

PILGRIM BIBLE COMMENTARY

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The Bible simply explained with devotional application



Alec Taylor

Introduction

This booklet is one of a series of concise Bible commentaries based on Pilgrim Bible Notes. They do not have the depth of detail found in larger commentaries but should serve as a help for new Christians or those who have little knowledge of the Bible.

The commentary can be used in daily devotions in addition to the readings from Pilgrim Bible Notes, taking a chapter each day.

Pilgrim Bible Commentaries on Genesis, Exodus and Luke are also available.

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Key to notes

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics.
- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Genesis, this would be Genesis chapter 23, verse 16.
- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).
- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.
- When I refer to ‘the Word of God’ I mean the Bible as a whole, rather than a particular word or words spoken by prophets or apostles on a specific occasion.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Luke, '*the beloved physician*' (Colossians 4:14), wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to give to Theophilus a history of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles (1:1). This man was probably a person of some importance; he is addressed as '*most excellent*', a title given to Roman governors (Luke 1:3; cp. Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Luke continues in Acts where he left off in his gospel ('*the former account*', 1:1). The events in the book cover a period of some thirty-three years from AD 30 to AD 62.

The Acts of the Apostles has often been called 'the Acts of the Holy Spirit' because of its record of the mighty working of the Spirit of God through the apostles, particularly Peter and Paul (there are seventy references to the Holy Spirit in Acts). The words '*witness*' and '*witnesses*' are found throughout the book (1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39,41; 13:31; 22:15; 23:11 26:16,22). The gospel is for '*all nations*' (Luke 24:47). The Lord Jesus told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would be witnesses to him *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth* (1:8). This promise and command are reflected in the three sections of the book:

1. Witness in Jerusalem	AD 30–32 (chapters 1 to 7)
Waiting in Jerusalem	– 1:1–26
Day of Pentecost	– 2:1–40
Jerusalem church established	– 2:41–47
Healing of lame man	– 3:1–26
Beginning of persecution	– 4:1–37
Death of Ananias and Sapphira	– 5:1–11
Further church growth and persecution	– 5:12–42
Choice of seven men to serve in church	– 6:1–7
Stephen's ministry and martyrdom	– 6:8 to 7:60

2. Witness in Judea & Samaria AD 35–44 (chapters 8 to 12)

Christians scattered by persecution	–	8:1–40
Conversion of Saul of Tarsus	–	9:1–31
Peter's ministry in Palestine;		
first Gentile Christians	–	9:32 to 11:18
The first Gentile church	–	11:19–30
Persecution by Herod Agrippa I	–	12:1–25

3. Witness to the end of the earth AD 47–62 (chapters 13 to 28)

Paul's first missionary journey	–	13:1 to 14:28
Conflict over circumcision	–	15:1–35
Paul's second missionary journey	–	15:36 to 18:22
Paul's third missionary journey	–	18:23 to 21:14
Paul in Jerusalem	–	21:15 to 23:32
Paul in Caesarea	–	23:33 to 26:32
Paul's journey to Rome	–	27:1–28:15
Paul in Rome	–	28:16–31

(The dates shown above are approximate).

May God be pleased to challenge us and to enthuse us by the example of the early church. Let us work and witness for the same risen Lord.

For further reading I recommend:

ACTS — YOU ARE MY WITNESSES by Gordon Keddie, Welwyn Commentary Series, published by Evangelical Press.

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY — SIX VOLUMES OF SERMONS ON ACTS CHAPTERS 1 TO 8 by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones published by Banner of Truth.

Acts chapter 1

In the introductory notes on the Acts of the Apostles on page 4, I reminded you that Luke, ‘the beloved physician’ (Colossians 4:14), wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to give to Theophilus a history of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles (1:1). The Gospel of Luke gives an account *of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach* (1). This book continues to show what the Lord Jesus continued to do through the ministry of the apostles who also taught what they had learned from their great Master.

Luke begins his account by making a brief reference to his Gospel (*‘the former account’*). He reminds Theophilus that the Lord Jesus often appeared to the disciples during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension. He showed himself to be alive *by many infallible proofs* (3). The Lord Jesus ate with the apostles and they were able to touch him. They knew without a shadow of doubt that Jesus, who had been put to death by crucifixion, had risen from the dead. **Christianity is based on facts!**

The Lord Jesus had opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures and spoke *of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God* (3; cp. Luke 24:45). These things included the necessity *for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations* (Luke 24:46–47).

In the forty days between his resurrection and ascension it appears that Jesus made no mention of restoring the kingdom to Israel, hence the question of the disciples (6). The kingdom of God is not to be confused with the kingdom of Israel. Our emphasis must be on *the things pertaining to the kingdom of God* (3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). **Let us beware of wasting time in speculating about things not made clear in Scripture (7).**

Before he ascended into heaven (9–12), the Lord Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for *the promise of the Father*, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (4–8). They were at the beginning of a

new dispensation when the Holy Spirit would dwell in every believer (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9–11, 15–16; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 4:6).

The Holy Spirit is associated with power (8), but we must always remember that he is a Person. The Holy Spirit is our ‘*Helper*’ and we need him to enable us to witness to a hostile world (John 15:26–27). The disciples certainly needed him in their witness to the world of unbelieving Jews. Jesus refers to him as ‘*the Spirit of truth*’ who would guide his apostles into all truth (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit will never lead us into fellowship with those who deny the truths of the gospel. He never points us to himself but he glorifies Christ (John 16:14).

Jesus said, ‘*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me ...*’ (8). **We too have the Holy Spirit but are we witnessing?** We have a wonderful message concerning the grace of God, who gave his Son to die and to rise from the dead to save sinners. This message alone has hope for a needy world. We are to tell men and women of the liberating power of the gospel which can rescue them from the tyranny of Satan and sin, that they need to repent of their sin and to trust in Christ to save them. How is your witness at home, at school, at work?

*Send forth the gospel! Let it run,
Southward and northward, east and west;
Tell all the earth Christ died and lives,
Who giveth pardon, life, and rest.*

*Send forth the gospel, holy Lord!
Kindle in us love’s sacred flame;
Love giving all and grudging naught
For Jesus’ sake, in Jesus’ name.*

(Henry E. Fox)

Jesus went out to Bethany which was about two miles east of Jerusalem and there he blessed the disciples. As he was blessing them, *he was taken up* into heaven (9; cp. Luke 24:50–51). The disciples watched him disappear from their sight through the clouds and two angels appeared beside them and told them that Jesus would one day return in the clouds (10–11). The ascension of Jesus was prophesied in

the Old Testament (Psalm 68:18). Why did he ascend into heaven?

- He ascended to be exalted to the right hand of God as sovereign Lord of the universe (2:33; cp. Mark 16:19; Ephesians 1:20–22). The right hand of God is the place of power and authority (7:56; 1 Peter 3:22).
- He ascended to be our great High Priest. The Old Testament high priest offered sacrifices for his own sins and for those of the people when he entered the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle (or of the temple). Jesus has entered heaven with his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption for us (Hebrews 9:12; 10:11–12). As our great High Priest, he makes intercession for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25–27).
- Jesus ascended in order to send the Holy Spirit (John 7:39; 16:7). The ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential for the salvation of sinners (eg. John 3:5; 16:7–11) and in the life of every believer (John 14:16; Romans 8:12–16, 26–27).
- Jesus ascended to prepare a place for us (John 14:2–3). What a glorious place that will be!

When the Lord Jesus comes again, everyone will see him (11; Revelation 1:7). Every Christian alive at that time will be caught up to meet him in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). It will be a wonderful day for those who know and love Christ, but it will be a fearful time for those who do not know him (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). **If Jesus came again today, would you be ready to meet him; would you be taken up to be with him?**

There are discouragements in the work of the gospel and our message is often scorned and rejected. The half-brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ (sons of Joseph and Mary) did not at first believe in him (Matthew 13:55; John 7:5). They were now praying with the eleven disciples and other believers (13–14). James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (12:17; 15:13; cp. Galatians 1:19; 2:9). Most Bible commentators believe that he wrote the letter which bears his name. The Holy Spirit inspired Jude to write his letter (Jude 1:1). Let us persevere in praying for those we love and in witnessing to them.

We are not only to be witnesses but we must also wait upon God in prayer (14). Though we now have *the promise of the Father* (the Holy Spirit), we do need to take time to pray. As we read through the book of Acts, we will notice that the early church placed a great priority upon prayer (13–14). They needed to appoint someone to take the place of Judas Iscariot among the twelve apostles *and they prayed* (24). They then chose Matthias to be numbered with the eleven apostles (15–26). Some commentators believe that though Peter was sincere in his motive for seeking a replacement for Judas, he was mistaken to be so impatient to see the office filled. They see Paul as the rightful holder of the office (cp. 1 Corinthians 15:8–9). Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, was a close companion and friend of Paul. It is true that Paul was an apostle, and that he had a unique ministry, but Luke gives no indication that the appointment of Matthias was a mistake. If Scripture remains silent on this matter, we waste time if we allow ourselves to be distracted by needless speculation.

Are you discouraged? Are you carrying heavy burdens? Do you need direction and guidance? **Have you prayed? Are you persevering in prayer? If you are not, do not be surprised that you are having problems. If you try to get along without daily prayer, you will be weak.** Be determined to set time aside each day for prayer when you will worship God, offer up your praise and thanksgiving, repent of sins committed, and bring your requests to him.

Acts chapter 2

The Feast of Pentecost was celebrated seven weeks after the Passover to give thanks for the barley harvest (Leviticus 23:15–21). God chose this time to pour out his Holy Spirit on the first Christians who were expectantly praying in the upper room of a house in Jerusalem (cp. 1:12–14). *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit* (4). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was accompanied by three types of phenomena:

- *A sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind* (2). Wind is a symbol of deity, of the presence of God. When the Lord came to Job, he *answered Job out of the whirlwind* (Job 38:1; 40:6).
- *Fire*, which, like wind is also a symbol of deity and of God's presence. (3). God appeared to Moses in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1–6). After Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, the Lord sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the place (2 Chronicles 7:1–3). John the Baptist had prophesied of Jesus, *'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'* (Luke 3:16).
- Speaking with other tongues (4). They were enabled to speak *the wonderful works of God* in recognisable languages which they had never learned (7–11). The tongues-speaking here in this chapter must not be confused with a repetition of unintelligible sounds.

Many of the devout Jews in Jerusalem were amazed and perplexed when they heard those early disciples speaking in tongues, but others mocked and accused them of drunkenness (13). It is important to note that they were not behaving like drunkards. They were not slurred in their speech, but were very lucid. Some foolishly use these verses to justify their lack of control when they are supposed to be 'drunk with the Spirit'. Such a thing is unbiblical! **The filling of the Spirit leads to self-control**; this is the opposite of the effects of drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18).

The fruit of the Lord's teaching over the forty days before his ascension was seen in the preaching of Peter. Jesus had *opened their*

understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures (Luke 24:44–45). The apostle rebutted the mockers who accused the Christians of drunken behaviour (12). He then explained to his Jewish congregation the significance of what was happening. His sermon was full of quotations from the Old Testament and he demonstrated that the prophecy of Joel which promised the coming of the Holy Spirit was being fulfilled before their very eyes (14–21; cp. Joel 2:28–32).

Peter also showed how the Old Testament prophesied of the death and resurrection of Christ (25–28; cp. Psalm 16:8–11). He told his hearers that it was not possible that the Lord Jesus should be held by death (24). The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was not an accident; God planned it for our salvation. *Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God* (23; cp. 4:28). The Lord Jesus is *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world* (Revelation 13:8).

God the Father chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, having predestined us to be adopted into his family *according to the good pleasure of his will* (Ephesians 1:4–5). God is sovereign in all of his purposes. There is infinite wisdom and care in all his planning! What wonderful grace that God should choose to save poor sinners like us and bring us into his family. God's purposes for us are good and wise (Romans 8:28). Blessed be his name! Let us rejoice and praise him with thankful hearts.

The fact that God planned the death of Christ to save sinners in no way excused those who had crucified him. The people in the crowd had heard Jesus and seen many of his miracles. They had taken him by lawless hands and were responsible for his death (23, 36–37; cp. 3:13–15; 7:51–52). **We must never hide behind God's purposes to excuse our own waywardness or sin.**

Peter pointed out to his hearers that the verses he quoted from Psalm 16 could not refer to David who died and was buried. David had prophesied of the Christ (the promised Messiah) who had died and had risen from the dead (27–32). Peter told them that the Lord Jesus had been *exalted to the right hand of God* and that it was he who had poured out the Holy Spirit upon the company in the upper room (33).

Peter quoted from Psalm 16 and pointed out to his hearers that the verses he quoted could not refer to David who died and was buried. David had prophesied of the Christ (the promised Messiah) who had died and had risen from the dead (27–32). Peter told them that the Lord Jesus had been *exalted to the right hand of God* and that it was he who had poured out the Holy Spirit (33).

