosion was a mystery to him like the first."

Paul's rhetorical question: "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" caused a good deal of embarrassment for the commander. He understood immediately that he could imperil his own status by proceeding with the interrogation the way he intended to. Later in his letter to the governor, he would take turn the information Paul gave him to his own favor, as if his astute handling of the case had avoided grave mistakes.

There was no reason for Paul to submit passively to the torture that was about to be given to him, as he had done in Philippi when he accepted his beating because of Silas.⁴⁵⁶ In this Paul was as much an opportunist, who knew how to use the law to his own advantage, as he had been a faithful fellow sufferer for the love of Christ.

The scene reveals to us some of the problems the Romans had to face in their efforts to rule the Jewish nation. *The Pulpit Commentary*, in its Homiletics section, states: "A Jewish riot had something terrific in it, something dreaded even by the iron-minded Romans. The features all contorted with passion, the large eyes starting out of their sockets, the savage grinding of the teeth, the fierce cries, the wild throwing of handfuls of dust into the air, the tossing and waving of their garments with an unbridled violence, gave a demoniac aspect to such rioters." Even the issues that caused such riots were incomprehensible to them. An objective look at Judaism must, unavoidably, bring one to the conclusion that the relationship between the mind of a Jewish believer and his heart is a living paradox. There is in God's revelation of Himself in the Old Testament no basis for the violence and hatred as evinced against Paul in these verses. The Jewish anger was, ultimately, an anger against themselves, or rather, against God.

Claudius Lysias conceives then the ingenious idea that a confrontation of Paul and the Sanhedrin might provide him with the facts of which Paul was being accused. When this also proves to be unproductive, the poor commander had no choice but to refer his prisoner to the governor.

Paul's appearance before the Sanhedrin is sketched in only a few rough lines. Luke was, obviously, not an eyewitness of this event as he had been at the preceding incident. What we read is, probably, Paul's own condensed version.

Having been a member of the Sanhedrin himself, Paul faced the court as an equal, which must be the reason why he addresses them as "my brothers." Several decades earlier this same council had given him authority to go to Damascus to root out Christianity in that city. Now, being the first time he returned to stand before them, Paul reports to them, more or less in the same way as he had reported to the church of Antioch after his first missionary journey. Against this background we must understand the words: "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." Paul's appeal to his conscience infuriated his judges. In their eyes, Paul had betrayed the cause. He had done none of the things he set out to accomplish when he left for Damascus.

We may assume that Paul said more than the few words recorded for us. He must have explained his change of attitude after receiving the heavenly vision of Jesus, stating that it would have been impossible for him to continue his mission of destruction and also maintain his integrity. The Greek word rendered "I have fulfilled my duty" is *politeuomai*, meaning: "to behave as a citizen." *Vincent's Word Studies* states: "'[I] have lived a citizen,' with special reference to the charge against him that he taught men against the law and the temple. He means that he has lived as a true and loyal Jew." His words explain both the sincerity of his previous fanaticism and his present convictions. The high priest's order to strike him on the mouth conveyed the rejection of Paul's defense by the council.

Paul's reaction indicates a loss of composure for which he had to apologize afterwards. There was no written law which forbade the high priest's command to strike Paul. Paul, however, interpreted the answer to his defense as an indication that he could not expect a fair trial and that he was condemned before he was tried. He was certainly not treated as innocent until proven guilty.

⁴⁵⁵ Ex. 19:6

⁴⁵⁶ See Acts 16:22,23

The Pulpit Commentary, using the information from Josephus, states about the high priest Ananias, that he was: “the son of Nebedaeus, successor of Joseph the son of Camel, or Camydus [who] appears to have been actually high priest at this time. He was a violent, haughty, gluttonous, and rapacious man, and yet looked up to by the Jews. ... He had probably lately returned from Rome, having been confirmed, as it seems, in his office by Claudius, to whom Quadratus, the predecessor of Felix, has sent him as a prisoner, to answer certain charges of sedition against him. He seems to have been high priest for the unusually long period of over ten years — from A.D. 48 to A.D. 59.”

Paul’s reply: “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest” has been the subject of much controversy among scholars. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “All sorts of explanations of this have been given. The high priesthood was in a state of great confusion and constant change at this time (as appears from Josephus), and the apostle’s long absence from Jerusalem, and perhaps the manner in which he was habited, or the seat he occupied, with other circumstances to us unknown may account for such a speech. But if he was thrown off his guard by an insult which touched him to the quick, ‘what (says Hackett) can surpass the grace with which he recovered his self-possession, and the frankness with which he acknowledged his error? If his conduct in yielding to the momentary impulse was not that of Christ himself under a similar provocation (John 18:22-23), certainly the manner in which he atoned for his fault was Christ-like.’ ” Paul’s apology refers to a verse in Exodus, which reads: “Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.”⁴⁵⁷

Whether because of Paul’s ejaculation or not, the curse did have its effect. *The Pulpit Commentary*, again drawing from Josephus, notes that: “Ananias perished by the daggers of the Sicarii ... at the beginning of the Jewish war under the procuratorship of Florus, in the year A.D. 66. He had been previously deposed from the high priesthood by King Agrippa toward the close of the government of Felix ... about A.D. 59, or early in A.D. 60, less than two years from the present time.”

Paul must have come to the conclusion that a fair trial was impossible to obtain. The apparent unity of the Sanhedrin was a unity of hatred, not one of principle. Earlier, opposing groups in Jewish society had found the same common ground to plot the death of the Messiah. After one of Jesus’ miracles of healing on the Sabbath, Mark records: “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”⁴⁵⁸ The statement: “I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead” was at the same time a sincere confession of faith, which appealed to the belief of the Pharisees, and a bait to the council of judges who behaved more like a pack of hungry wolves than supreme court judges in search of justice. Paul’s action was a shrewd and well-calculated risk, which immediately brought to light the real character of the judges. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “Whatever may be thought of the propriety of this course, it cannot be denied that it was a masterstroke of policy, and that it evinced a profound knowledge of human nature.” *The Pulpit Commentary*, in its Homiletics section, makes the beautiful observation that “the safety of the righteous lies in the disunion of sinners.”

This is the only place in Scripture where we learn that Paul’s father had also been a Pharisee. Some scholars interpret this to mean that Paul had been a disciple of the Pharisees. It is true that the apostle set no specific value to the fact that he belonged to the party of the Pharisees. In his Epistle to the Philippians, he even stated: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”⁴⁵⁹ According to his words here, however, he still considered himself to be a Pharisee as far as his conviction about the resurrection of the dead is concerned. Paul called this doctrinal statement “the hope of Israel.”⁴⁶⁰

Paul does not specifically refer here to the resurrection of Christ, but the members of the Sanhedrin cannot have missed that point. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he explains: “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁷ Ex. 22:28

⁴⁵⁸ Mark 3:6

⁴⁵⁹ Phil. 3:7-9

⁴⁶⁰ Ch. 28:20

⁴⁶¹ I Cor. 15:12-17

As far as the Sadducees were concerned, Paul's proclamation was offensive in that it opposed their fundamental belief that there was no resurrection. To the Pharisees Paul proclaimed that a denial of Christ's resurrection would endanger their convictions about the resurrection of all human beings. Immediately after Pentecost, Peter and John were imprisoned because: "the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead."⁴⁶² For both parties, acknowledgment of Jesus' resurrection would mean a conviction of their guilt. As in the case of the other apostles, the roles were reversed in that the accused became the accuser and the judges the accused.

It is worthy of note that the apostles considered the doctrine of the resurrection to be the core of the Gospel message, something which is seldom emphasized in modern preaching. If death is the end of man's existence, life is in fact meaningless and human dignity an illusion. The hope of the resurrection is the hope of glory. Jesus Christ is our pioneer as well as our Savior. Faith in Christ gives meaning to life.

The reaction to Paul's ejaculation would have been comical if it had not been so tragic. The two parties not only began to tear into each other like fighting dogs, they also tore into the man who stood accused before them. The Roman commander found it necessary to interfere. Luke states: "The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them." If Claudius Lysias had ever felt any inclination to consider Judaism, he was probably cured from that moment on.

We may read in vs. 11 that Paul was depressed by the experiences of the riot and the trial. Physical exhaustion may have played a role in that also. Physical abuse takes an emotional toll. Luke states: "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" The wording suggests that what Paul experienced was more than merely having a dream or a vision. His spirit entered into the presence of the Lord Jesus of whom he had testified, or rather, the risen Lord lifted the veil of what we call reality and showed him the sweetness of His presence. Part of the great commission Jesus gave to His disciples is: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁴⁶³ In a way, Jesus' revelation of Himself to Paul in the prison cell in the castle of Antonia was similar to His appearance on the road to Damascus. There Jesus had identified Himself with the victims of Paul's persecution; here He identified Himself with Paul. In the assurance of His presence and the sweet encouragement of the words: "Take courage!" the risen Lord lifted His beloved apostle out of his despondency into His glorious presence. Jesus did not send an angel to Paul to give him his new marching orders; He came Himself to convey the message. How many prison cells in this world have been lit up by similar experiences!