Jesus and the apostles taught that there can be no forgiveness of sin without repentance. Those who want to be saved, must turn away from their sin and trust in the Lord Jesus. Baptism is a symbol of our identification with Christ who died, was buried, and rose from the grave to save sinners. It is also a confession that we are walking with him in newness of life (Romans 6:3–5). If you love the Lord Jesus and acknowledge him as your Saviour, you will want to obey him. Have you been baptised as he has commanded (Matthew 28:19)?

The promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit is not for a select few but for *as many as the Lord our God will call* (39). All Christians are called by God and they all receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9,30. See notes on Acts 1:4–8). The body of each Christian is *the temple of the Holy Spirit* (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The real test of whether a person has the gift of the Spirit is not speaking in tongues but having the fruit of the Spirit in his life (Galatians 5:22–23). **We are very privileged to have the Helper, the Holy Spirit within us wherever we go (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). We are never alone.**

Three thousand people were saved after hearing Peter's sermon. They gladly received the word and were baptised in obedience to God's command (41). They were integrated into the life of the Jerusalem church. *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers* (42). Let us think about this:

- *They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine.* There is more to the Christian life than 'making a decision' to follow Christ. Thousands of people make 'decisions for Christ' but their lives are no different. If we truly love the Lord, we will be determined to continue in the apostles' teaching which is found in Scripture. Doctrine should

never be a dull thing to us. We should be thrilled to learn more about God, what he has done for us in Christ, and how he wants us to live.

- *They continued steadfastly in ... fellowship.* They had unity among themselves ('*one accord*', 46) which is essential for true fellowship. Christian fellowship is far more than having a cup of tea after church, than going on a church outing or enjoying some Christian social activity though these are valuable. It is first and foremost spiritual, being based on our fellowship with God (1 John 1:3). It is grounded in sound doctrine (what the apostles taught) and holiness of life (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Fellowship flows out of a deep love for our fellow Christians, helping them in their need (1 John 3:15–19). Fellowship involves showing kindness, being tender-hearted to one another, and showing a readiness to forgive when we have been wronged (Ephesians 4:32). We cannot, however, have true fellowship with those who deny the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul was thankful for Christian fellowship (Philippians 1:3–5). If a person has no desire for Christian fellowship, they may be backslidden or not truly saved.

- *They continued steadfastly in ... the breaking of bread* (42). This refers to the Communion service. This is a solemn occasion when we remember the love of the Lord Jesus for us and his great sacrifice for our sins. The Lord Jesus commanded, '*Do this in remembrance of me*' (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24–25). It is a remembrance service of his death which was a once for all sacrifice, not a re-sacrificing of Christ as some believe. When we eat the bread and drink from the communion cup, we *proclaim the Lord's death till he comes* (1 Corinthians 11:26). The bread speaks of his body, broken and tortured at Calvary for us. The Lord Jesus said of the cup that we take at the Communion service, '*This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins*' (Matthew 26:28; cp. Ephesians 1:7). **He wants us to remember that he paid the supreme price to save us and this should enhance our love for him and make us hate sin with all our heart.**

- *They continued steadfastly in ... prayers* (42). They prayed together. It is sad and strange that many professing Christians are absent from the prayer meetings of their church. Do they really take the Bible seriously? Do they really believe that God answers us when we pray together (cp. Acts 4:23–31)?
- They also had a practical concern for the needy in the church (45). These Christians really loved each other and cared for one another. They were filled with joy and praise to God (46–47).

We must not live in spiritual isolation when there is a good local church nearby which continues *steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers* (42). A genuine believer will be keen to be involved in the life and witness of a local church as a member. *The Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved* (47). **Has he added you to the church?**

Acts chapter 3

A man who had been lame from birth and about forty years old sat begging at the Beautiful Gate of the temple (2; 4:22). He was taken there every day, but this day was to be different and life-transforming. The man saw Peter and John about to enter the temple and he begged them for money (3).

The two apostles commanded the lame beggar to look at them and he did so, *expecting to receive something from them* (4–5). He received something far more precious – salvation and healing. Peter told him that he did not have silver or gold but commanded him to rise up and walk in the name (upon the authority) of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The man was immediately healed and he went into the temple with the apostles, *walking, leaping, and praising God* (6–8). The people recognised that this man had been miraculously healed and they were filled with wonder and amazement (11–12).

These verses give an example of the *many wonders and signs* that were done through the ministry of the apostles (2:43). The working of miracles was an evidence of their apostolic ministry and that of their associates (cp. 5:12; 6:8; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4).

The Lord does not give signs and wonders ministries today and those who claim to have such ministries deceive themselves and millions of others. When they fail to heal, they generally blame the sufferer, claiming that there must be lack of faith or sin in that person's life which blocks the healing. God does heal today, but when we ask him for healing, we must submit to his wise providence as Paul did (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

We have a wonderful message of salvation and we are to witness and bring the gospel to those around us. Some look to us, *expecting to receive something*. They may want us to pray for their physical needs, but we have a message that can meet with their deepest need – the need for forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to God. **What are we offering to those around us?**

The lame man who was healed clung to Peter and John and the amazed crowd followed them into Solomon's Porch; this provided a great opportunity for Peter to preach the gospel (11). He made it quite clear that the One who had healed the man was the Lord Jesus Christ, whom they had rejected in favour of a murderer, when Pilate had offered to release him. They had *killed the Prince of life* but God had raised him from the dead and the apostles were witnesses to this. The lame man had been healed through faith in the name of Jesus (12–16).

Peter told them that they and their rulers had killed Christ through ignorance, but God had foretold his death and resurrection by the mouth of all his prophets (17–18). He urged them, '*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out*' (19). Repentance is essential to salvation and it was a vital element in apostolic preaching (cp. 2:38; 5:31; 8:22; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). There is much man-centred preaching today which lacks any message of repentance. It focuses on the emotional hurts and needs of people rather than their need as sinners who are under the wrath of God. **We cannot be saved unless we repent of our sin.** Repentance is the gift of God (11:18) which comes through the enabling of the Holy Spirit who first convicts us of our sin.

We must never refuse to urge sinners to repent on account of their inability to do so because God commands all men to repent (19; cp. 17:30). The lame man could not walk, but Peter commanded him, '*Rise up and walk*' and he walked (6). As we declare God's Word we must expect him to bring sinners to repentance.

God gives us great blessings when we repent. Our sins are blotted out so that we are no longer under condemnation (cp. Isaiah 44:22; Colossians 2:14); our sins are forgiven and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). **Do you know these blessings in your own life?**

Let us think about '*times of refreshing*' and '*the times of restoration*' (19–21):

- '*Times of refreshing*' (19). The Greek word translated '*refreshing*' is the same word that is used for '*rest*' (eg. Matthew 11:29) Peter told

the people that the Lord Jesus was the great Prophet promised through Moses whom they must hear. Samuel and the prophets who followed him had spoken of the gospel age (22–24; cp. Deuteronomy 18:18). God had raised up his Servant Jesus and sent him to bless them by turning them away from their wickedness (24–26). God gives us great blessings when we repent; there is rest and relief from the tyranny of sin; there are *‘times of refreshing ... from the presence of the Lord.’*

There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). There is no joy to be compared with that which we receive when sinners are saved. Such times are truly *‘times of refreshing’* and of *‘rest’*.

- *‘The times of restoration of all things’* when Jesus comes again (21). There will then be a new heaven and a new earth and everlasting joy for the people of God (Isaiah 66:22; 2 Peter 3:10–13; Revelation 21:1–5). A glorious future awaits every Christian. We will be glorified (Romans 8:30). To be glorified is to have a new body that will never age, never feel pain, never suffer death (Revelation 21:3–5). Such a body will never be the instrument of sin.

We have a glorious inheritance in heaven. The suffering that we endure for Christ pales into insignificance when we compare it with the glory that shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18). *The Lord Jesus Christ will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body* (Philippians 3:20–21). We shall see our precious Saviour in all his majesty and splendour. We will admire him and love him as never before. We will then realise more than ever just how much we owe him. **Are you looking forward to *‘the times of restoration’*?**

Acts chapter 4

The priests, the Sadducees, and the captain of the temple guard arrived as Peter and John were speaking to the people. They were very disturbed to hear the apostles preaching of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead (1–2). The chief priests were Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. The preaching of the resurrection of Christ, whom they had crucified, was extremely offensive to them. If Jesus had not risen, they would have been able to produce his body from the tomb on which they had set a guard. They tried to spread the lie that the disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:11–15). The enemies of the gospel will resort to any amount of lies to discredit the gospel message. The apostles had seen the risen Christ many times and they could not help but speak the things which they had seen and heard (20).

The Jewish religious leaders had Peter and John arrested and imprisoned but many of those who had heard the apostles believed and five thousand were added to the church (3–4). Assuming that not all who heard the apostles believed, we can work out that a huge crowd must have heard the apostles teach and preach after the lame man was healed.

The rulers, elders, scribes and the high priest questioned Peter and John the next day. They should have been glad that a poor, wretched, lame man had been healed but the miracle did not bring them any satisfaction. They asked, *‘By what power or by what name have you done this?’* (7). Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly proclaimed that the lame man had been healed by the power of the risen Christ whom they had crucified (7–10).

The tragedy of the Jewish religious leaders was that they were blinded by their own religious prejudice and they had no desire to be healed of their spiritual blindness. They obstinately refused to believe in Christ, despite the miracle that had been wrought at the gate of the temple.

Peter quoted Psalm 118, verse 22 (11) which Jesus also used with reference to the chief priests and Pharisees when applying the teaching of his parables (Matthew 21:42–45). The chief corner-stone determines the accuracy of the angle of the walls. If the corner-stone is not suitable, the walls of the whole building will be out of line. The chief-cornerstone of God's building is the Lord Jesus Christ. He was rejected by the Jewish leaders ('*you builders*') but chosen by God the Father and precious (1 Peter 2:4).

Dr D. M. Lloyd-Jones observes, 'Here is the test of a good builder: Can he choose something solid, durable, that can stand the strain and stress? These Jewish leaders, who called themselves "builders", wanted something big enough and great enough to make their world and civilization, but they rejected the Son of God. It is the supreme tragedy of all history that when men and women are confronted by the only one who can solve the problems and answer the questions, they reject him with scorn and derision' (AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY', VOLUME 2, ACTS 4-5, page 41).

Peter was very uncompromising in his message, declaring, '*Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*' (12). If we reject the Lord Jesus, we reject God's way of salvation, and we will be lost for ever. Those who teach that there are many ways to God pervert the teaching of Scripture and deny the gospel. Evangelicals who compromise with the ecumenical movement are in danger of denying the faith. Light cannot have fellowship with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14).

We may be accused of bigotry or of intolerance when like Peter and Paul we insist that the Lord Jesus is the only way to God the Father (12; cp. John 14:6; Galatians 1:8–9). **We must be intolerant of everything which undermines the gospel or which seeks to explain it away.** G.K. Chesterton rightly said, 'Tolerance is the particular virtue of those who do not really believe in anything!'

The council which was the ruling body of the Jews (also known as 'the Sanhedrin') wondered what course of action they could take against

Peter and John. The man who had been healed was standing with them and they could not deny that *a notable miracle* had been done through them (14,16). They marvelled at the boldness of the two apostles who had not been trained in their own schools of learning and oratory (13). The Greek word translated ‘*boldness*’ means confidence in speech. *They realised that they had been with Jesus* (13). These men had been with Jesus during his ministry on earth and they now enjoyed daily fellowship with the risen Saviour.

Do you spend time with Jesus each day, waiting upon him in prayer and seeking to listen to him through his Word? Do others recognise that you have been with Jesus? Why do so many of us lack spiritual fruit in our lives? Could it be that we do not take time to be with the Lord Jesus? Perhaps we crowd personal devotions out of our lives for things which have little importance and we spend more time watching television, reading newspapers, looking at Facebook, or allocating all our available spare time to some hobby. We may protest that they are important to us, but they are not as important as cultivating our walk with the Lord. We need to be determined to discipline our lives.

Being with Jesus not only gave Peter and John confidence in speech, but also courage in the face of threats. They would not be silenced by threats from the council which commanded them not to speak nor to teach in the name of Jesus. They insisted that they had to listen to God rather than the Sanhedrin and that they could not help but speak the things which they had seen and heard (18–20). Are you timid or shy about your Christian faith? Spend much time with Jesus and he will give you grace to be bold in your witness.

*O the pure delight of a single hour
That before thy throne I spend,
When I kneel in prayer and with thee, my God,
I commune as friend with friend.* (Frances Jane Van Alstyne)

Peter and John went to the church and told them about the threats of the chief priests and elders. They did what we all should do in difficult times. They shared the problem with fellow believers and then sought the Lord in prayer, *raising their voice to God with one accord* (23–24).

They were able to pray like this because they enjoyed a precious unity in Christ. They prayed *with one accord* and *were of one heart and one soul* (24, 32).

Let us think about the way in which they prayed:

- They worshipped God as sovereign. The usual word which is translated ‘*Lord*’ is ‘*kurios*’. In this verse, however, the Greek noun ‘*despotēs*’ is translated ‘*Lord*’ (24). Our word ‘*despot*’ is derived from this word which means a master who has absolute authority. We should always remember when problems and trials come upon us that God is in absolute control of all our circumstances (cp. 28; Romans 8:28).
- They acknowledged God as the Creator of heaven and earth and of all who dwell in them (24). There is no support in the Bible for Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. God is our sovereign Creator who is awesome in his power. We can come to him knowing that all things are possible with him.
- They quoted Scripture in their prayer (from Psalm 2). They recognised that this opposition to the preaching of the apostles was opposition to Christ (25–28).
- They did not pray that the apostles would be protected from wicked men but that they would be enabled to speak God’s Word *with boldness* and that God would stretch out his hand to heal and to perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus (30).

Their prayer was answered. The Holy Spirit descended upon them shaking the place where they were assembled. *They were all filled with the Holy, Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness* (31). Do you wish to witness with confidence to those around you? You need to depend on the Holy Spirit, to spend time in prayer each day, and to read and learn the Word of God.

These verses tell us more about the church at Jerusalem. There was:

- Great power: *With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus* (33). The people were seeing the evidence of the power of the risen Christ.
- Great grace: *And great grace was upon them all* (33). Those early Christians had a great zeal for God, but it was not the offensive,

insensitive zeal of fanaticism. Their lives showed something of the beauty and compassion of the Lord Jesus. They were gracious people who showed a practical concern for the needy ones in their fellowship.

- Great generosity: They did not cling to their possessions. *Neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common* (32). They gave sacrificially to help one another, and some who were able, sold houses and lands and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles (34–35). Generous Christian giving is a mark of God’s grace in our lives (2 Corinthians 8:1–7; 9:7). **Are you a generous person? Do you have this ‘great grace’?**

One of those who sold land was Joses (36–37). He was a Levite who belonged to the Jewish community in Cyprus. He had close links with Jerusalem, being the cousin of John Mark, whose mother lived in the city. She had a large house where the church met for prayer (12:12; Colossians 4:10). The church gave Joses the name ‘Barnabas’ which means ‘Son of Encouragement’ because he was exercising a ministry of comfort and of encouragement among them. **Do you seek to encourage others in your church? Do you make yourself aware of the needs of others? Are you thoughtful and kind?**

*Give me a faithful heart,
Likeness to thee,
That each departing day
Henceforth may see
Some work of love begun,
Some deed of kindness done,
Some wanderer sought and won,
Something for thee.* (Sylvanus O. Phelps)

Acts chapter 5

Satan had failed to unsettle the church by attacks from without but he now attacked from within and this was more deadly and pernicious. The generosity of Barnabas and others made a great impact upon the Jerusalem church but Ananias and Sapphira sinned in their desire to be admired. They sold some land but gave only part of the proceeds from the sale to the church while pretending that they had given the whole amount. They were both equally guilty of deception (2,9) and as soon as Ananias laid the money at the apostle's feet, Peter challenged him, '*Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?*' (3). How foolish they were to imagine that they could deceive the Holy Spirit.

These verses make it quite clear that the Holy Spirit is a Person and that he is God (to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God; 3–4). This important truth is denied by false sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians. The Lord visited Ananias and Sapphira with terrible judgment (5,10). If their hypocrisy had gone undetected, sin would have flourished in the church, with disastrous consequences.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted a reputation for self-sacrificing godliness without paying the price. If we pretend to be godly when we are not, we offend God who hates lies and deception (cp. Proverbs 12:22). **Let us beware of hypocrisy. The greatest antidote to hypocrisy is to cultivate a healthy fear of God and of fearing to sin against him.** *So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things* (11).

*O give me Lord, the tender heart
That trembles at the approach of sin
A godly fear of sin impart,
Implant and root it deep within,
That I may dread thy gracious power
And never dare to offend thee more.*

(Charles Wesley)

Satan's attack on the church backfired on him. After the fear of God came upon the church and all who heard of the incident involving Ananias and Sapphira (11). The apostles were preaching and performing miracles in the precincts of the temple (*'Solomon's Porch'* – 3:11; 12,25) and *the people esteemed them highly* (13).

Some church leaders and their followers do not follow the biblical pattern but go to great lengths to be like the world in order to influence the world. Worldly behaviour is not becoming in anyone who professes to love Christ. **The church is most powerful and has more influence over the world when it is different from the world! We must not be conformed to this world, but be transformed** by the renewing of our mind. We will then prove *what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God* (Romans 12:2).

Multitudes of men and women were saved and the sick were healed (14–15). News of God's mighty power spread and people from the surrounding cities poured into Jerusalem with their sick and with those tormented by evil spirits. *They were all healed* as the Lord worked mightily through the apostles (16). When the high priest and his fellow Sadducees saw all that was happening, *they were filled with indignation* (17; Greek = 'filled with jealousy'). They arrested and imprisoned the apostles but an angel released them during the night. He told them, *'Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life'* (18–20). They obeyed the angel and went to the temple early in the morning and taught.

In the meantime the Sanhedrin had assembled to try the apostles and sent to have them brought from the prison (21). They were to have a great surprise! Let us pray that God will revive us so that he will be glorified in our lives and in the salvation of sinners. May he help us declare *'all the words of this life.'*

The men who had been sent to bring the apostles from the prison came back to the Sanhedrin empty-handed. They reported that though the prison was shut securely and under guard, the prisoners were not inside. The enemies of the apostles were bemused and confused and then heard that those who had been put in prison were in the temple

teaching the people (22–25). The apostles were again arrested and brought before the council; The high priest accused them of filling Jerusalem with their doctrine and of laying the blame for the death of Jesus on him and his fellow-members of the Sanhedrin (28). They had said to Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, '*His blood be on us and on our children*' (Matthew 27:25) but they now objected to having the blame put where it belonged – at their door.

The high priest charged the apostles with ignoring the command of the Sanhedrin not to teach in the name of Christ (28). They answered, '*We ought to obey God rather than men*' (29). **This is a vital principle! We must be law-abiding citizens, but when obedience to men's laws means denying God's laws, '*We ought to obey God rather than men.*'** Are you determined to obey the Lord, whatever the cost to yourself?

Peter did not allow the council members forget that they were responsible for the murder of Jesus whom God had raised Jesus and exalted to his right hand *to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins* (30–31). Notice that repentance and forgiveness are from God, that they are gifts graciously and freely given by him (cp. 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). Those who take Jesus as their Saviour, must also take him as their Prince and Lord. Peter affirmed that God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey him (32). Obedience to God begins with repentance and baptism, and continues in holiness of life. Let us always remember that *we ought to obey God rather than men*.

The Sanhedrin reacted furiously to Peter's bold defence and took counsel to kill the apostles (33). One of their most highly respected members Gamaliel, at whose feet the apostle Paul had been taught (22:3), urged caution. He reminded them of fanatical sects whose leaders had made great claims for themselves but had come to nothing. If the preaching of the apostles was not of God but of men, their work would also come to nothing. If it were of God, however, they would never overthrow it and they should beware lest they find themselves fighting God. Gamaliel's counsel prevailed and after a further warning, the apostles were flogged and released (34–40).

Gamaliel appeared to be very balanced in his response to the apostles and their message, but his attitude of ‘wait and see’ was not good enough. He would have heard the gospel on many occasions and knew that the miracles performed by Christ and his apostles were genuine; he knew that the lame man had been healed (3:10–11). He and the Sanhedrin had overwhelming evidence that Jesus had risen (cp. Matthew 28:11–15) but they were spiritually blind and refused to follow Christ.

The apostles rejoiced *that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name* and continued to preach and teach in the temple and in private homes ‘*Jesus as the Christ*’ (41–42). We may long for success in gospel work such as that enjoyed by the apostles and the early church. We must not forget, however, that there is a price to pay for success – hardship and suffering (cp. 16:22–24,34; 2 Timothy 2:3; 1 Peter 4:12–14). Are we prepared to suffer shame and humiliation for the sake of Christ and his gospel? Persecution may also take more subtle forms. We may suffer the taunts or hurtful remarks of family, friends and work-mates because we love the Lord. We may be denied promotion at work because we are ‘too honest’. **The Lord Jesus willingly suffered the most appalling humiliation and shame to save us (Philippians 2:5–8). Dare we demand a life of Christian ease?**

Acts chapter 6

The disciples were *multiplying* (1) and a growing church is bound to have ‘growing pains’. Satan is always on the lookout for ways to destroy the unity of a church. The apostles had such a great workload that they failed to notice that the Christian widows of the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) were being neglected. This situation was not brought about by malice but it could have easily destroyed the unity of the Jerusalem church. It led to misunderstanding and then *murmuring against the Hebrews* (Aramaic-speaking Jews; 1).

The apostles were sensitive to this grievance and acted to maintain the unity and fellowship of the church. They admitted that they were unable to preach the Word of God and also serve tables (2). Those in the church were to seek out from among themselves *seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom* to be responsible for the care of the widows (3). A situation which could have blighted the church was turned into great blessing (7). The humble task of serving tables was important enough to need ‘*men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*’. What is the evidence of being *full of the Holy Spirit*? There is a beauty and attractiveness about such a life because it bears the precious fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). **Stephen, one of the seven appointed, was greatly gifted, but he was willing to serve in a humble capacity** and God honoured this man who was to become the first Christian martyr. Pray that God will raise up men to lead our churches who are *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*.

The apostles had important priorities. They gave themselves *continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word* (4). — *And the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith* (7). The Word of God would not have spread and many would not have been brought to faith in Christ if the apostles had neglected prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Stephen was the first man in the early church, other than the apostles, to perform miracles. He is described as being *full of faith and the Holy*

Spirit (5) and *full of faith and power* (8). He faithfully, powerfully and boldly preached the gospel. He was an outstanding Christian. All Christians have the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38), but not all are equally godly or Christlike. Stephen's sermon in the next chapter shows that he had an excellent knowledge of Scripture. **We cannot have spiritual wisdom without a knowledge and love of God's Word.** *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom* (Colossians 3:16).

Some of the Jews who belonged to the Synagogue of the Freedmen were very hostile towards Stephen and disputed with him, but *they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke* (10). Preaching without the blessing and power of the Holy Spirit will not bring conviction of sin, nor will it move men and women to repentance and faith in God. Pray much that the preaching of your pastor will be attended by the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

The enemies of Stephen were determined to silence him and they recruited some men to falsely accuse him of blasphemy against Moses and God (11). These people were very devout in their religion but were prepared to tell wicked lies to further their evil aims (13–14). They stirred up the people and seized Stephen, bringing him before the Sanhedrin. The history of the church reveals that some of the worst persecution suffered by Christians has been instigated by religious people. All the members of the council fixed their eyes on Stephen whose face was as radiant as that of an angel (15). They may have hated Stephen, but they could see that his religion was real and far different from their hypocritical ways. Our churches need to see more shining faces which are aglow with love for Christ and joy in the Holy Spirit. The people in the world around us need to see the difference that the Lord Jesus has made in our lives.

Acts chapter 7

Stephen was challenged by the high priest to answer the accusations made against him and his defence took the form of a very powerful sermon. He had been falsely accused of speaking *blasphemous words against Moses and God* (6:11). He began by tracing the history of Israel from Abraham to the prophets (2–52). He proved that he had in no way misrepresented Moses who himself had suffered rejection at the hands of the Jews (27–29,35,39). Moses had supposed that his people *would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand* (25). They were spiritually blind but they were without excuse:

- They had seen wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and during their forty year journey through the wilderness (36).
- They had been given the Word of God through Moses (*‘the living oracles’*; 38).
- They had disobeyed that Word and had hankered after Egypt, the place of terrible bondage and misery (39; cp. Numbers 14:1–14).
- They had turned away from God to worship idols (41–43).

Stephen’s listeners honoured Moses with their lips but they were no different from their ancestors who had rejected him. They were more culpable because they had rejected the great prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom Moses had spoken (37). The words in verse 42 are frightening! — *‘Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven.’* They had rejected his Word and his servant, and he gave them up to the worship of the sun, moon and stars and idols. The captivity in Babylon was a just punishment for their rebellion against his commandments.