The words "Take courage!" are the translation of one single Greek word: *tharseo*, "to have courage." The KJV renders it: "be of good cheer." The same word is used in the verse: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world,"⁴⁶⁴ and in several instances where Jesus performs a healing. To the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, for instance, Jesus said: "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you."⁴⁶⁵ Paul would need the assurance of his Lord's approval and commission in the years to come. He had earlier expressed the hope of being able to go to Rome. In writing to the Romans, he said: "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you."⁴⁶⁶ It would, however, take several years of imprisonment and an almost fatal shipwreck before the apostle set foot in Rome. Christ's words: "Take courage" must have been a constant encouragement for him, a light in the darkness of his circumstances.

Luke's description of the plot against Paul's life is one of the most detailed sections in the whole Book of Acts. The oath taken by the forty men who planned to assassinate Paul shows the fanaticisms of Paul's enemies. They invoked a curse upon themselves if they failed. The Greek word used is *anathematizo*, which is the same word Paul uses in his Epistle to the Galatians: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"⁴⁶⁷ The word anathematize has found its way into the English language. Peter used the same word, invoking a curse upon himself when he denied Christ. We read in Mark's Gospel: "He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, 'I don't know this man you're talking about.'"⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶² Ch. 4:2

⁴⁶³ Matt. 28:20

⁴⁶⁴ John 16:33

⁴⁶⁵ Matt. 9:22

⁴⁶⁶ Rom. 1:9,10

⁴⁶⁷ Gal. 1:8

⁴⁶⁸ Mark 14:71

I used to think that those forty men must have starved themselves to death when their plot failed, but *The Pulpit Commentary* explains that the Jews had a way of escape from this kind of predicament: “Lightfoot, on this passage, quotes from the Talmud: ‘He that hath made a vow not to eat anything, woe to him if he eat, and woe to him if he do not eat. If he eat he sinneth against his vow; if he do not eat he sinneth against his life. What must such a man do in this case? Let him go to the wise men, and they will loose his vow’ ” In this matter the Jews were not morally better than the present day Islamic suicide bombers who blow themselves to pieces to kill other people; they were merely slyer.

This passage shows how deeply the hatred against Paul and the Gospel he represented was rooted. It was the same hatred that accounts for Jesus’ crucifixion. Our Lord’s verdict about them was: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.”⁴⁶⁹ The opposition against the Gospel is, ultimately, demonic.

What can we say about a religious body that claims to be the highest authority in spiritual matters that consents to murder? It is the equivalent of the Pope entering into a league with the Mafia. In lending themselves to this corruption of justice, the leaders of the people forfeited whatever status they may have had in God’s dispensation. These judges must have been familiar with the indictment in Asaph’s Psalm: “God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the ‘gods’: ‘How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. I said, ‘You are ‘gods’; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler.”⁴⁷⁰

Luke does not give us any details about Paul’s family or explain how his nephew learned of the plot. In all probability, Paul’s father had moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem with the whole family. It does not appear that his family had ostracized Paul when he converted to Christianity, otherwise the nephew would not have informed Paul about the plot against his life. The way the commander treats Paul’s nephew, taking him by the hand, would make us believe that he was merely a child. The Greek word translated “young man” is *neanias*, which may denote a youth of any age up to about forty. The same word is used of Paul at whose feet the killers deposited their cloaks when they stoned Stephen and of Eutychus who fell out of the window when Paul preached at Troas.⁴⁷¹ It seems more likely, however, that a child could overhear the plotting of a murder than an adult. Grown-ups tend to underestimate children and their comprehension of adult secrets.

The commander took the report seriously enough to decide to ship Paul out under heavy guard to Caesarea the same evening. A sentry of 470 soldiers protected Paul as he left Jerusalem, never to return. The foot soldiers went along as far as Antipatris and the remaining cavalry took him to the governor’s residence. The Greek word translated “spearmen” is *dexiolabous*. This word has puzzled scholars over the centuries since it is nowhere else found in the New Testament or in Greek literature. It contains a reference to the right hand and the throwing of an object. So Paul left Jerusalem under the double protection of Jesus’ promise that he was to give his testimony in Rome and the Roman military safeguard.

Claudius Lysias’ letter to Felix is an interesting sample of Roman diplomacy. We are not told how Luke knew the text; Felix may have read it to Paul upon his arrival. It seems unlikely that the commander of the Jerusalem garrison let Paul read it, since he had taken some liberty with the truth in stating that he had rescued Paul from the Jewish mob because he knew him to be a Roman citizen. Paul may have chuckled when he heard the content of the letter.

We can hardly blame the Romans for not understanding the issues that divided the Jewish community to the point that they were willing to kill each other for it. They must have concluded that the Hebrew “Shalom” was different from the “Pax Romana.” The most logical part of Claudius Lysias’ measure was that he sent Paul’s accusers to the governor’s palace to state their case there.

Felix’ question as to the place of Paul’s origin was appropriate since a Roman prisoner had the right to stand trial in his own province. Evidently, Cilicia fell under the governor’s jurisdiction. Felix’s record of government in history has not gone down favorably. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Our historical sources refer to him as an evil man. Tacitus says that ‘with all manner of cruelty and lust he exercised the functions of a prince with the mind of a slave’ ... His period of office in Palestine was characterized by a growing spirit of insurrection, and he governed with a ruthless and heavy hand.”

⁴⁶⁹ John 8:44

⁴⁷⁰ Ps. 82:1-7

⁴⁷¹ See ch. 7:58; 20:9

Apparently, Paul was not present when the case against him came to court and the governor was informed of the charges against him. We read that he was called from prison when the formal accusations were presented. The Sanhedrin had engaged a certain Tertullus as their prosecutor. He was probably a Roman who was versed in Roman law and could present the case in Latin before the governor. He may have been a convert to Judaism, since he refers to the Mosaic Law as “our law.” However, the words “and wanted to judge him according to our law,” which we find in some translations, do not appear in the best manuscripts.

Luke states that the Jewish delegation arrived after five days, and Paul refers to his arrival in Jerusalem twelve days before. Since Paul spent almost a whole week in the rite of purification, the members of the Sanhedrin did not lose much time in appearing in Caesarea.

After a flowery and flattering introduction, Tertullus comes to the point, accusing Paul of inciting riots in several places. According to Luke’s accounts, however, the Jews who apposed Paul’s preaching of the Gospel had incited all the riots. Tertullus calls Paul *loimos*, which literally means: “a pest.” We may suppose that the layer furnished Felix with more details than Luke presents to us here.

Paul is also called: “a ringleader of the Nazarene sect.” This was, obviously, a derogatory designation of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It is difficult to trace the meaning of the word Nazarene. There may have been a play on words in Hebrew. According to Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus settled in Nazareth, we read: “And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”⁴⁷² Isaiah uses the Hebrew word *netser* in the verse: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” *Netser* is related to *naziyr*, “separate,” denoted a Nazarite.

The charge of desecrating the temple was the only one that would stick in court provided it could be proven. Since only Paul, and no accompanying foreigner, was seized in the precincts of the temple, the accusation was invalid. But the Jews had the right to execute people who trespassed in the temple area, however not without due process. And murder on the spot, which was what they Jews endeavored with Paul, was illegal, to say the least. Had Claudius Lysias not intervened, Paul would have been killed by the mob. The brief sentence: “The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true” is probably a condensation of several testimonies given by the high priest Ananias and others.

In his way of conducting the procedure, the governor gives an impression of arrogance and of an inflated sense of his superiority. Paul is given permission to speak by a simple nod of his Excellency’s head. The apostle does not lose time in flattering introductions, although his opening statement gives the governor credit for his ability to investigate the case. Although Paul denies the truth of the charges against him, he is obviously not concerned about his personal defense. His focus is on the presentation of the truth of the Gospel before a man who is lost in sin and who is in dire need of salvation for his soul. Under the guise of a defense, Paul emphasizes before the governor that he himself will one day have to stand before the judgment seat of God to give an account of his life. In saying: “I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man,” Paul appeals indirectly to the governor’s conscience, forcing him to take a closer look at his own life.

At the same time, the apostle reminds those who have come from Jerusalem to accuse him, that they have a common ground of belief with him in the resurrection of the dead. The inference is that Christianity is the logical conclusion of Judaism. Although we do not read this, the repetition of Paul’s proclamation before the Sanhedrin: “It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today” may have caused the same sense of disunity among those present in Felix’ court as it had in the courtroom of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

Verse 22 makes the intriguing statement: “Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings.” The Greek text seems to be ambiguous and scholars, over the centuries, have been divided as to its meaning. The Interlinear Transliterated Bible reads: “[And] he deferred them... Felix heard these things, more perfect having knowledge of that way...” *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament* asks the question: “More accurately than what? Than the Sanhedrin supposed he had ‘concerning the Way’ ... How Felix had gained this knowledge of Christianity is not stated. Philip the Evangelist lived here in Caesarea and there was a church also. Drusilla was a Jewess and may have told him something. Besides, it is wholly possible that Felix knew of the decision of Gallio in Corinth that Christianity was a *religio licita* as a form of Judaism. As a Roman official he knew perfectly well that the Sanhedrin with the help of Tertullus had failed utterly to make out a case against Paul. He could have released Paul and probably would have done so but for fear of offending the Jews whose ruler he was and the hope that Paul ... might offer him bribes for his liberty.”

Paul is kept in prison, but with relaxation of restrictions. The governor was, evidently, of the opinion that Paul was not guilty of any crime against the Roman government. Paul’s testimony during the trial must have made an impression on Felix because he received Paul several times in private audience to hear more about the Gospel

⁴⁷² Matt. 2:23

message about Jesus Christ. His wife, Drusilla, was present at least at one of these occasions. *The Pulpit Commentary*, quoting from Josephus, states about Drusilla: "She was, according to Josephus ... the daughter of Herod Agrippa I., who 'killed James with the sword,' and died shortly afterwards. She was first the wife of Azizus, King of Emesa; but Felix, becoming enamored of her on account of her singular beauty, employed a certain magician, a Jew named Simon, to entice her away from her husband, and persuade her to marry him, contrary, as Josephus says, to the institutions of her country. She perished, with Agrippa, her only son by Felix, in the eruption of Vesuvius, in the reign of Titus."

In these verses, Felix appears to us as a man with a tortured conscience. Every time Paul came close to making personal application of the Gospel of salvation to the governor's life, he became afraid and sent Paul away. What would make a Roman governor covet a bribe from an underpaid evangelist, who also happened to be in prison, is beyond the scope of our understanding. As is often demonstrated in the history of the martyrs of the church, real poverty and lack of liberty is found on the side of the judges, while the accused exude a spirit of liberty and riches in Christ.

Thus Paul languished for two years in a Roman prison because of the whim of a governor, but also because he was, as he called himself, "a prisoner of Christ Jesus."⁴⁷³ This relationship with Jesus and his conviction that what happened to him was not a coincidence or whim of fate but a divinely ordered circumstance, changed the dungeon to a place of worship. When Felix is replaced by the emperor, he uses Paul as a bargaining chip with the Jews to protect himself against subsequent accusations before the emperor's court. He left behind a trail of plunder and oppression and he hoped that leaving Paul in prison would wipe his slate clean with the Jewish leaders.

The Pulpit Commentary wraps up this chapter with the following beautiful reflection: "The scene in this chapter is a very striking one, depicted with admirable simplicity and force. The bloated slave sitting on the seat of judgment and power, representing all the worst vices of Roman degeneracy. The beads of the sinking Jewish commonwealth, blinded by bigotry and nearly mad with hatred, forgetting for the moment their abhorrence of their Roman masters, in their yet deeper detestation of the Apostle Paul. The hired advocate with his fulsome flattery, his rounded periods, and his false charges. And then the great apostle, the noble confessor, the finished Christian gentleman, the pure-minded, upright, and fearless man, pleading his own cause with consummate force and dignity, and overawing his heathen judge by the majesty of his character. It is a graphic description of a very noble scene."

Porcius Festus replaced Felix as governor. History has, generally, judged Festus' brief rule more favorably than that of his predecessor. He ruled for only two years and died while still in office. From the way he took up office, we get the impression that he was efficient and impartial. Immediately upon his arrival he visited Jerusalem to acquaint himself with the religious climate of the area of his jurisdiction. In the three days he spent in Caesarea and before going to Jerusalem, he must have familiarized himself with Paul's case. We presume that the reason for his refusal to the Jewish leaders to have Paul go up to Jerusalem to stand trial was because he had read up on his case and knew about the previous conspiracy to assassinate Paul. We do read, however, that Festus was inclined to do the Jews a favor.

Upon his return to Caesarea, Festus lost no time to begin Paul's trial. Luke spares us the details of the accusation brought by the Jews and Paul's defense, which must have been the same as in Felix' court. Paul's appeal to the Roman emperor, which could not legally be refused, virtually means the end of the court case.

Festus availed himself of the opportunity to discuss Paul's case with King Agrippa who had come on a state visit to pay his respects to the governor on the occasion of his inauguration. Agrippa was accompanied by Bernice, his sister. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains about Agrippa that he was: "Herod Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I. (Acts 12.), and consequently brother of Drusilla [Felix' wife] ... He was only seventeen at his father's death, and so not considered by Claudius a safe person to entrust his father's large dominions to. But he gave him Chalets, and afterwards, in exchange for it, other dominions. It was he who made Ismael the son of Phabi high priest, and who built the palace at Jerusalem which overlooked the temple, and gave great offence to the Jews. He was the last of the Herods, and reigned above fifty years. Bernice was his sister, but was thought to be living in an incestuous intercourse with him. She had been the wife of her uncle Herod, Prince of Chalets; and on his death lived with her brother. She then for a while became the wife of Polemo, King of Cicilia, but soon returned to Herod Agrippa. She afterwards became the mistress of Vespasian and of Titus in succession."

The Herodian family was Edomite and had embraced Judaism. Agrippa, therefore, must have been thoroughly familiar with all things Jewish. The Jews, however, never accepted the Herods as genuine Jews and called them "half-Jews." Bernice, being the daughter of Herod I, and therefore of the same family, was in the same category.

⁴⁷³ See Eph. 3:1; 4:1; II Tim. 1:8; Philemon vs. 1,9

The Pulpit Commentary intimates: “These minute touches suggest that St. Luke was most likely in the hall, and saw the “great pomp,” and heard Festus give the order for Paul to be brought.” The Greek word translated “pomp” is, interestingly: *phantasia*. Acts 25:27

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary observes about the whole procedure: “If Felix cuts a sorry figure in the preceding chapter, Festus in this one shows not much better. No doubt he was perplexed in consequence of his ignorance of the Jewish Religion, the parties it created, and the questions which it raised. So that though he at first declined to try the cause of Paul at Jerusalem, and intimated his intention to take it up at Caesarea, he might, without inconsistency, have been anxious to transfer it to Jerusalem, on finding the means of getting to the bottom of it could best be had there. But when the charges brought against the prisoner by Tertullus at Caesarea, and assented to by his Jewish accusers, so completely broke down—since of crime against the State there was none, and even their charges of sacrilege in religious matters proved baseless—it was the duty of an upright judge at once to acquit the prisoner. If there had existed evidence against him, his accusers ought to have had it ready when formally summoned to appear in the cause at Caesarea. Failing that, there was no pretext for delay in the acquittal of the prisoner; and it was a cruel alternative to shut him up to—either to have his cause transferred to Jerusalem, where his life, already attempted, would be at the mercy of his enemies, or to make his appeal to the emperor. The keen sense of this wrong appears in the apostle’s reply to the proposal of Festus that he should go to Jerusalem; and for all the injustice, and hardship, and danger involved in that proposal Festus was alone to blame. Nor did he commit this wrong under any misapprehension. The explanation given of it by the historian—that he was ‘willing to do the Jews a pleasure’—is one that would naturally suggest itself even though it had not been expressed; and it leaves a foul blot upon his administration. But ‘it was of the Lord,’ that He might fulfill the word which He spoke in the night season to His servant, when shut up in the castle at Jerusalem from the fury of his enemies, ‘Be of good cheer, for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome’ (Acts 23:11).”

It is interesting to observe that Festus formulates the conflict between Paul and the Sanhedrin as being “about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.” We may be sure that the governor was aware of the fact that the controversy was not as to whether this “man named Jesus” had, according to Paul, never died but that it involved a resurrection from the dead. Evidently, in Festus’ philosophy there was no place for a resurrection, as there had been no place for it in the mind of philosophers at the Areopagus.⁴⁷⁴ This must also have been the reason for Festus’ interruption of Paul’s defense, in the next chapter, when he shouted: “You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane.” As we observed earlier, we must conclude that some people do in fact consider death to be a logical conclusion to life, although everything in a human being shouts against this.

We may assume that Agrippa was thoroughly familiar with the existence of Christianity and its doctrine. He probably also knew of Paul and his controversial ministry. His curiosity, which prompted him to want to see Paul, is, therefore, understandable. His grandfather, Herod Antipas, had shown the same curiosity about Jesus.⁴⁷⁵

The problem remained that Paul needed to be sent to Rome with an accompanying letter, stating the accusations against him, and as far as the Roman government was concerned, there were none. A few years later, the Christians’ refusal to ascribe an aura of divinity to the emperor would constitute enough of a charge to warrant the death penalty. But Rome had not arrived at that point yet. The NIV renders the Greek word *kurios*: “His majesty.” Older versions use the word “Lord.” It implies divine authority. Previous emperors had refused the title, but Nero, evidently, enjoyed the honor given to him.