It is possible to rebel and to come to a point where God gives us up to our sin (cp. Romans 1:24,26,28). **The history of Israel gives us a solemn warning that Lord will not always be patient with those who have heard the gospel. To reject God’s goodness and mercy is the height of folly.**

The Jews laid great stress on the importance of the temple and the Sanhedrin (the council of the leaders of the Jews) had produced false witnesses to accuse Stephen of speaking against '*this holy place* (the temple) *and the law*' (6:13–14). He reminded them that God had been present with his people long before the temple had been built (44–46). He quoted the prophet Isaiah who had said that the Lord is far too great and majestic to be confined to a building made by men (49–50).

The Jews insisted on the rite of circumcision which was given by God to Abraham (8) but Stephen told them that they lacked the circumcision that really mattered. They were *stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears*. They laid great stress on religious ritual while neglecting to see that they needed to have a work of God in their hearts (51; cp. Romans 2:28–29). God sees our hearts and we cannot deceive him with religious sham (1 Samuel 16:7).

Those who were antagonistic to Stephen were like their ancestors, always resisting the Holy Spirit. He asked them, '*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?*' Their forefathers had rejected Moses and had persecuted the prophets who had foretold the coming of the Lord Jesus whom they had murdered (52). Stephen was facing false accusations, but he put his accusers in the dock and pressed home further charges against them. The law had been given to Moses *by the direction of angels* but they had not kept it (53).

One of the greatest enemies of true Christianity is a form of religion which has plenty of outward show but which lacks inward reality. Any religion which refuses to submit itself to the rule of Scripture is counterfeit. Many of the Jews professed to love the law of God, but their profession was empty. **It is not good enough to pay lip-service to truth. God requires us to live out his truth in our lives.**

The high priest and the Sanhedrin were *cut to the heart* (same Greek verb is translated '*furious*' in 5:33), but they raged rather than repented (54). Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and his gaze was not on his furious enemies but into heaven. He *saw the glory of God* and his precious Saviour. He was overwhelmed by what he saw and exclaimed that he was seeing heaven opened and Jesus *standing at the right hand*

of God (55–56). Those who heard him cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears. They refused to listen any more to God’s servant and they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death (57–58).

Stephen was murdered outside Jerusalem as was his Saviour, and like Jesus, he prayed for his murderers (60; cp. Luke 23:34). He called upon the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit and *he fell asleep* after praying for his enemies. **Death is not a dark abyss for the Christian! He falls asleep to wake up in the presence of his precious Saviour in heaven.** To die is to be with Christ. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord who will raise up our bodies when he comes again at the end of the age (Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:51–53; 1 Thessalonians 4:14–15).

We often wonder why it is that the Lord sometimes takes a believer while they are still young or engaged in a very fruitful and blessed ministry. We have no answer except to say that God is perfect in his wisdom. He knows best and all his ways are filled with love for us. Stephen’s prayer for his enemies was soon to be gloriously answered. Those who stoned him laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul who encouraged them in their wicked deed (58; 8:1). Saul was to become the great apostle Paul who was never to forget the day that Stephen died (22:19–20). The Lord took Stephen but Saul was to become the greatest missionary in the history of the church. **God does bring good out of adverse circumstances.**

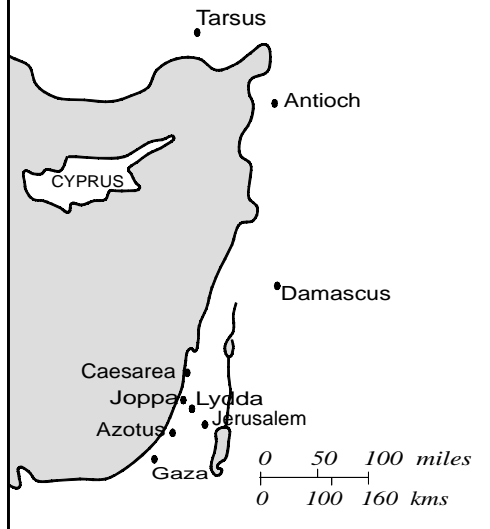
Acts chapter 8

Saul did not stop at consenting to the death of Stephen. He also *made havoc of the church* persecuting Christians with great zeal (1–3). The outlook appeared to be very bleak for the church at Jerusalem as its members were imprisoned or scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. **God overruled this great persecution, however. The scattering of the Christians led to the spread of the gospel.** The persecuted Christians did not give up in despair over the loss of property and threats against their lives. *Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word* (4). The word translated ‘preaching’ here means ‘evangelising’ or ‘witnessing to the good news’; (the other verb, meaning ‘to proclaim’, is found in verse 5).

The enemies of Christ may have silenced Stephen but God used his fellow deacon Philip to preach Christ in a Samaritan city. True preaching always exalts Christ. The apostle Paul wrote some years later, ‘*We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord*’ (2 Corinthians 4:5). God also worked miracles through Philip and there was great joy in that city.

You may not be called to preach before great crowds but you can share your faith with others. Pray for your relatives, friends, neighbours and for those with whom you work. Look for opportunities to bring them the gospel. God honoured those early believers and he will honour you, if you are faithful.

Witness in Judea, Samaria and Syria
(places mentioned in Acts 8 to 12)



There was a well-known sorcerer in Samaria named Simon who made great claims for himself. He astonished the people with his magic but many who had been deceived by him came to faith in Christ through Philip's preaching. They were baptised and so was Simon who also professed conversion. The sorcerer was amazed to see the miracles done through Philip's ministry (9–13).

When the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that the Samaritans had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them (14). They prayed for the Samaritans that they might receive the Holy Spirit and Simon wanted this apostolic power. He tried to bribe Peter and John to give him the power to bestow the Holy Spirit on whomever he laid hands (14–18).

Peter rebuked Simon for imagining that the gift of God could be purchased with money. He told him, '*Your heart is not right in the sight of God*' (21). The apostle urged Simon to repent of his wickedness and to pray to God for forgiveness. The sorcerer, fearing divine judgment, asked Peter to pray to God that none of the things of which he had spoken would come upon him (22–24). Peter and John preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages as they returned to Jerusalem (25; cp. 1:8).

Simon had given up his sorcery but he still hankered after power. **He had believed the gospel message and had been baptised but his heart was *not right in the sight of God*.** The most important thing in all the world is for each of us to know that we are right with God, that our sins are forgiven. Is your heart *right in the sight of God*? Have you repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus to save you?

NB. The Samaritans were Gentiles and the Holy Spirit was not given them at conversion but when Peter laid hands on them (15–17). Peter and the apostles had to be convinced that Gentiles did not have to submit to Jewish practices such as circumcision in order to be saved (see 10:44 to 11:18). These verses do not teach us to look for the Baptism of the Spirit after we are saved.

The Lord directed Philip to leave Samaria and go to a desert region between Jerusalem and Gaza. The evangelist obeyed God though it may have seemed strange to him to leave behind a thriving gospel work

to go to a desert. The Lord was working however in the heart of a eunuch who held high office in the royal court of Ethiopia (26). This man had been to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. He had obtained a scroll of the prophecy of Isaiah while in Jerusalem and was in his chariot reading Isaiah chapter 53 which prophesies the death of Christ in great detail. Philip went up to the man at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and asked him, '*Do you understand what you are reading?*' He replied, '*How can I unless someone guides me?*' (30–31).

We cannot be saved without understanding what the Bible teaches about salvation. **When the Holy Spirit works in the life of a sinner, he works in his mind as well as in his heart.** You will have noticed the emphasis on preaching the word in the ministry of the apostles and of Stephen and Philip. Many people go astray because they do not seek to understand the teaching of Scripture, or they attend a church where the Bible is not plainly and diligently taught.

Philip *preached Jesus* to the eunuch beginning with this passage of Scripture (35). The suffering servant of whom Isaiah prophesied is the holy Son of God. He was despised, rejected, humiliated and slain on the cross to save sinners. Philip would have told him about Christ's resurrection, of the need of repentance for his sin and faith in the Saviour. As they were passing a pool of water, the man asked Philip to baptize him. After confessing his faith in Christ he was baptized and went on his way rejoicing (36–39). Philip was miraculously transported by the Holy Spirit to Azotus and *he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea* (40). Churches were being formed throughout Israel and Samaria and the gospel was now being taken by a Gentile to Ethiopia. The church was thriving, despite persecution. **When God works, who can hinder him?**

Acts chapter 9

Saul of Tarsus Saul of Tarsus was relentless in his mission to destroy the church (1–2). He had seen and supported those who had killed Stephen and *made havoc of the church* (7:58 to 8:3), but the more he persecuted Christians, the greater the growth of the church. Christians were now to be found in Damascus, about one hundred and fifty miles to the north of Jerusalem and Saul was determined that they should be arrested and brought back to Jerusalem for imprisonment. He was however, kicking against a guilty conscience (5). He reckoned without God's sovereign and gracious purposes, and the arch-persecutor of the church became its great missionary. Saul and his party approached Damascus at midday when he was suddenly blinded by a dazzling light from heaven (3; 22:6). The risen Lord Jesus spoke to him, saying, '*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*' (4). Those who persecute believers persecute Christ.

God blinded Saul and humbled him so that he was now trembling with fear and astonishment. He asked two questions:

- '*Who are you, Lord?*' (5). The risen Saviour answered him, '*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*' Saul had been kicking against a guilty conscience. He was to discover that Jesus is the holy Son of God (20), spoken of in the Old Testament Scriptures, who died to save sinners. We cannot be saved unless we know who Jesus is, and why he came into the world.

- '*Lord, what do you want me to do?*' (6; cp. 22:10). **An evidence of conversion to Christ is submission to his lordship in our lives.** Jesus said that he was to go into Damascus where he would be told what he must do. Saul was to write some years afterwards, *We make it our aim ... to be well pleasing to him* (2 Corinthians 5:9). Those who love the Lord Jesus will keep his commandments (John 14:15). Have you submitted to the lordship of Christ in your life?

The blind persecutor was led into Damascus and did not eat or drink for three days (8–9).

Ananias is not to be confused with the man who was punished by God for lying to the Holy Spirit (5:3). Paul later described him as '*a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews*' who dwelt at Damascus (22:12). Ananias should be an encouragement to us all. He was not an apostle or a church leader but he was wonderfully used by God to contact Saul and to bring him into fellowship with the believers in Damascus.

The Lord came to Ananias in a vision, telling him that he was to go to a certain house and inquire for '*one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.*' Saul had been told in a vision that he would be coming to lay hands on him so that he might receive his sight. Ananias voiced his concern to the Lord, for he was aware that this man had come to Damascus on a mission of persecution (11–14). The Lord said to him, '*Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake*' (15–16). Ananias found Saul and laid hands on him so that he would receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. He then baptised him and the new Christian spent some days with the disciples at Damascus (19).

Saul was *a chosen vessel* of God and was to be used more than any other man in the history of the church to proclaim the gospel and to plant churches. All Christians were chosen by God to salvation before he made the world (Ephesians 1:4–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). Some mistakenly believe that the doctrine of election is a hindrance to evangelism. That is not so! This wonderful doctrine is taught in the Bible and it is a great encouragement for us to preach the gospel. **No one is too hard for God to save. He may have many chosen vessels among those who presently appear to be indifferent or opposed to the gospel.** Let us pray with faith and expectation and persevere in our work for the Lord!

The Jews at Damascus were amazed to find Saul preaching in their synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. They knew that he had come to persecute the infant church in their city but he was now proving to them that Jesus is the Christ (the promised Messiah). They turned on

him and plotted to kill him but the Christians at Damascus helped him to escape in a large basket over the city wall at night (20–25).

Saul returned to Jerusalem, but the Christians treated him with great suspicion. They could not bring themselves to believe that he had really come to faith in Christ. *But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles* (27). We can take verse 27 in two ways: either Saul testified of the Lord's dealings with him on the Damascus road and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus, or it was Barnabas who related these things to the apostles. Saul began to preach fearlessly in Jerusalem but the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) attempted to kill him. Some of the men escorted him to Caesarea from where he was sent to Tarsus for his own safety (29–30).

Five things are mentioned concerning the churches (31):

- They had peace. The persecution eased and the believers were also at peace between themselves.
- They were edified (built up). We cannot be edified where peace between ourselves and love are absent (cp. Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 8:1).
- They walked in the fear of the Lord.
- They walked in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
- They were multiplied.

Barnabas was a great encouragement to Saul (his name means 'son of encouragement'). He was prepared to trust Saul when others shunned him because of fear. Barnabas encouraged the new convert who was soon integrated into the life and witness of the church. **The ministry of encouragement is essential if a church is to be built up. Let us at all times seek to encourage one another.**

This chapter closes with an account of Peter's ministry in Lydda and Joppa. The Christian communities in these places may have been established as a result of the ministry of Philip who preached in all the cities between Azotus and Caesarea (Lydda and Joppa are situated between these two towns, 8:40; see map in notes in page 32). The early Christians were known as '*saints*' or '*disciples*' (13,19,32,38,41). The word '*saint*' means 'sanctified one'. A saint is one who has been set

apart to God. Every Christian is a saint and is expected to be holy and to lead a life which pleases God (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 1:15–16).

Peter visited the Christians in Lydda where there was a man named Aeneas who had been paralysed and bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, '*Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed*' (34). He was instantly healed and many turned to the Lord (34–35). Does the Lord Jesus heal today? The answer is that he does heal, but miraculous physical healing is the exception rather than the rule. The ability to heal the sick through the power of God was one of *the signs of an apostle* (2 Corinthians 12:12).

When the disciples at Joppa heard that the apostle Peter was in Lydda, they urgently sent for him after the death of one of their number. She was a well-loved sister in Christ, *full of good works and charitable deeds* (36). Her practical Christianity and compassion for those in need enhanced the witness of the church at Joppa (39). The raising of Dorcas from the dead also resulted in many believing on the Lord (42). Peter then *stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner* (43).

We may not see supernatural signs and wonders such as were wrought in the time of the apostles but we can be *full of good works and charitable deeds*. **Good works do not save us but they are an essential evidence of true faith (James 2:14–26) and of the love of God in our lives (1 John 3:17–18).** Jesus said, '*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*' (Matthew 5:16).

Acts chapter 10

The New Testament introduces us to several centurions (Roman army officers commanding one hundred soldiers) and they are all spoken of favourably. One was commended by the Lord Jesus for his great faith (Matthew 8:5–13), another glorified God as he saw the Lord Jesus die (Luke 23:47), and the centurion Julius *treated Paul kindly* (27:3).

Cornelius, a centurion based in Roman army garrison in Caesarea, was a devout, God-fearing man, prayerful and generous (2). It would seem that he was seeking a greater knowledge of God. The Lord sent an angel to Cornelius in a vision to tell him, *‘Your prayers and alms have come up for a memorial before God’* (4). God does take note of our prayers and kindness. Salvation is not by works such as giving generously to the poor and needy, nor by religious devotions, but we must not despise these things unless they are motivated by a proud, hypocritical heart. We should recognise that some who do these things are sincere seekers after God. We must be patient with them and show them the way of salvation from the Scriptures and encourage them to turn from their sin to Christ. **Cornelius was not yet a Christian but the Lord heard his prayers and approved of his compassion to the needy.** God told him to send messengers to Peter in Joppa who would tell him what he must do (5–8).

The Lord was already preparing Peter through a vision, to take the message of salvation to Cornelius. He was praying on the roof-top of Simon’s house about the sixth hour (noon) when he became very hungry. *He fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and saw all kinds of animals* descending in a great sheet. When a voice commanded him to kill and eat, he was not willing to do so. The voice rebuked him telling him that what God had cleansed, he must not call common. The Lord repeated these words twice more before the sheet with its animals was taken from his sight (9–16). The Lord Jesus had commanded that the gospel should be preached to all nations (1:8). Peter had not come to terms with preaching the gospel to the Gentiles whom the Jews considered to be unclean.

As he was wondering what the vision could mean the Holy Spirit told Peter that three men were seeking him and that he should go with them for he had sent them (17–20). Peter asked them the reason for their journey and they told him about Cornelius and his vision (21–22). Peter invited them in and the three men stayed the night. Peter returned with them to Caesarea (some 25 miles, 40 kilometres) away, accompanied by six of the Christians from Joppa (23; cp. 11:12).

Cornelius had gathered together his relatives and close friends to hear Peter but he was still spiritually ignorant and he tried to worship the apostle. Peter told him, *‘Stand up, I myself am also a man’* (24–26). Peter then told Cornelius and his company about God’s dealings with him. Many early Jewish Christians still held to their old prejudices concerning Gentiles (non-Jews) considering them to be ‘unclean’. God had told Peter in a vision to eat unclean animals and he got the message. *‘God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean’* (28). Before receiving his vision, he would have considered Romans to be unclean and he would never have entered the house of Cornelius (28–29). The centurion then told Peter of his own vision and of the angel’s instructions to send for him (30–32).

Cornelius and his company were eager and expectant hearers of God’s Word. He acknowledged that they were in the presence of God saying, *‘We are all present before God to hear all the things commanded you by God’* (33). These words are full of instruction for us. **Do we come to worship each Lord’s Day remembering that we are all present before God?** Such an attitude will help bring a sense of awe and adoration into our worship and it will cause us to expect God to speak to us through the preaching of his Word.

*Jesus, where’er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy seat:
Where’er they seek thee, thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.*

*Here may we prove the power of prayer,
To strengthen faith, and sweeten care;
To teach our faint desires to rise,
And bring all heaven before our eyes.* (William Cowper)

Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man, but he needed to hear the gospel and that is why the Lord sent Peter to him. God had been preparing this Gentile to receive the gospel and had been working in his heart long before the apostle came to him. Peter began his message to Cornelius and those with him by telling them that *God shows no partiality*. God accepts from every nation those who fear him and work righteousness (34–35). **Prejudice is a hindrance to the work of the gospel. We must never despise anyone because they are of a different race or station in life to ourselves.** We are all sinners and we all need to be saved. The gospel is for all classes of people and for all races. *God shows no partiality*. Let us seek to reach all kinds of people. God may already be working in the lives of those who seem unlikely to be saved, preparing them to receive the message of the gospel.

Salvation is not restricted to certain races. Verse 35 could be misunderstood to teach that salvation can be obtained through good works but that is not so. The Bible plainly teaches that works of righteousness are not the basis of our acceptance with God (Titus 3:4–5). We are accepted by God only through the work of Christ in redemption (Ephesians 1:6–7).

Peter's preaching was Christ-centred. He preached Jesus as '*Lord of all*' (36) and reminded his hearers of the power and compassion of Christ. It would appear from verse 37 that they knew about Jesus and about the baptism of John. Peter told them that Jesus had been crucified but had risen from the dead. He had been seen by many witnesses chosen by God, including Peter himself, who had eaten and drank with him after his resurrection. The risen Lord had commanded the apostles to preach to the people (38–41). What was their message? That Jesus had been *ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead*. The prophets had spoken of him, saying that whoever believes (trusts) in him will receive remission of sins (42–43).

As Peter was preaching, *the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word* (44). We have already seen that God gives his Holy Spirit to all who trust in Christ and repent of their sin. Cornelius and his friends received a similar experience to that of the apostles at Pentecost when

the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them (44–48; cp. 11:15). They spoke with tongues and magnified God and this was an evidence that they had received the Holy Spirit. Not all Christians in the early church spoke in tongues and this experience was not the only evidence of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:30). The gift of tongues has now ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8) and any attempt to replicate the experiences recorded in the book of Acts fall far short of genuine languages. Moreover, the Holy Spirit fell upon all without exception in such visitations (44).

Why did God send the Holy Spirit in such a spectacular manner to the household of Cornelius? The Jewish Christians who were with Peter were '*of the circumcision*'. They were rigid in their ideas and could not accept that Gentiles would be saved. They *were astonished ... because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also* (45). They could not forbid baptism to these Gentiles (47–48). This outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the vision that Peter had received earlier, prepared the way for Peter and the church to accept Gentiles into their fellowship.

The Holy Spirit still works when the Word of God is preached. He convicts sinners, opening their minds and hearts to understand and to receive the message of the gospel. He brings life to sinners so that they repent of their sin. He also works in the hearts of believers when they hear the Word preached, bringing comfort, encouragement and rebuke. Let us thank God for the ministry of the Holy Spirit and look to him to work among us.

Acts chapter 11

The opening verses of this chapter describe the great tension that came into the church with the admission of the Gentiles. The devil does not need to attack the church from outside if he can tear it apart from within. On his return to Jerusalem, Peter was called to give account and to defend himself against *those of the circumcision who contended with him* (2). These people were Jewish Christians who had difficulties in accepting that Gentiles could be saved. They were angry that he had kept company with Gentiles and that he had eaten with them. He had wisely taken some of the same persuasion to Caesarea who would be able to confirm that the Holy Spirit had indeed fallen upon Gentiles (10:45).

Peter told them about his vision and of all that had happened at the house of Cornelius (4–17). He reminded them that God had given them the Holy Spirit when they had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and that he had done the same for these Gentiles. He dared not withstand God by turning them away (17). Peter's critics were silenced when they heard these things and they glorified God, saying, '*Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life*' (18). God is very gracious in giving us precious gifts. Though he commands all men to repent (Acts 17:30), repentance is a gift which he sovereignly bestows (cp. 5:31). **We would never have repented of our sin but for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, bringing us to new birth.** The gift of repentance causes us to loathe our sin, to turn from it, to be committed to Christ and to obey God's holy Word. There can be no genuine conversion to Christ without repentance.

Christian, think of all that God has done in your life. Thank him and praise him for his great grace, and for the priceless gifts of repentance and of the Holy Spirit.

The persecution which arose with the martyrdom of Stephen had scattered believers as far as Antioch in Syria, some 300 miles (480 kilometres) to the north of Jerusalem and to Cyprus (19). Some of these Christians were Greek-speaking Jews who had restricted their

preaching to fellow-Jews. When they came to Antioch however, they also preached the Lord Jesus to *the Hellenists* (Greek-speaking Jews; 20). We read that *the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord* (21). '*The hand of the Lord*' is an expression that speaks of God's almighty power (4:29–30; 13:11; cp. Exodus 3:20; 1 Peter 5:6). Persecution led to blessing!

When the church of Jerusalem heard of this great work of God in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to visit this new and thriving Christian church. *When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord* (23). We may begin well, but the most important thing for us is that we continue with the Lord and finish well. When the hand of the Lord is with us, it can be seen in our lives and in the life of the church. There is a zeal for the Lord and a great desire to please him each day. **Do others see the grace of God in your life?**

Barnabas is described as '*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*' (24). His ministry of encouragement is again described in these verses. He went to Tarsus to seek Saul, bringing him back to Antioch. They began to teach in Antioch, reaching a great many people with their message. *The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch* (26). There was a 'Christ-likeness' about them that was apparent even to unbelievers.

Agabus came with other prophets from Jerusalem and warned of coming famine. The grace of God was seen in the response of the believers at Antioch who sent Barnabas and Saul with gifts for the Christians of Judea. Notice their generosity, each giving *according to his ability* (27–30).

Acts chapter 12

This chapter records two incidents involving an angel of the Lord. Herod (Agrippa 1) the king was an evil man. He was a grandson of Herod the Great, who had sought to murder the Lord Jesus after the visit of the wise men. Agrippa 1 was also a nephew of Antipas, who killed John the Baptist. He killed James, the brother of John, and seeing that this pleased the Jews, he also had Peter arrested with a view to execution once the Passover was finished (2–4).

The church in Jerusalem was under siege and Peter was in prison. Herod may have been told of Peter's miraculous escape from prison some years earlier (Acts 5:17–24). Four squads of four soldiers were assigned to guard Peter round the clock. He was chained to two soldiers and another two were guarding the prison doors (4–6). Humanly speaking, Peter was in an impossible situation and execution seemed certain. *But constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church* (5). The health of any church is measured by its prayer meeting. If you have no interest in this vital meeting of your church, you despise a precious opportunity to meet with God's people to pray.

An angel of the Lord came to the prison the night before Herod intended to deal with Peter. The angel roused the sleeping apostle and he was miraculously released from his chains and from prison (6–11). Peter went to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, where a prayer meeting was in progress. The praying Christians could not at first bring themselves to believe that their prayers had been so wonderfully answered (12–17). **Do you come to God in prayer expecting him to answer you or are you astonished when he does?**

Why did the Lord bring about a miraculous release for Peter but not for James? We do not know. We must always bow to God's sovereign purposes. He knows what is best for us and for his church. If we die unexpectedly, we know that for the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). James went on ahead of Peter to be with his precious Saviour.

The people of Tyre and Sidon, who depended on Herod for supplies of grain, had fallen foul of his anger. They sued for peace and Herod set a day for their delegation to appear before him. The king, resplendent in his royal robes delivered a speech and the people, seeking to gain his favour, kept shouting, *'The voice of a god and not of a man!'* (20–22). Herod did nothing to prevent this blasphemous adulation. *An angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died* (23). The Jewish historian, Josephus, confirms that Herod was struck with an excruciatingly painful disease from which he died in August AD 44. This was four months after he had killed James. No one who opposes God and his church will escape judgment. *But the word of God grew and multiplied* (24).

Angels are a terror to the wicked (cp. 2 Kings 19:35) but their ministry is a great comfort to the child of God (11; cp. Psalms 34:7; 91:11). God created angels before he created Adam. They are spirit beings, invisible to the human eye except when God chooses to allow us to see them. They have immense strength (Psalm 103:20). They are *ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation* (Hebrews 1:14). *The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear him, and delivers them* (Psalm 34:7). Peter found this to be true in his own experience when he was rescued from prison (11:5–10). *The angel of the LORD* fed and encouraged the prophet Elijah when he fled from wicked Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1–8).