In chapter twenty-six, Luke continues to describe in detail Paul’s defense before the governor, the king, and Bernice. Paul’s motioning with his shackled hands accentuates the paradox of his outward fetters and inward liberty. The apostle speaks as if he is not bound at all. Writing later to Timothy, he would state: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained.”⁴⁷⁶ The Greek word, translated “defense” is *apologeomai* of which our word “apology” is derived. In modern use, the word has acquired the meaning of confessing a wrong and asking for forgiveness. But in the realm of theology it means an exposition of religious truth. The word is, therefore, very appropriate in describing Paul’s action at this point. The apostle was not merely defending himself or proving his innocence, he presented the truth of the Gospel.

His introduction demonstrates sound psychological insight. His words flattered the king, but not in a smooth talking manner as Tertullus when he tried to curry Felix’ favor. Agrippa was, in fact, well informed about Judaism and Christianity. Paul established, first of all, the fact that he was a Pharisee and considered himself still to be one. He demonstrated that the belief of the Pharisees was rooted in the foundations of Judaism as it took seriously

⁴⁷⁴ See ch. 17:32

⁴⁷⁵ See Luke 23:6-12

⁴⁷⁶ II Tim. 2:8,9

the historical promises of God to the Patriarchs. Because of Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees and our Lord's sharp condemnation of their practices, we sometimes get the mistaken impression that their doctrine was amiss. But Jesus never condemned their doctrine. He said to His disciples: "You must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."⁴⁷⁷

In spite of Paul's assertion that the resurrection of the dead, as exemplified in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the essence of God's promise to the fathers, we must admit that the resurrection was a hidden treasure in the Old Testament prophecies. It was not until Jesus came and broke the code in which the truth was written and "He opened [the disciples'] minds so they could understand the Scriptures,"⁴⁷⁸ that the Holy Spirit could place this truth in broad daylight.

In emphasizing that the resurrection is the core of God's promises, Paul distances himself from the doctrine of the Sadducees but he also condemns the practice of the Pharisees, who confessed the doctrine but did not live up to it. Admitting the reality of Jesus' resurrection would, of course, be a confession of their guilt for His crucifixion. In a sense, the Sadducees were more straightforward in that they adhered to their confession (or the lack of it) than the Pharisees, who were said to believe in the resurrection but would not admit to the possibility of it. The conflicts and complications of the Jewish mind can, ultimately, be traced back to the deviousness of the human heart. In the words of Jeremiah's prophecy: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"⁴⁷⁹

Apparently, Paul does not make here a direct reference to the Jewish expectation of the coming of the Messiah, but he refers to the Jewish hope of a physical resurrection for all men. The reason for this approach is logical if we consider that Paul wanted to appeal to the pagan part of his audience. Everybody accepts the fact that man must die. The question is whether death is the end of man's existence. If it is, there is no judgment and, consequently, no need for moral restraint. For the same reason, Paul had spoken to Festus about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come."⁴⁸⁰ To most pagans the hope of the resurrection must have been, at best, a gray area, but for the Jews it was, with the exception of the Sadducees, a vital part of their religion and their nationhood. The hope of the resurrection when taken to its logical conclusion leads eventually to the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. When Paul writes to the Philippians: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead,"⁴⁸¹ he expresses, basically, a deeply held Jewish conviction. Jesus appealed to this belief when He stated: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."⁴⁸² And that the resurrection of the dead was vitally connected to the character of God, is clear from Jesus' rebuttal of the Sadducees' error: "But about the resurrection of the dead-have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."⁴⁸³

Another interesting part in Paul's speech is the expression "our twelve tribes." We know that the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom, which were taken into Assyrian captivity, never returned to their homeland. Some members of the ten tribes, however, moved to Judea in order to worship the Lord in Jerusalem. When Jeroboam initiated his idol worship in the Northern Kingdom, we read: "Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the LORD, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the LORD, the God of their fathers. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon three years, walking in the ways of David and Solomon during this time."⁴⁸⁴ At a later point in history, some Israelites also responded to Hezekiah's invitation to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. We read: "Some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem."⁴⁸⁵ At the birth of Christ, we find in the temple "Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher."⁴⁸⁶ Paul's wording, "our twelve tribes," therefore, was more than a Jewish ideal expression of a reality that was no more. It may also have been, however, a statement of faith to express the conviction that God's plan with Israel had not been cancelled. Jesus expresses this in the words: "You

⁴⁷⁷ Matt. 23:3

⁴⁷⁸ See Luke 24:45

⁴⁷⁹ Jer. 17:9

⁴⁸⁰ ch. 24:25

⁴⁸¹ Phil. 3:10,11

⁴⁸² John 5:24

⁴⁸³ Matt. 22:31,32

⁴⁸⁴ II Chron. 11:16,17

⁴⁸⁵ II Chron. 30:11

⁴⁸⁶ Luke 2:36

who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”⁴⁸⁷ And James sends his epistle “To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”⁴⁸⁸

At this point, Paul must have looked around at the rest of the audience and not only addressed King Agrippa. His rhetorical question: “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” touches upon the essence of all faith and unbelief. *Barnes’ Notes* suggests the reading of these words: “What! Is it to be thought a thing incredible...?” We return again to the question whether death is a logical conclusion of life. It is an established fact that all living beings die, but is it logical? Death is a logical consequence of sin, but not of life itself. That God would have created life in order to destroy it makes no sense. We can understand why a person who separates himself from the source of life by an act of the will must die, but we cannot say that this makes death a logical conclusion of life as God created it. The very fact that every living being fears death proves the point. Immortality definitely makes more sense than mortality.

The above does not prove that there is a resurrection of the dead, but it lays a foundation for the possibility of a reversal of the process of death. The question, therefore, is not whether resurrection occurs but if it is a possibility. In view of the existence of a God who is the omnipotent Creator of life, the answer must be: “Yes!” The fact that we may not have seen a resurrection is no proof of its impossibility. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* convincingly states: “If it be above the power of nature, yet it is not above the power of the God of nature. Note, there is no reason why we should think it at all incredible that God should raise the dead. We are not required to believe anything that is incredible, anything that implies a contradiction. There are motives of credibility sufficient to carry us through all the doctrines of the Christian religion, and this particularly of the resurrection of the dead. Has not God an infinite almighty power, to which nothing is impossible? Did not he make the world at first out of nothing, with a word’s speaking? Did he not form our bodies, form them out of the clay, and breathe into us the breath of life at first? And cannot the same power form them again out of their own clay, and put life into them again? Do we not see a kind of resurrection in nature, at the return of every spring? Has the sun such a force to raise dead plants, and should it seem incredible to us that God should raise dead bodies?”

Paul, cleverly, moves from the question about the resurrection of the dead in general to the resurrection of Jesus. He did not persecute Christians because of his conviction about the resurrection but because he believed that Jesus was a fraud and that He was not resurrected. Meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus changed all this.

We find the account of Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road three times in the Book of Acts.⁴⁸⁹ There is no contradiction in these versions but some details are mentioned in one that are not in the other two. The words: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” are not recorded in the other two accounts according to the most reliable Greek manuscripts. It seems that the apostle inserted part of another vision into his testimony for the purpose of not only clarifying the reason for his work among the gentiles but also to appeal to the conscience of his hearers. In his defense before the crowd that had wanted to kill him on the temple square, Paul recounted what he had heard when he fell into a trance when worshipping in the temple. The crowd had interrupted him when he made the statement that the risen Lord had commissioned him to go to the gentiles.⁴⁹⁰ At that time, he never had the opportunity to finish the sentence: “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” It is obvious why the apostle spoke these words at this occasion. Also the words: “I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds” are clearly spoken with the intent to appeal to the conscience of those present.

We must remind ourselves that what we read is obviously a condensed version of a much longer address. It may very well be that Paul elaborated on Christ’s suffering by referring to His crucifixion by the Roman authorities. Peter and the other apostles had minced no words in telling the people who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost that they were guilty of their Messiah’s death.⁴⁹¹ Paul may have said similar things in front of the Roman governor, who reacted violently to the concept that the Savior of a nation could be killed by crucifixion and then be raised from the dead. To the unconverted mind, the crucifixion is foolishness. Even the Koran denies it.

Paul’s passionate speech evokes a violent reaction from the governor. He interrupts Paul with a shout: “You are crazy!” giving as his personal opinion a medical diagnosis that an excess of study must have overloaded the apostle’s brain. The Greek word translated “out of your mind” is *mainee*, from the word *mao*, from which our word “maniac” is derived. Since Paul had not made any particular display of learning in his defense, Festus’ reaction

⁴⁸⁷ Matt. 19:28

⁴⁸⁸ James 1:1

⁴⁸⁹ ch. 9:3-6; 22:6-11

⁴⁹⁰ See ch. 22:17-21

⁴⁹¹ See ch. 2:23

must have been based on his own emotional response to Paul's message. Festus is a typical example of a man who uses his own understanding as the absolute and ultimate measure of judgment for things that are beyond his grasp. Human logic, when used as a defense mechanism against the truth of God, leads to complete moral failure. Festus understood more than he wanted to admit to himself. Paul's mention of darkness and light, of Satan and God, of repentance of sin, was too close for Festus' comfort. If he admitted that Paul was right in his statements, he would have to draw the consequences for his personal life. The easiest defense for the governor was to dismiss Paul's words as insanity, making Festus the man with the sound mind. The fact, however, that the governor shouted his words indicates that he felt the soundness of his own mind threatened.

Paul's retort is a marvel of politeness and restraint. He addresses the governor as "Your Excellency," and says that his words give rather proof of the sanity of his mind than of the contrary. The Greek words used can be translated "truth" and "sanity." Addressing again King Agrippa, Paul appeals to the king's knowledge of the historical facts of salvation. "It was not done in a corner." Agrippa must have been familiar with the report of Jesus' ministry and death sentence, as well as with the role his father and grandfather had played in the persecution of Christ and His followers. Paul's words contain a hidden reminder of the king's painful heritage. Since Agrippa believed in the Old Testament Scriptures, it would have been a logical step for him to accept the Gospel message.

The NIV renders vs. 28: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" This is probably more correct than the rendering of the older versions: "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."⁴⁹² The paraphrase of TLB: "With trivial proofs like these, you expect me to become a Christian?" strays farther from the Greek text but it probably conveys the meaning quite correctly. The controversy settles around the Greek word *oligos*, which literally means "puny," or "somewhat." Scholars have argued for centuries whether Agrippa was serious or ironic and whether Paul understood the king's words correctly or reacted to them incorrectly.

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "The Greek phrase is very difficult and literally translated says, 'In a little you are persuading me to make a Christian.' In a little may mean either, 'in a little time' or 'in brief.' To make a Christian may mean either to become a Christian or to play the role of a Christian. The translation of the AV is certainly incorrect; Agrippa was not on the point of becoming a Christian. His remark may be a sarcastic parry of Paul's appeal: 'In a short time, you think to make me a Christian!' (RSV). However, the rendition suggested above (that of F. F. Bruce [In short, you are trying to make me play the Christian]) makes Agrippa brush aside Paul's appeal by replying that Paul is not going to make Agrippa play the role of a Christian and try to persuade Festus of the correctness of his prisoner's position." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, however, opines: "How it could have entered into the mind of any man, who carefully considered the circumstances of the case, to suppose that these words of Agrippa are spoken ironically, is to me unaccountable. Every circumstance in the case proves them to have been the genuine effusion of a heart persuaded of the truth; and only prevented from fully acknowledging it by secular considerations."

Paul's reply to the king's ironic or serious statement, places the situation in the courtroom in a heavenly perspective. Agrippa and Bernice had come to the room, in Luke's words, "with great pomp." Agrippa would have expected Paul to wish he could trade places with the king. After all, who would not wish to be a king? The desire to trade places with Paul had, obviously, never entered the king's mind. Paul's exchange offer, therefore, must have evoked a strong emotional reaction. On the one hand, the king must have immediately brushed aside the thought of giving up his crown and becoming a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, he may have realized that the great pomp merely served to cover the emptiness of his soul. The question begs itself as to who the real king in this scene was. Spurgeon's statement still stands: "If God calls you to be a missionary, don't stoop to be a king!"

Paul's defense began and ended with the rattling of his chains. He had lifted up his shackled hands as he started to speak and, not without a humorous sparkle in his eye, he must have shown his handcuffs as he announced to his audience that he was praying for their conversion. But Paul did not wish his listeners to bear his chains. They had their own chains that would be taken from them if they chose to enter into the wonderful freedom of Jesus Christ. There is no mention that any of them did.

The conclusion of the court was that Paul was innocent. I don't know if the governor would have the authority to cancel Paul's appeal to the emperor. The question, evidently, never came up. As far as the Roman government was concerned, sending Paul to Rome was an expedient way to solve a controversy. The actual reason Paul went to Rome was because the King of kings had told him: "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."⁴⁹³

B. Reception of the Gospel in Rome 27:1-28:31

⁴⁹² NKJV

⁴⁹³ ch. 23:11

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary introduces these last two chapters with the summary: “Luke now relates Paul’s journey from Palestine to Italy and his reception in Rome. The fact that Luke tells in detail about this trip shows how important it was for his purpose. The motif of the journey, in Luke’s account, is not the initial evangelization of the Roman capital but the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews in Rome and its acceptance by the Gentiles. This brings to a climax one of the central motifs of the entire book—the rejection of Israel and the rise of the Gentile church.”

For the third time in this book, Luke introduces himself into the narrative.⁴⁹⁴ Luke and Aristarchus had, obviously, been with Paul throughout the whole period of his imprisonment in Caesarea. It does not appear that Aristarchus, who had been in Paul’s company since the riot in Ephesus, traveled with the apostle as a prisoner. But, in writing from Rome to the church in Colosse, Paul calls him, “My fellow prisoner Aristarchus.”⁴⁹⁵ It may be that Aristarchus’ imprisonment did not start until he was in Rome.

Luke’s nautical expertise is very obvious from his description of the sea voyage and the details of the shipwreck. For us who live in the age of jetliners, it would be interesting to put ourselves in the sandals of a first century person who must travel from Caesarea to Rome. The trip by plane would, nowadays, take less than two hours; Luke is speaking in terms of months. Even a present day boat trip would not take longer than a few days.

The first leg of the journey was made in a coastal vessel that took the prisoners, the other passengers, and the soldiers from Caesarea to Myra. The trip was continued in another boat that passed Fair Havens and was driven by a storm in a westerly direction until it shipwrecked at the island of Malta, where the company was forced to spend the winter months. From there a ship took the group to Puteoli from where the rest of the journey to Rome was made overland.

Paul, with some other prisoners, were handed over to a Roman officer by the name of Julius. The NIV informs us that he was a centurion who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. The Greek text calls the company *speira sebastos*, which means literally “his majesty’s band.” *Sebastos* was a title given to the Roman emperor. Older versions call the company “the Augustan Regiment.” It appears that Paul immediately established a friendly relationship with the commanding officer, because as soon as the ship moors at Sidon, Paul gets permission to go on land and visit friends who provide for his needs. Luke uses the medical terms *epimeleia tugchano*, which can be rendered “obtain care.” *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “It is in very common use among medical writers for the care and attention required by the sick. It is very probable that St. Paul was suffering from his long confinement at Caesarea, and that the *epimelia* here mentioned has reference to his invalid state.” No details are given about the Christians in Sidon who ministered to the apostle.

Although it was still summer, the westerly winds made it already impossible to make a beeline to Myra, by passing south of Cyprus. The ship therefore followed the coastline of Asia Minor rather closely, passing Cyprus on the north. In Myra the company changed ships. Myra seems to have been an important harbor at that time where larger cargos from Egypt and Cyprus came to load and unload. The place acquired fame, several centuries later, as the seat of St. Nicolas who served as bishop and was martyred there and who later found a place in our present day Christmas celebrations.

Luke’s very detailed description of the voyage and its problems is interesting from a historical viewpoint but it does not give us much food for spiritual reflection. Some commentators, legitimately, see Paul’s passage to Rome as a picture of the Christian life in which “God has not promised us smooth sailing but a safe arrival.” One striking feature of the trip with its difficulties is that God intended Paul to go to Rome to give his testimony before the emperor. Yet, the Lord did not clear the way for the apostle to have a safe journey. It seems that the opposition of all the elements of nature was demonically inspired. God allowed Satan to lash out against His servant and bring him, as well as his fellow travelers, within an inch of their lives. We can often determine the importance of our acts by the amount of spiritual opposition we encounter. Satan frequently understands more of God’s strategy in and through our lives than we do ourselves. He shoots at those who are on important missions.