The Bible does not teach that each person has a single guardian angel but we do know that each child of God is watched over by many, many angels. *He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways* (Psalm 91:11). Angels are present with the believer when he dies. The angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22) and they will gather up God's people to meet the Lord Jesus at his second coming (Matthew 24:30–31). **Christian, rejoice in your priceless privileges and be encouraged. The Lord will never forsake you (Hebrews 13:5) and his angels watch over you.**

Acts chapter 13

The church at Antioch was established by Christians who had been driven from Jerusalem by persecution (11:19–26); it became the base for the missionary activity of the early church. The characteristics of a healthy fellowship were found among them. Their leaders were blessed in their evangelistic work (11:20–24) and diligent in their teaching (11:26). The people were also generous in their giving (11:27–30). Barnabas and Saul were among the prophets and teachers at Antioch.

The word ‘*ministered*’ (2) is not the more usual New Testament word meaning ‘to serve’; it is translated from the Greek verb from which our English word ‘liturgical’ is derived and it is also translated ‘*worship*’ in the English Standard Version. We must always remember that our worship and service is first and foremost for God and not for our own enjoyment. I do not advocate dullness in worship but many believe that worship is dead if it does not entertain them. How mistaken they are!

The prophets and teachers at Antioch gave themselves to God in worship and fasting. As they worshipped and fasted, the Holy Spirit directed them to set aside as missionaries two of their number, Barnabas and Saul. Fasting is a neglected discipline in the church today and we are the poorer for it! The church at Antioch was led by godly men who fasted and prayed (3; cp. 14:23). They earnestly sought the Lord and they were brought into line with the mind of the Holy Spirit. — *They sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit ...* (3–4).

There are some important principles for missionary work in these verses. Though Barnabas and Saul were called to their missionary work by God, it was their local church that recognised that call! They were also active in the leadership of the Antioch church. Unproven novices or those who are not already involved in serving the Lord in their local church should not be sent out as missionaries. If we disregard these biblical principles, we are asking for trouble!

Barnabas and Saul took John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) as their assistant and began their missionary work in Cyprus (4–5). They landed at Salamis in eastern Cyprus and preached in the Jewish synagogues. They then travelled through the island to Paphos.

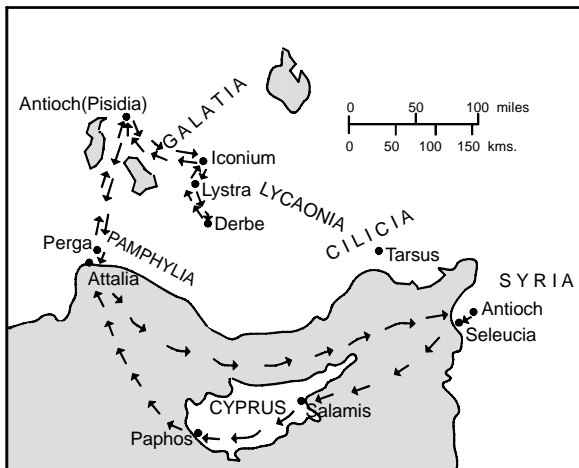
The only conversion recorded in Cyprus was that of Sergius Paulus the Roman proconsul, who *called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God* (7). Elymas, a Jewish false prophet and sorcerer, sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Where men are seeking to know God and his Word, Satan will seek to turn them away from the faith, using false teachers (8). Elymas was struck with blindness at the command of Saul (from now on called ‘Paul’) and the proconsul *believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord* (9–12). The miracle had convinced him of a superior power to that possessed by Elymas but notice that he was also amazed by what he heard. **Does this same teaching fill you with a sense of amazement, worship and grateful thanksgiving to God?**

The work in Cyprus was not spectacular apart from this one incident, but we see the pattern for the ongoing missionary work of Paul. There was opposition and hostility to the preaching of the gospel. We must never forget that we

are engaged in spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Ephesians 6:1–12) but it is reassuring to know God is with us and that he is far more powerful than the enemies of the gospel.

Paul and Barnabas sailed from Paphos in Cyprus to go to Pamphylia.

When they arrived in Perga (which is in what is now Turkey), John Mark, for whom they apparently had high hopes, left



them and returned to Jerusalem (13). We are not given the reason for John Mark's decision but it is obvious from later events that Paul considered him to be very wrong in what he had done (15:38–39). Mark was eventually reconciled to Paul, serving with him as a missionary (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24).

Paul and his companions travelled north from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia (14; not to be confused with Antioch in Syria). They went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day where the rulers invited Paul to preach. He challenged those who feared God to listen to what he had to say (15–16). If we fear God, we will listen to God's Word and obey it,

The sermons to the Jews recorded in the Book of Acts are rooted in the Old Testament (eg. 2:16–36; 3:13–26; 7:1–53). Notice how Paul declared the sovereignty of God:

- In his choice of Israel to be his people (17).
- In his deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (17).
- In his destruction of the Canaanite nations and distribution of their land to the people of Israel (19).
- In giving them judges and then King Saul (20–21).
- In removing Saul and raising up David as king (22).
- In fulfilling his promise to raise up a Saviour. *'From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour — Jesus.'* The promise of the Messiah from the family of David was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus (23; cp. verse 32).

We need to know the Old Testament if we are to understand the New (cp. Luke 24:27,32,44–46). 'We must see that the relationship of the Old to the New is not that of law to grace – for there is grace in the Old as well as in the New, and law in the New as well as in the Old – but rather that of promise to fulfilment.' (Rev. James Philip).

Paul told his hearers that John the Baptist had prepared the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus but that the rulers in Jerusalem had rejected him. His death and resurrection had been foretold by the prophets. God had raised him from the dead and he was seen by many witnesses on many occasions (27–31). The apostle continued to quote Old Testament prophecies relating to Jesus (33–35), showing that Psalm

16, verse 10 could not refer to David whose body decayed in the grave, but David speaks Jesus whom God raised up. Paul went on to explain that through the death of Jesus there is forgiveness of sins and justification: *‘By him everyone who believes is justified’* (36–39).

Our sin renders us guilty in the sight of God who is righteous and must punish us for our sins. How can he freely pardon us and remain just? The doctrine of justification shows how God has dealt with this problem (Romans 3:24–26). We cannot be justified by the law of Moses (39) or through our own works. Paul, writing later to the Galatian churches (which included the church at Antioch in Pisidia), emphasised this truth (Galatians 2:16).

What is justification? – ‘Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.’ (WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM). ‘To justify’ is a legal term which means ‘to declare righteous’. Our sin is imputed to Christ (put to his account) and his righteousness is imputed to us (put to our account) – see Romans 4:3–5, 22–25; 2 Corinthians 5:19–21.

The more we understand this great doctrine, the more we will appreciate the wonder and greatness of our salvation, and the more we will love and magnify the Lord Jesus. ‘Justification by faith is the jubilee trumpet of the gospel because it proclaims the gospel to the poor and destitute whose only door of hope is to roll themselves in total helplessness upon the grace and power and righteousness of the Redeemer of the lost’ (Professor John Murray. ‘COLLECTED WRITINGS’, VOLUME 2, page 217. Published by Banner of Truth Trust).

Paul’s sermon made a great impact on many Jews and proselytes (Gentiles who had embraced the Jewish faith). They followed the apostles from the synagogue who *persuaded them to continue in the grace of God* (42–43). What does this mean? These people had been taught that to be accepted by God, they must adhere strictly to the requirements of Judaism such as circumcision, observing various holy days and ceremonial rites (cp. Colossians 2:16–17). These things could not bring peace with God, however. The grace of God declares that we

are not saved through our own works but through the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to save sinners. Paul and Barnabas impressed these great truths upon their hearers. They must never again depend on religious rites for their salvation.

The following Sabbath, *almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God* (44). Many Gentiles were saved in Antioch and the gospel spread throughout the surrounding area (48–49). We have already seen that Satan is not slow to stir up opposition to the preaching of the gospel, and that it often comes from religious people. The greatest enemies of Paul’s ministry were generally religious Jews (45–47). They stirred up the civic leaders of Antioch to persecute the apostles who were then expelled from the region. Paul and Barnabas *shook off the dust from their feet against them* (50–51; cp. Luke 9:5). If we are faithful to God’s Word, and proclaim the gospel of God’s free and sovereign grace to sinners, we must not be surprised to encounter opposition from religious people who reject much of the Bible.

What is our confidence in evangelism? – That all of God’s elect will surely believe. In Antioch, *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed* (48). All those whom God has chosen before he made the world will surely be saved! (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). We do not depend upon ourselves but upon the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit as the Word of God is preached. When God is pleased to give blessing, *we are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit* even in the face of persecution (52).

Acts chapter 14

Paul and Barnabas went on to Iconium which was about seventy miles (112 kilometres) south-east of Antioch. The pattern and the effects of their ministry were similar to that in Antioch – preaching in the synagogue, many conversions among Gentiles as well as Jews, opposition from unbelieving Jews who *stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren* (1–2).

Notice the comment in verse 1 concerning the preaching of Paul and Barnabas in the synagogue, *they ... so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed*. Notice that little word ‘so’ (the English Standard Version translates this verse, they ‘*spoke in such a way*’). There was persuasion in their preaching as they challenged their hearers to think about their message (cp. 26:27–28). Biblical Christianity is not a mindless exercise. It is persuasion based on facts.

Preachers must be persuaders!

How did the apostles react to opposition and slander (2)? They did not give up, or ‘get up and go’: *Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord* (3). God blessed their preaching of *the word of his grace*, confirming it with signs and wonders. Hatred and persecution did not deter the apostles – *they stayed there a long time*. Paul and Barnabas only left Iconium when a violent attempt was made by their enemies to stone them. They moved on south to Lystra and Derbe where they continued to preach the gospel (5–7).

We must not sink into despair when we encounter difficulties, opposition, discouragement or setbacks in our work for the Lord, but stay on unless God clearly directs us away from that sphere of service. *Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart* (Galatians 6:9). We must expect disappointments as well as blessings but *those who sow in tears shall reap in joy* (Psalm 126:5). Let us persevere; faithful service in God’s work is never in vain!

Some preachers rarely look at their congregation as they declare God's Word. They look at the wall, up to the ceiling or down at their Bible as they preach. If you are a preacher or Sunday School teacher, you must look at those to whom you speak. At Lystra Paul noticed among his listeners a man who was crippled from his birth. He observed this man intently (*'looking intently at him'* – ESV) and saw *that he had faith to be healed* (8–9). True faith comes through hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17) and so it was with the crippled man (9). He was wonderfully healed but the people of Lystra responded to the miracle in the wrong way. They hailed Paul and Barnabas as two of the Greek gods come down to them *in the likeness of men* (11–13). Miracles do not necessarily bring people to faith in Christ.

Greek legend has it that the gods, Zeus and Hermes (called Jupiter and Mercury by the Romans) had once visited the region of Lystra. A temple for the worship of Zeus had been erected at the entrance of the city. There was great excitement when the priest of Zeus came to meet Paul and Barnabas with garlands, and oxen to sacrifice to them. The people thought that they were having another visit from the gods. They little realised that this was a far more important event. They were hearing the messengers of the true and living God. The apostles were very distressed at the blasphemous adulation of the crowd. They ran in among the people telling them that they were only men like themselves and urged them to *turn from these vain things to the living God* who created the universe (15). **False religion, materialism and sinful pleasure-seeking are all vain and useless. When we repent, we must renounce such things and turn from them to God.** This is no loss when we gain Christ as our Saviour, Lord, Protector and Friend.

Jews from Antioch and Iconium stirred up the crowd against Paul. Those who wanted to worship him earlier now stoned him. His injuries were so serious that they thought him to be dead but he was able to get up and go into Lystra. The next day he travelled to Derbe (19–20).

Paul always showed much love and prayerful interest for those who had been saved through his ministry. He had *a deep concern for all the churches* (2 Corinthians 11:28), having a self-sacrificing love for them

(1 Thessalonians 2:7–12). After considerable success at Derbe, Paul and Barnabas returned to those cities where they had suffered much persecution (21). They wanted to strengthen the disciples and to encourage them to persevere in the face of suffering and trial. They exhorted them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God*’ (22). The word ‘tribulation’ in the Greek carries the idea of ‘pressure’. **The path to glory is far from smooth!** There are pressures from within such as remaining sin, and from without, such as satanic opposition and persecution. **Tribulation is never comfortable, but it is necessary.** *Tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character* (Romans 5:3–4). We are strengthened by the testing of our faith.