Another fact worth noticing is the importance of the role Paul plays on the ship. As we have seen, he immediately made a favorable impression upon Julius, the commanding officer of the guard. This pagan soldier must have seen the difference between the apostle’s attitude and that of the other prisoners. Paul did not fight his captivity. He wore his chains as a free man, knowing that he was not a prisoner of the Roman government but of Jesus Christ. Accepting our adverse circumstances as ordained by God is the best and only way for us to bear them. Paul practiced what he had preached to the Corinthians, that: “he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is

⁴⁹⁴ See ch. 16:10; 20:6

⁴⁹⁵ Col. 4:10

the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."⁴⁹⁶

The Adam Clarke's Commentary notes: "It is generally allowed that the fast mentioned here was that of the great day of atonement which was always celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month, which would answer to the latter end of our September; see Lev 16:29; 23:27, etc. As this was about the time of the autumnal equinox, when the Mediterranean Sea was sufficiently tempestuous, we may suppose this feast alone to be intended. To sail after this feast was proverbially dangerous among the ancient Jews." Although the advice given at Fair Havens not to continue the voyage to Rome was disregarded, Paul's prediction of doom enhanced his status considerably when it turned out to be correct. The general consensus of the crewmembers was that passing the winter in Fair Havens would be undesirable since the harbor was less than ideal for that purpose, Phoenix, a little farther west on the same island of Crete, would be better. Luke does not elaborate on the conditions, but evidently it was the protection from the prevailing winds that mattered. Scholars are quite divided about the meaning of several words in the text, but we would not gain any blessing by digging into the controversy.

A gentle south wind lured the ship out of the haven. Had this wind continued the ship would have reached Phoenix within a few hours. But as soon as the vessel is at sea a hurricane picked up the boat and forced it away from the island. The NIV translates the name of the storm "northeaster," for the Greek *Euroclydon*. Most older versions leave the name un-translated. Since this was a wind of hurricane force and it pushed the ship away from the southern shore of the island of Crete, it is likely that it came over the 7000 feet high mountains and beat upon the Mediterranean. For about two weeks the ship was in the power of this storm till it was smashed to pieces at the island of Malta. Luke's graphic description of the ship's helpless drift to its doom is very impressive. A twenty-four hour cloud coverage made any attempt to navigation impossible. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: "This is mentioned, not only as a feature of the severity and length of the easterly gale (for the wind had shifted two or three points to the east), but specially because in the navigation of that time, before the invention of the compass, the sun, moon, and stars were the only things they had to steer by, or by which they could know the direction in which they were drifting." The darkness at night and the gloom by day created an atmosphere of panic and hopelessness that affected everybody, except the apostle Paul. He was the only person who knew where they were going. His Lord had told him that he would go to Rome, and he knew that he must be going in that direction and that he would arrive there. As far as the purpose of the voyage for the ship owners was concerned, everything was lost. They lost their cargo, the ship's tackle and, ultimately the ship itself. Paul, who was not making the journey to sell anything upon arrival, had not lost anything. Gains and losses are always closely connection to the goals we have set for our lives.

This was not all; Paul knew he would arrive safely in Rome, because the Lord had told him so. But God did more for him than spare his own life. Obviously as an answer to prayer, God gave him graciously the lives of all those who were sailing with him. If you want to travel safely, take someone with you who prays! *Matthew Henry's Commentary* makes the beautiful observation: "Harm and loss in the world, if sanctified to us, may be truly said to be gain; for if they wean us from present things, and awaken us to think of a future state, we are truly gainers by them."

The comparison with the storm that caught the ship on which Jonah tried to flee from the presence of the Lord forces itself upon us. It happened on the same Mediterranean Sea and it may have been the same kind of storm. The differences, however, are obvious. Jonah's storm raged because of his disobedience; Paul's storm because of his obedience. Jonah's ship sustained no significant damage, Paul's vessel shipwrecked. Jonah slept through the storm, Paul was awake. But in both storms, God was, ultimately, glorified. We are reminded of Psalm 107, in which the poet states: "Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders."⁴⁹⁷ Paul, undoubtedly, knew this psalm and it may have come to his mind.

The above quoted *Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments on the comparison with Jonah: "Whether they called every man on his God, as Jonah's mariners did, we are not told; it is well if this laudable practice in a storm was not gone out of fashion and made a jest of. However, Paul among these seamen was not, like Jonah among his,

⁴⁹⁶ I Cor. 7:22,23

⁴⁹⁷ Ps 107:23-32

the cause of the storm, but the comforter in the storm, and as much a credit to the profession of an apostle as Jonah was a blemish to the character of a prophet.”

The terrible experience began on the day of the Jewish fast, the Day of Atonement. God asked the people of Israel to abstain from food for one day in order to humble themselves before Him on account of their sins. During this storm, Satan saw to it that the people on board of this doomed ship did not eat for two full weeks. Fasting, however, is a proven means for the defeat of the devil.⁴⁹⁸ Paul’s breaking of Satan’s fast served as an object lesson to the worn out crew and passengers of the ship. His simple act of publicly taking a piece of bread and asking God’s blessing upon the food broke the ban of fear and greatly encouraged everybody. They all knew he had been right about the storm, so they believed he must be right about their salvation also.

This happened as the ship approached the coast of the island of Malta. The NIV speaks of the Adriatic Sea, but technically, Malta is situated in the Mediterranean. The sailors may have thought they were in the Adriatic, not having been able to determine their true position by the stars. *Barnes’ Notes* explains: “This sea is situated between Italy and Dalmatia, now called the Adriatic Gulf. But among the ancients the name was given not only to that gulf, but to the whole sea lying between Greece, Italy, and Africa, including the Sicilian and Ionian Sea. It is evident from the narrative that they were not in the Adriatic Gulf, but in the vicinity of Malta.”

Luke’s description of the shipwreck is full of technical terms that have confused interpreters throughout the ages. Whether the rudders were cut off, or the anchors, and whether the main sail was hoisted or the smaller one, is of little purpose to our study. Some of the sailors decided to run for their lives instead of staying with the ship as long as they could, which is proper procedure for sailors. Paul reported their deceptive maneuvers to the Roman officer who directed his men to prevent the deserters from fleeing by cutting the ropes of the lifeboats. Whatever was done to the ship did not achieve the goal of having her run on the beach, which seems to have been the captain’s plan. The vessel ran aground on a sandbar and began to break apart under the pressure of the waves that were swept up by the gale.

The soldiers who guarded the prisoners were held accountable for them with their own lives. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Roman cruelty, which made the keepers answerable with their own lives for the safety of their prisoners, is here reflected in this heartless proposal.” This extreme measure under circumstances that may be called extenuating is a clear indication of the severe discipline of the Roman army. We should not judge these soldiers too harshly from the viewpoint of our present age. As a matter of fact, the attitude of Julius, the commander, is more remarkable in the context of his day, than that of the soldiers. His personal attachment to Paul, which made him decide to spare his life, is more extraordinary in the world of army discipline than the sense of duty of his underlings. God’s promise to Paul that all on board had been given to him played, of course, an important role in the commanders decision.

The last chapter of this book begins on the island of Malta and ends in Rome. The survivors of the shipwreck spent three months on the island, during which the Lord confirmed Paul’s ministry of the Gospel by allowing him to have a ministry of healing. We find no record of the establishment of a church, or even of Paul’s preaching, although it would be hard to imagine that he would not have given his testimony about Christ. Luke mainly highlights the miraculous aspects of Paul’s work. There may have been a language barrier which complicated communications. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “The population, however, was Phoenician or Punic, and probably knew little Greek or Latin.” The NIV designates the inhabitants as “the islanders.” The Greek uses the word *barbaroi*, from which our word “barbarians” is derived. To the Greek, anybody who did not speak Greek was called *barbaros*. It is believed that these natives were descendants of Phoenicians.

The first miracle described is Paul’s own healing. Immediately upon arrival on the beach, an incident occurs that establishes Paul’s reputation as more than a mere mortal. The survivors were, of course, drenched and shivering and the natives of the island had made a bonfire for them. We do not know if Paul was the only one of the newly arrived who made himself useful in gathering firewood. Luke may have singled him out because of the incident with the viper. It may be, however, that Paul set the example as he had done on the ship when he ate bread in front of everybody and encouraged the others to follow his example.

We must not read too much in the incident with the snake. It is true that a serpent in Scripture represents Satan and that he did not want Paul to arrive in Rome. But to see a parallel between this incident and the temptation of Eve pushes Bible interpretation beyond the limits of what is reasonable. The almost nonchalant way in which Paul treats the snakebite is an indication of his faith in the Lord’s promise that he would go to Rome and stand before the emperor. The reaction of the bystanders to the incident is interesting; they first label Paul as a murderer to whom justice is meted out and then the pendulum of their opinion swings to the other extreme and they believe that he is a god. The fact that there is truth in both extremes of these beliefs must have been beyond their comprehension.

⁴⁹⁸ See Mark 9:29 (KJV)

Paul's faith may have been boosted by Jesus' promise to His disciples: "They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."⁴⁹⁹

Publius, who was probably the tribal representative of the Roman government, invited the survivors of the shipwreck to his estate and gave them hospitality for three days, after which, possibly other accommodations for the rest of the winter were found. Whether only a small group was invited, which included Paul, Luke and, probably, the Roman officer, Julius, or all 276 survivors, is not clear.

The miracle of Paul's healing of Publius' father is the only divine healing in the New Testament that is authenticated by a medical person. Luke diagnosed the man's sickness as fever and dysentery. Paul first prays and then places his hands upon the patient. This indicates that God had given Paul the spiritual gift of healing. The hand in which the viper had fastened its fangs was the hand that became the hand of healing. It has been observed that both parts of Jesus' promise about signs that would accompany the preaching of the Gospel are vindicated here: "They will pick up snakes with their hands; ... they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."⁵⁰⁰ This second miracle opened the way for the healing of all the sick on the island. That winter on Malta became a spiritual springtime. It seems impossible that this would not have been backed up by a life-changing work by the Holy Spirit in the souls of the Maltese. After all: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"⁵⁰¹ At the same time, God used Paul's ministry to the sick to provide for the physical needs of the group, who had lost everything in the wreck, so that at the time of their departure they were well provided for.

The KJV renders vs. 11: "And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux." *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* explains about the ship that carried the survivors on to Rome: "Sign. Answering to the ship's 'name' in modern times. It was the image of a god, a man, a beast, or of some other object, sculptured or painted on the prow. The figure of the guardian deity was affixed to the stern. 'Castor and Pollux.' Known as the twin brothers and the Dioscuri, or sons of Jove. They were regarded as tutelary deities of sailors." In a way, the ancient travelers were more religious than those in modern times. Some of our Roman Catholic friends may hang medals of St. Christopher in their cars. As God's children we do well to plead for God's "traveling mercies" in prayer as we go on our journeys.

The ship sailed from Malta to Syracuse, a port on the island of Sicily, touched the toe of the Italian mainland at Rhegium, and ended its journey at Puteoli. There, the party spent a whole week. It may be that Julius had personal reasons to spend to linger there, or that he consented to Paul's request to spend time with a group of Christians at that place. Since the remainder of the trip had to be done overland, there was no particular hurry to continue. The Christians in Puteoli may have been people who heard the Gospel from those who had attended the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem on the day the church of Jesus Christ was born. Or they may have been the fruit of the testimony of some of the Jerusalem Christians who moved there when the persecution broke out.

Word of Paul's arrival in Italy reached the Christian in Rome before the apostle got there. They sent out a welcoming committee, which met him and his party at the Forum of Appius, some forty-three miles south of Rome. This was one of the stopping places on the Appian Way, as was the Three Taverns, ten miles further up the road. These rest stops are also referred to in ancient classic literature.

Approaching Rome, Paul is overwhelmed by the realization that a dream is becoming reality. No one knows exactly how the Gospel had reached Rome at such an early date. There is no record of any apostolic activity in the city before Paul's arrival, apart from the "visitors from Rome," Luke mentions as being present on the day of Pentecost.⁵⁰² Several years earlier, Paul had written his famous Epistle to the Romans, in which he expressed the desire to meet them. We read: "God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong."⁵⁰³ And elsewhere in the same epistle: "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you ... so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed."⁵⁰⁴

Upon Paul's meeting with these people he had longed to see, Luke records: "At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged." These few words give us insight into the depth of Paul's paradoxical emotions

⁴⁹⁹ Mark 16:18

⁵⁰⁰ See Mark 16:18

⁵⁰¹ Mark 8:36

⁵⁰² See Acts 2:10

⁵⁰³ Rom. 1:9-11

⁵⁰⁴ Rom. 15:23,32

and into both the strength and weakness of his faith. The fact that the apostle was encouraged indicates that he needed encouragement. The long journey must have been emotionally and physically wearing on him. Being a prisoner of the Roman government was not a sinecure, even if one is a prisoner of Jesus Christ at the same time. Paul's encounter with the Christians of Rome must have choked him up. He would need this encouragement to face the opposition that would face him in the city later on.

In Rome, Paul was allowed and able to rent private quarters, which gave him a certain amount of liberty under the guard of a Roman soldier, although, according to vs. 20, he remained cuffed to his guard day and night. Since the guard was changed ever so often, the apostle must have had ample opportunity to present the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to a large number of his majesty's warriors. The words: "It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain" could be construed to merely refer to his being a prisoner, without being physically shackled to a soldier, but the context seems to rule this out. This must be the reason that he called the Jewish leaders to his house instead of going to the synagogue. Some scholars believe that the Jews in Rome were not allowed to build a synagogue. The fact that there was again a Jewish congregation in Rome indicates that the previous eviction of all Jews by the Emperor Claudius had been rescinded. Bringing a Roman soldier into the Sabbath service would have been considered improper.

Barely three days after moving into his apartment, Paul asked for the representatives of the Jews living in Rome to meet with him. If these "three days" are calculated according to the Jewish time reckoning, the time may even have been less than 48 hours. The first thing Paul wanted to ascertain was whether the Jews in Rome were in any way prejudiced against him, as the Jews in Asia Minor had been. When it appears that they knew about Christianity but had no information about Paul and his ministry, the air is cleared for his presentation of the Gospel.

Paul explains in a delicate way that his appeal to Caesar does not imply an accusation against the Jews in Jerusalem or anywhere else. In view of the difficult status of the Jews in Rome, it was important to explain that the apostle's arrival would not compromise their position. Paul explains that his appeal to Caesar was only made for the salvation of his own life. One important truth, that had been the overriding motivation for all Paul's recent actions, is left out, namely the vision of Jesus in which he was told that he should go to testify in Rome.⁵⁰⁵

It seems strange and even unlikely that the Jews in Rome would not know what the "sect" of Christianity was all about. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* quotes F. F. Bruce's *Commentary on Acts*, saying: "Logically [this commentary] suggests that at this point the Jewish leaders were telling less than the whole truth. It would have been impossible for them to have been unfamiliar with the Christian church in Rome, since we know from Paul's letter to the Romans that a vigorous church existed there (see also Acts 18:2). Furthermore, it was highly unlikely that word would not have reached the Roman Jews from Jerusalem, because constant communication was sustained. However, it was apparent that no sound case could be registered against Paul, and the Jews therefore felt it the better part of wisdom to dissociate themselves entirely from Paul's case and thus avoid incurring the wrath of the Roman government." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* goes farther back into history and states: "A saying of Justin Martyr casts some light on this saying of the Jews: he asserts that the Jews not only cursed them in their synagogues, but they sent out chosen men from Jerusalem, to acquaint the world, and particularly the Jews everywhere, that the Christians were an atheistical and wicked sect, which should be detested and abhorred by all mankind." Other scholars, however, see in the Jews' statement proof of their sincerity. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* for instance states: "This statement has been pronounced incredible; and believing critics ... have thought that these Jews here dishonestly concealed the truth, while rationalistic critics make it a handle against the authenticity of the history itself. But the distinction which they make between Paul himself, against whom they had heard nothing, and his 'sect,' as everywhere spoken against, is a presumption in favor of their sincerity; and, as Meyer well says, until the apostle appealed to Caesar, the Jews of Palestine would have no occasion to send information to Rome against him, while the unexpected turn which the case took by his appeal to Caesar occurred so late, that no information on the subject would travel from Jerusalem to Rome in advance of the apostle himself. The apparent freedom from prejudice here expressed is best explained by reference to the danger which the Jews of Rome felt themselves to be in of fresh persecution, should any disturbances break out among themselves-which a keen collision between them and the Christians would be sure to provoke. It was this, probably, that induced the Jewish community of Rome, as a body, to ignore the Christianity which was springing up in the capital around them; and the same motive would now induce them to express themselves with such prudent reserve as they do here."

Paul must have known, better than we do nowadays, whether his audience was unprejudiced or reluctant to hear. But this did not change his commitment to preach the Gospel. He had earlier written in his Epistle to the

⁵⁰⁵ See ch. 23:11

Romans: "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."⁵⁰⁶

Paul seems to have had only one day to expound the Gospel to his fellow Jews in Rome and he, obviously, made the most of it by preaching a one-day-long sermon to them.

Some scholars believe that this meeting did not take place in the house Paul rented, where he would spend the next two years. The Greek uses the word *xenia*, which is derived from a word meaning "hospitality." The same word is found in the apostle's letter to Philemon, where we read: "And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers."⁵⁰⁷ Others, however, believe this to be the same place as Paul's own rented house, mentioned in vs. 20.

We would have wished that Luke had elaborated on the contents of Paul's discourse of that day. The core of his message is, however, not difficult to reconstruct if we read the epistles and the few sermons the apostle preached in synagogues, recorded in this book.

The Jewish concept of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah was mainly derived from Daniel's prophecy. In one of his visions Daniel recorded: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."⁵⁰⁸ Jesus Himself clearly established this link with Daniel's prophecy by calling Himself "the Son of Man." In Matthew's Gospel alone, the expression is used thirty times. Daniel's prediction about the time of appearance of the Messiah and of His rejection is among the clearest of his prophecies. The angel Gabriel had stated clearly: "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed."⁵⁰⁹ In spite of this, the Jewish expectation of the Kingdom of God was one of a political and nationalistic restoration of the kingdom of David. There was little or no conviction of sin that must be atoned for in order for the reign of God to become a reality on earth.