*Believe not those who say
The upward path is smooth,
Lest thou shouldst stumble in the way
And faint before the truth.* (Anne Brontë)

Elders are essential for the well-being of the local church (to rule, to teach, and to care for the members). Before returning to Antioch in Syria, the apostles appointed elders in the new churches (23; see 1 Timothy 3:1–7 for the qualifications of elders). Paul was not satisfied with evangelism alone. When churches were planted, he knew that they needed to have elders.

Paul and Barnabas arrived back in Syrian Antioch and reported to their ‘home’ church *all that God had done with them, and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles* (27). They did not take personal credit for their success but gave glory to God. It was what he *had done with them* that mattered. We must always depend on the Lord in our work for him, and magnify him when he is pleased to bless our labours.

Acts chapter 15

We have already seen that Satan attacks the church from the outside with persecution (eg. 8:1–3) and from within by seeking to destroy the unity of the church (eg. 6:1). The devil will do all that he can to rob us of blessing. There is another instance here of an attack from within the church. Paul and Barnabas returned to the church at Antioch in Syria to report *all that God had done with them* (14:27) but trouble was not far away. Men came from Judea insisting that Gentile Christians submit to the rite of circumcision in order to be saved (1). Paul and Barnabas debated with them and they led a delegation sent by the church, to consult with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (2). Passing through Phoenicia and Samaria, they visited churches to describe the conversion of the Gentiles; this brought great joy (3).

News of Gentile conversions should have brought rejoicing to the Jerusalem church but some who had belonged to the Pharisees insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised (4–7). Peter pointed out to them that God had made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians, giving both the Holy Spirit in the same way (8–9). He went on to say, *‘We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they’* (11). Paul referred to his visit to Jerusalem in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:1–10). He describes those who insisted on circumcision as being necessary for salvation as *‘false brethren’* who wanted to bring the new Christians into bondage and he stood very firmly against them (Galatians 2:3–5). He saw this teaching as a serious threat to *the gospel of the grace of God* (20:24). The assembly then heard Paul’s account of how God had worked through them among the Gentiles (12).

We are saved through grace alone and not by works or religious ritual (Ephesians 2:8–9). This was the great issue at the Reformation when many Reformers laid down their lives rather than compromise this vital truth. The Roman Catholic church insists on works such as penance, and suffering in purgatory for salvation. Let us be determined to resist any compromise with such false teaching.

James (the half-brother of the Lord Jesus) was a leader in the Jerusalem church and he followed Peter in speaking to those assembled. He showed that the conversion of the Gentiles was a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (13–17; cp. Amos 9:11–12). He warned that these Gentile converts should not be troubled, except that they should abstain from sinful practices associated with their former way of life (19–20). They had enough battles without unnecessary burdens being placed upon them by zealots with questionable views.

The apostles prepared a letter outlining these principles and repudiating the false teaching concerning circumcision and keeping the law of Moses. They sent it with Paul and Barnabas to be read in the church at Antioch and other churches in Syria and Cilicia. (23–29). Judas and Silas, two of the leaders in the Jerusalem church returned to Antioch with Paul and his company to give added support to the contents of the letter (22,27).

*Some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls ... (24). **If you are a new Christian, do not be surprised when you meet with professing believers who will trouble you with their words and who will unsettle your soul.*** These people may twist the meaning of Scripture and want you to follow their peculiar ideas. They are doing the work of Satan to unsettle your soul. If you have been troubled by such people, talk to your pastor or to a mature Christian whom you love and respect. They will be pleased to help you.

The Christians in the church at Antioch were encouraged when they heard the letter read. They were also blessed with the ministry of Judas and Silas (31–32). Another problem arose soon after. Even godly men have their differences or personality problems which Satan will seek to exploit. Paul and Barnabas were all set for their second missionary journey, but they parted from one another after a sharp dispute over the suitability of John Mark for missionary work. He had deserted them on their first missionary journey (13:5,13). Barnabas was John Mark's cousin (Colossians 4:10) and he wanted to take him with them again. Paul disagreed, not wanting to take with them someone who had already let them down. *Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another (39).* It is very sad when godly men cannot

work with each other because of disagreements or personality problems. **Satan loves to divide us. Let us learn to recognise his craftiness so that we will be on our guard.**

The church at Antioch supported Paul, commending him and Silas *to the grace of God* for the next phase of their missionary work. Barnabas went to Cyprus taking John Mark (39–40). All did work out well for Mark in the end. Years later, Paul wrote of him with much warmth and affection (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). He also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. God’s grace is such that he can make failures to become useful to himself.



Acts chapter 16

Paul began his second missionary journey travelling north through Syria and then through Cilicia *strengthening the churches* (15:41). He had with him the letter from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem giving instructions for the Gentile Christians (4). Paul and Silas travelled west to Galatia and when they arrived in Lystra, Paul chose Timothy to join his missionary team. Timothy's father was a Gentile and though his mother was Jewish, he had not been circumcised. We have seen that circumcision is not required for salvation, but Paul had Timothy circumcised to avoid problems with the Jews in that region (1–3). Timothy appeared to be a reserved and timid young man (1 Corinthians 16:10; 2 Timothy 1:7), but he was well spoken of by the Christians in Lystra and Iconium (2). He was to become one of Paul's closest and most trusted friends (cp. Philippians 2:19–23; 2 Timothy 1:2).

They travelled north and then west but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in Asia and Bithynia. They were joined by Luke at Troas (notice how *'they'* in verse 8 becomes *'we'* in verse 10). It would appear that Luke remained at Philippi (17:1 – *'they'*) and rejoined Paul when he passed through Philippi on his third missionary journey (20:5–6).

While at the port of Troas, Paul had a vision of a man pleading with him, *'Come over to Macedonia and help us'* (8–9). The people of Macedonia enjoyed the rich heritage of Greek culture, but all the learning and wisdom of the Greek philosophers had no answer to the desperate plight of mankind. One of these philosophers once said, 'The best thing of all is not to be born, and the next best thing is to die.' What wretched despair! Man without God is without hope (Ephesians 2:12). Has man's advance in science and technology changed things? Not at all! **Men and women are still sinners. They are lost and they need to be saved. We may not be privileged to have visions like Paul, but we have the same good news.** Are you taking the gospel to sinners around you? Are you willing to say, 'Lord, send me'?

Paul and his companions sailed from Troas to Neapolis in Macedonia, before going to Philippi. This city enjoyed the status of being a Roman colony (12), its citizens having the same rights and privileges as those on the Italian mainland. Paul and his companions went out of the city on the Sabbath where they found a group of women who prayed by the riverside, probably because there was no synagogue. They spoke to these women, one of whom was Lydia, who was not a European. She was from Thyatira (in the province of Asia), a town famous for its purple dye and manufacture of woollen garments. She imported the purple dye and woollen garments to sell in the region of Philippi. *The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul* (14).

We must never despise the preaching and teaching of God's Word but pray that the Lord will open the hearts of those who hear. **Sinners are only saved when God opens their hearts! This should encourage us in our evangelistic work as we remember that the Lord is sovereign in bringing people to faith in Christ.** When God opened Lydia's heart, she was saved and was then baptised. You will notice that all those who came to faith in Christ in the book of Acts were baptised. If you have not been baptised, you disobey the command of Christ (cp. Matthew 28:19). God opened Lydia's heart and she opened her home to give hospitality to Paul and his fellow-missionaries (15, 40).

God was working in Philippi but so was Satan. Paul and those with him were pestered by a demon-possessed slave girl for many days. She *brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling* (16–18). These men had no compassion for this poor girl who was not only their slave but also Satan's. They were angry when she was released from the power of the demon through the ministry of Paul because their trade was ruined. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them off to the magistrates, accusing them of being troublemakers. The apostles were severely beaten and committed to prison where their feet were fastened in stocks (19–24). This may have appeared to be a great setback but the Lord overruled it for the advance of the gospel.

Paul and Silas did not reproach God for their suffering. Bleeding backs and feet bound in stocks could not keep them from praising God. At

midnight they *were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them* (25). Suddenly there was a great earthquake which shook the prison so violently that the doors were thrown open and the prisoners' chains were loosed (26). The jailer knew that if any prisoners escaped in the commotion, he would forfeit his own life (cp. 12:19). Fearing the worst, he panicked and was about to kill himself when Paul called out and reassured him that no one had escaped (25–28). The terrified man asked, '*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*' (30). **This is the most important question a person can ask!**

To be saved, we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (31). This means more than believing certain facts about him, though it is essential that we believe that he is the Son of God who died to save us from our sins and that he rose bodily from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1–4; 1 John 4:2). Belief in Jesus means that we trust in him with all our heart to save us through the merits of his death on the cross. It involves repenting of our sin, embracing Jesus as our Lord and gladly obeying his Word (cp. 20:21; John 10:26–27; 1 John 2:3–5).

The jailer and his family listened as Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to them. They believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and were baptised. The grateful man bathed the wounds of Paul and Silas and fed them. The momentous events of that night had resulted in his conversion and that of his household. He had good cause to rejoice (32–34).

Paul and Silas both possessed Roman citizenship which entitled them to a fair trial (see comments on verse 12). The Philippian magistrates were afraid when they discovered that they had denied them their rights. They released them and pleaded with them to leave their city (35–39). Paul and Silas went to Lydia's home to encourage the new believers before departing (40). The church at Philippi became very dear to Paul (Philippians 1:3–8; 2:12; 4:1, 15–17). No suffering for the gospel is easy to endure but when we are persecuted, we must not lose heart. God uses our suffering for his own glory and for the furtherance of the gospel.

Acts chapter 17

Travelling Jewish teachers were often invited to speak at local synagogues and Paul used this custom to bring the gospel to the Jews. He travelled with Silas and Timothy from Philippi to Thessalonica where he went into the synagogue *and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures* (2). He explained and demonstrated that the suffering, death and resurrection of the promised Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament and that *'This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ'* (3). Some of the Jews and many Greeks, including some of the leading women of the city, were persuaded by Paul's reasoning from the Scriptures.

The unbelieving Jews stirred up some of the louts from the market place and led a mob to attack the house of Jason where the apostles were lodging. They did not succeed in finding Paul, but they dragged Jason and some of his fellow-Christians before the rulers of the city accusing them of turning the world upside down and of proclaiming another king, Jesus (6–7). Today much of the professing church has compromised with the world and has little zeal for King Jesus. Is it any wonder that we make little impact upon the godless world around us?

The Thessalonians received the Word in much affliction but they became examples to other believers throughout Macedonia and Greece. They sounded forth the Word of the Lord, knowing that it works effectively in those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8; 2:13).

Paul and Silas left Thessalonica by night and went to Berea, where they and they went to the synagogue. These Jews were more open to receive the teaching of the Scriptures concerning Jesus. *They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily* (10–11). **Do you love God's Word enough to take time to read it and learn from it or do you skip through your reading as quickly as possible?** There were again many conversions to Christ in Berea but unbelieving Jews came from Thessalonica to stir up further trouble. Paul was obliged to depart immediately, leaving behind Silas and Timothy (12–15).

Paul travelled south to Athens where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him (14–15). The city was renowned for its magnificent buildings, culture, philosophy and its learning, but it was steeped in spiritual ignorance. Less than one hundred years after Paul was in Athens, a traveller named Pausanias wrote six volumes of detailed description of the land of Greece, with Athens taking up far more pages than any other city or region of Greece. Pausanias was captivated with the architecture and artistic splendour of the Greek capital. He was impressed by its temples, shrines and statues to all the gods. In fact Athens had more idols than the rest of Greece put together. They even had an altar inscribed, '*To the unknown God*' to cover any other god of whom they were ignorant (23).

Athens made quite a different impression on Paul than it did on the majority of its visitors. *Now while Paul waited for them* (Silas and Timothy) *at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols* (16). Our English word 'paroxysm' is derived from the Greek word translated '*provoked*'. A 'paroxysm' is a fit of deep passion or of acute pain. The apostle was set on edge, stirred up by the spiritual darkness of the city. What did he do? He went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. He also went into the market-place every day to reason with the people who were so steeped in idolatry and superstition (17).

How do you react when you visit our cities and see the vast crowds of people? Do you feel moved with compassion for them and yearn to see them saved? Are you *provoked within* yourself when you see so many given over to materialism and superstition, who have been so deceived by Satan, that they have no idea that they are on the high road to hell? How about those with whom you work or see every day? **Are you driven to your knees to pray for them? Do you speak to anyone to share the glorious good news of the gospel of Christ?**

Some of Athens' philosophers heard Paul preaching in the market-place and were quite scornful of him and his preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. They were curious about other teachings and were open to hear *some new thing* (21). They invited Paul to address the

Areopagus, the council named after the place where those legislating on religion and morals met. These people prided themselves in their learning and wisdom. They met under the shadow of the great Parthenon which was the temple to the goddess of wisdom, Athene, after whom the city was named.