This truth regarding the need for atonement for the sin of the world and its connection with the coming of the Messiah had been completely hidden from the Jewish worldview. Yet the Law of Moses abounds with stipulations regarding atonement for sin by substitution. The thought that the blood of animals could not effectively solve the problem of human sin had never entered their mind. The words of John, the Baptist, in presenting Jesus: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"⁵¹⁰ had been completely lost on them.

Yet, as *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states correctly: "How easily Jesus, as the Messiah, and his spiritual kingdom, might be proved from the law of Moses, any person may be satisfied, by consulting the notes written on those books. As to the prophets, their predictions are so clear, and their prophecies so obviously fulfilled in the person, preaching, miracles, passion, and death of Jesus Christ, that it is utterly impossible, with any show of reason, to apply them to any other."

It appears that Paul was not able to convince many. Luke does not give us any numbers or statistics, but Paul's closing remarks suggest that the unbelievers outnumbered those that were convinced.

The translation "They disagreed among themselves" is a double negative in the Greek: *asumphonos ontes*, for being "inharmonious among themselves." This is probably one of Luke's major understatements about the Jewish way of debating. Paul's final quotation of Isaiah's prophecy does not seem to be a diplomatic effort to "win friends and influence people." But in holding before them the mirror of God's Word, the Word they professed to believe and honor, he did indeed do them the greatest service he could do. Jesus had done the same to a hostile crowd of Pharisees and Jewish leaders when He told them the Parable of the Sower.⁵¹¹ The seed of God's Word is sown in the human heart, but it depends on the condition of the heart whether the Holy Spirit can make it grow and produce fruit.

⁵⁰⁶ Rom. 1:14,15

⁵⁰⁷ Philemon 22

⁵⁰⁸ Daniel 7:13,14

⁵⁰⁹ Daniel 9:25,26

⁵¹⁰ John 1:29

⁵¹¹ Matt. 13:3-9

However hard and condemnatory Paul's words may sound in this context, we must not forget what he had written before to the believers in Rome: "I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."⁵¹² Some of that compassion must have shown in his quotation of the Isaiah's prophecy.

More than Paul's condemnation regarding the callousness of their heart, the announcement that the Gospel would henceforth be presented to the gentiles must have stung those people deeply. Jesus had a similar reaction when He told the Parable of the Tenants and the Vineyard.⁵¹³ Paul's statement is built on Jesus' words: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit,"⁵¹⁴ as well as on Jesus' instructions to Paul during the vision he received in the temple.⁵¹⁵

Paul's quotation of Isaiah's prophecy is the sixth reference to it in the New Testament.⁵¹⁶ At first sight, Isaiah's words seem to make God the source of man's callousness. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, however, correctly observes: "The prophecy of Isaiah was neither the cause nor the motive of their unbelief: it was a simple prediction, which imposed no necessity on them to resist the offers of mercy. They might have believed, notwithstanding the prediction, for such kinds of prophecies always include a tacit condition; they may believe, if they properly use the light and power which God has given them." The same commentary quotes Augustin, who wrote: "If I be asked why they could not believe? I immediately answer, because they would not. And God, having foreseen their bad will, foretold it by the prophet."

In Isaiah's prophecy God uses sarcasm to express His deep sorrow over the fact of the hardness of Israel's heart. We understand Isaiah's words: " 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed"⁵¹⁷ to mean: "Go ahead! Keep on hearing without understanding..." We base this interpretation on the last line that reads: "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." With Adam Clarke, we come to the conclusion that on the basis of what we know of the character of God, God cannot be held responsible for the hardness of the human heart. If in Scripture there is mention of God's intervention by which a human heart is hardened, it is never in the sense of making hard something that was originally soft. God can continue and make irreversible what man started. It is true that God said to Moses: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," and "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials,"⁵¹⁸ but Pharaoh's heart had never been anything but hard to begin with.

Paul's quotation of Isaiah is even mild in comparison with Stephen's condemnation of the leaders of the Jewish nation. When he stood before the Sanhedrin, he shouted at them with a passion that cost him his life: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."⁵¹⁹

The tragedy of the Jewish people throughout the ages has been that they never understood their heritage. Paul defined this legacy in his Epistle to the Romans as: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."⁵²⁰ The Jews acted as if they owned God and that God's glory was derived from theirs. They did not see themselves as tenants of God's vineyard but as owners. Unless we use our ears to hear God's Word, our eyes to see His glory, and our hearts to believe His promises we will find ourselves in the enemy's camp. There is no in-between position; we are either light or darkness, goodness or evil. The reason the Jews had Jesus killed was because they did not recognize Him as God who had become man.

⁵¹² Rom. 9:1-4

⁵¹³ Matt 21:33-44

⁵¹⁴ Matt. 21:43

⁵¹⁵ See ch. 22:17-20

⁵¹⁶ The other five are Matt. 13:14,15; Mark 4:12; Luke 6:10; John 12:40; Rom. 11:8

⁵¹⁷ Isa. 6:9,10

⁵¹⁸ Ex. 7:3; 10:1

⁵¹⁹ ch. 7:51-53

⁵²⁰ Rom. 9:4,5

As Isaiah's prophecy included a prediction of Israel's captivity, so was Paul's quotation a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish nation. Paul does not specifically say this, but those who heard him knew that Isaiah's text continues with the words: "Then I said, 'For how long, O Lord?' And he answered: 'Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.'"⁵²¹ In Isaiah's day the captivity was still more than a century away; when Paul spoke those words there was only one decade of grace remaining.

Paul had clearly expressed the agony of his soul regarding the wayward condition of his own people, when he wrote in his Epistle to the Romans: "Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them."⁵²² It was this compassion, the hope that their jealousy regarding their heritage would make them turn back, that prompted him to quote Isaiah's words.

On three previous occasions, Paul (and once Barnabas) had announced to their Jewish audience that they would henceforth preach the Gospel to the gentiles. We read: "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.'" And: "But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'" And: "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!'"⁵²³ At every one of those occasions, this statement had put Paul's life in jeopardy. Being under the protection of the Roman government, this was the first time that Paul could speak without risk.

We cannot overstate the tragedy of the moment. The rejection of the Gospel by those for whom it was primarily meant seems to have been a complete victory for Satan. Yet, God also turned this defeat around in the most triumphant manner. This reminds us of Joseph's words to his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."⁵²⁴

Paul, himself, puts this in the right perspective in his Epistle to the Romans: "Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"⁵²⁵

Luke records that Paul lived for two years in a rented house and that this place soon became a center of Christian activity in the city of Rome. This piece of information suggests that the Roman government did not assume any financial responsibility for Paul's imprisonment and that his case was pending in the judicial system of the empire. It is generally assumed that the apostle's liberty was curtailed by the presence of a Roman soldier to whom he may have been chained. Paul's house arrest would naturally not create a favorable condition for the spread of the Gospel in the capital, but in spite of this the Holy Spirit made Paul's abode into a place to which many hungry souls were drawn. A similar situation existed at the time of John the Baptist, who preached in the desert, where people flocked to him. Ralph Waldo Emerson is credited with saying: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap, than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." The Holy Spirit does not need strategic locations for the proclamation of the truth. Wherever the light of the Gospel shines, souls who are bound in darkness will be attracted to it.

The conclusion of the Book of Acts has, throughout the ages, been a matter of discussion among scholars. One would wish that this second book, which Luke dedicated to Theophilus, did not fizzle out the way it does. We must conclude that the book, actually, has no ending. It seems reasonable to assume that Luke either intended to continue the narrative or to write a third volume. There are other examples in world history of masterpieces that have remained unfinished. In classical music Franz Schubert's "Eighth Symphony," and Anton Bruckner's "Ninth" come to mind. Yet, art critics usually consider those compositions to be complete in themselves. The same can be said about Luke's masterpiece. Luke may have intended to write more. He may not have lived long enough to do so. He may not have survived the apostle who is the main character in the greater part of his book. We do not know. Believing the Book of Acts to be part of the divinely inspired Scriptures, we must conclude, however, that the Holy

⁵²¹ Isa. 6:11,12

⁵²² Rom. 11:13,14

⁵²³ See ch. 13:46; 18:6; 22:21,22

⁵²⁴ Gen. 50:20

⁵²⁵ Rom. 11:11,12,15

Spirit considered this book to be complete. Luke had stated in the opening of Acts, that this book was a sequence to “all that Jesus began to do and to teach,” and that the Book of Acts was, obviously, a continuation of Jesus’ acts and teaching. In the way Acts ends, the Holy Spirit seems to tell us that Jesus’ acts and teaching did not end with Paul or Luke but that they are being continued. His Word marches on and we are part of it.

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