Paul had seen their altar '*To the unknown god*' (23) and he proclaimed some essential truths that the Athenians needed to know about the God they did not know. He told them that:

- God made the world and everything in it (24).
- He is the Lord over all the universe (24).
- Temples cannot contain God, for he is everywhere (24,27).
- He sustains his creation (25).
- He is absolutely sovereign in all his purposes (26).
- Idolatry is a denial of God (29).
- God *commands all men everywhere to repent* (30).
- He will judge the world through the Lord Jesus whom he raised from the dead (31).

Some mocked Paul, some promised to hear him again, but others believed, including Dionysius, one of the philosophers of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris (34). **The true and living God is unknown to millions in our nation.** Some are sophisticated, cultured and articulate (like the philosophers of Athens), others boast no great education and many are poor and unemployed. They have one thing in common – they are lost, without God and without hope. We may be mocked when we witness to those around us, but there will also be encouragements. Let us persevere in prayer for the lost and look for every opportunity to make the gospel known to them. **We have the message that they need.**

Acts chapter 18

Paul left Athens, the cultural capital of Greece, for Corinth, the commercial capital (1). Corinth was 40 miles (64 kilometres) to the west of Athens and was located on a narrow strip of land which linked the province of Achaia with the rest of Greece. The city had become a very important trading centre and at the time of Paul's visit had a population of half a million people. Athens was full of idols but Corinth was full of immorality, and was notorious throughout the ancient world for its debauched and sleazy way of life.

Roman emperor, Claudius, had driven the Jews from Rome shortly before Paul arrived in Corinth in AD 51/52. Aquila and his wife Priscilla had been among those expelled but the Lord used this adverse circumstance to bring them into contact with Paul at Corinth (2–3). The couple were to become very close and special friends of Paul (Romans 16:3–5). Paul reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and after the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, he testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. This led to strong opposition but Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and many other Corinthians were saved (6–8).

The Lord spoke to Paul in a vision at night, saying, *'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you ... I have many people in this city'* (9–10). There were people, as yet not saved, marked out for salvation. God had choice vessels to pluck from Corinth's cesspool of wickedness (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11: *'And such were some of you'*). Paul was encouraged and he remained in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching the Word of God (11).

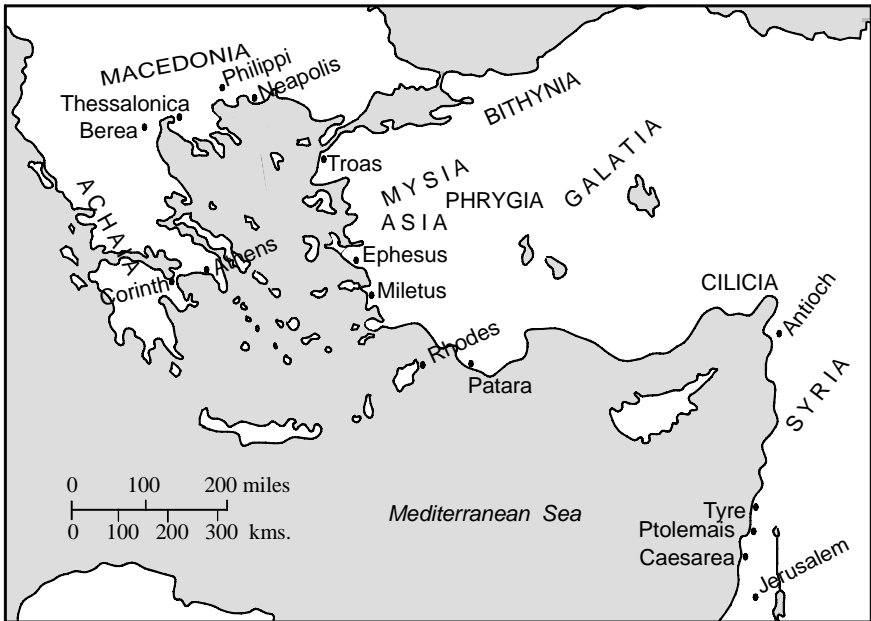
The truth that God chose sinners to salvation before he made the world (Ephesians 12:3–7) has encouraged many preachers since Paul's day, among them great Christians such as John Calvin, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey and C.H. Spurgeon. We do not know who the elect are among those with whom we meet day by day. **Let us persevere in our evangelism, trusting that God has *'many people'* where we live, who are presently indifferent to the gospel.**

Paul remained in Corinth for a year and six months and encountered further opposition. Jewish opposition to the preaching of the gospel had previously taken the form of stirring up mob violence or seeking to have the apostles punished by the civil magistrate. The Corinthian Jews went a step further. They went to the higher court of the provincial magistrate, accusing Paul of propagating a religion not allowed by Roman law. Gallio, the proconsul, concluded that Paul's message was a form of Judaism (which was protected by Roman law). He told Paul's accusers that he had no interest in intervening in a Jewish religious dispute, and he drove them out of the court. Following Gallio's snub to the Jews, the Gentile crowd assaulted Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, *but Gallio took no notice of these things* (12–17). God had told Paul in his vision that he was in sovereign control of his life to protect him (10). This is seen in the Gallio incident.

Paul left Corinth and set sail for Syria. Cenchrea is just a few miles from Corinth and while there, he took a vow and had his head shaved (18; cp. 21:23–24). Priscilla and Aquila were with the apostle on his journey and he left them at Ephesus. While there, Paul visited the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews who asked him to stay longer, but he did not consent. He was determined to be at Jerusalem for the *feast* (probably the Passover). He promised to return to them, *God willing* (19–21). **We must always have a submissive attitude to the will of God.** We ought to say, *'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that'* when making our plans (James 4:14–15; cp. 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7).

After Paul landed at Caesarea, he went up to greet the church (at Jerusalem) before going to his home church in Antioch. He spent some time there before beginning his third missionary journey. He visited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples (22–23). Paul was not only a great missionary and evangelist. He also had the heart of a concerned pastor (cp. 2 Corinthians 11:28).

Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23 to 21:17)



1. Paul leaves Antioch for his third missionary journey, travelling to Galatia and Phrygia where he strengthens all the disciples (18:23).
2. He travels on to Ephesus, where he spends three years in evangelism and teaching (19:1–41 (cp. 20:31).
3. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus into Macedonia (Acts 19:22).
4. Following the riot in Ephesus, Paul leaves to go to Macedonia (20:1–3).
5. After staying three months in Greece, Paul travels from Philippi to Troas (20:4–5)
6. Paul and his companions spend seven days in Troas, before leaving for Miletus (20:5–16).
7. After meeting the Ephesian church elders in Miletus, Paul sails for Tyre (20:17 to 21:3).
8. The apostle and his companions spend seven days in Tyre before boarding their ship for the last leg of their journey. They travel on to Ptolemais and Caesarea, and then to Jerusalem (21:4–15).

Aquila and his wife Priscilla were used by God to point Apollos to a clearer understanding of Christ and we can learn much from the way they dealt with this man. Apollos was an eloquent and fervent preacher, well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord (the teaching of the Lord Jesus as known by the twelve disciples before the death and resurrection of Christ). He spoke and taught accurately the things he knew, though he only knew repentance and baptism as taught by John the Baptist (24–25). He did not know that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on believers nor of Christian baptism (cp. 19:1–7).

Aquila and Priscilla heard him preaching in the synagogue and recognised that his message lacked the gospel of Christ as taught by the apostles. They did not rudely accost him to put him right. *They took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately* (26). Apollos was convinced and later went to Corinth where he was used of God. There, *he greatly helped those who had believed through grace for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ* (24–28).

Apollos was probably helped as much by the kindness of Aquila and Priscilla as by their better understanding of Scripture. **We must not write off those who are untaught or ignorant, but seek to help them by being Christlike in our attitude towards them.** Thomas Scott (1747–1821) was the curate in John Newton’s neighbouring parish. He was opposed to Newton’s evangelical faith but was eventually won to Christ through Newton’s godliness and patience. Scott was soon preaching in Newton’s pulpit in Olney and he was used by God to write a commentary on the whole Bible. He tells his story in an autobiography, ‘THE FORCE OF TRUTH’ which is still available (published by Banner of Truth Trust). The great Baptist missionary, William Carey wrote of him, ‘If there be anything of the Word of God in my soul, I owe much of it to his preaching.’

Acts chapter 19

Paul travelled from Galatia and Phrygia and came to Ephesus where he was to remain for three years (20:31). He met twelve disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus. John had taught the people about the Holy Spirit (cp. Matthew 3:11) but these men were vague in their understanding about him. Paul told them about the Lord Jesus of whom John had spoken, and they were baptized in his name, receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul laid hands on them so that they received supernatural spiritual sign gifts (1–7). These signs were the evidence of apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4). They ceased with the passing of the apostles and are not available today.

About eighteen months had passed since the apostle had promised the Jews in Ephesus that he would return to them (18:19–21). He now returned to the synagogue, *and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God* (8). Some were hardened and Paul and those who believed withdrew from them. He then reasoned every day for two years in the school (the lecture-room) of Tyrannus (9). Notice the word ‘*reasoning*’ in verses 8 and 9. **True Christian teaching does not by-pass the human mind. True preaching and teaching not only stirs the heart but also makes us think and it persuades us.**

The Word of the Lord was heard over all the province of Asia at this time (9–10). Paul’s method was to reason and to persuade from the Scriptures. He did not seek to communicate the gospel through drama (which was very popular in those days), but through the preaching of God’s Word. Let me ask you who are preachers, ‘How are you communicating truth to your hearers? How much persuasion is there in your preaching? Are you really concerned for the plight of those who are lost? Seek at all times, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the gospel with urgency and persuasion (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:11).’ Richard Baxter, the great 17th century pastor declared, ‘I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.’

Ephesus was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey). It was a great trading centre and place of pilgrimage to the shrine of the goddess Diana ('Artemis'). The city was also a centre of superstition and much occult activity. *God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul*. Handkerchiefs or aprons which had been in contact with his body were placed on the sick who were then healed or delivered from evil spirits (11–12). Some claim to do the same thing today to heal those who are sick, but their so-called 'blessed cloths' promote superstition and raise false hopes.

Some itinerant Jewish exorcists observed the power of the Lord Jesus when they heard Paul preach and cast out evil spirits. They took it upon themselves to use the name of Jesus in their exorcism. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest were among these itinerant healers. They attempted to cast out a demon in the name of Jesus. This evil spirit knew of Jesus and his power and recognised that these men were not servants of Christ. The possessed man attacked the would-be exorcists and tore off their clothes and wounded them before they fled from the house. Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus were filled with fear and magnified the name of the Lord Jesus when they heard of this incident (13–17).

Many of the new believers in Ephesus confessed their past sins. Those who had been involved in occult practices brought their books which taught these evil things, to be burned (18–19). They were very valuable and could have been re-sold, but the only fit place for them was the bonfire. I remember visiting a new believer when I saw a statue of Buddha on his shelf. I pointed out that it must be destroyed, even though it had been given to him by his young son when he was interested in eastern religions. He destroyed the image after I left his house. We must not hold on to items associated with false religion or the occult when we come to faith in Christ! *So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed* (20). **Let us pray that God's Word will grow mightily and prevail in our neighbourhood and throughout the rest of the world.**

Paul planned to leave Ephesus and go to Greece, visiting churches in Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. He also desired to visit Rome after that. He sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia while he remained in the province of Asia (21–22).

Ephesus, the centre of the worship of the fertility goddess Diana, was to witness a mighty advance of the gospel, which spread throughout the region. The temple dedicated to Diana (Greek name is ‘Artemis’) contained a meteorite which was revered as an image of the goddess which had been sent from heaven. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was the largest building in the old Greek empire.

The Word of God prevailed over occult practices and idolatry (19, 26–27). Writing to the Corinthian church from Ephesus, Paul said, ‘*A great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries*’ (1 Corinthians 16:8–9). The success of the gospel threatened the livelihood of the Ephesian silversmiths who made and sold images of the goddess Diana. They instigated *a great commotion about the Way* (23). They stirred up a mob against Paul and they seized two of Paul’s companions. They chanted for two hours, ‘*Great is Diana of the Ephesians*’ (24–34).

Paul wanted to address the angry crowd but he heeded the pleading of his friends not to do so. The town clerk told the crowd that they would be in danger of having to account to the Roman authorities if they persisted in their disorderly conduct. He pointed out that if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen had a case against anyone, they could pursue it through the courts of law and they dispersed peacefully (30–41).

The early Christians were known as belonging to ‘*the Way*’ (9,23; cp. 9:2; 24:22). They taught that there is only one way to God the Father – through the Lord Jesus Christ (4:12; cp. John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5). **All religions do not lead to God! To believe that they do is to be in spiritual darkness and great error.** No other gospel is acceptable (cp. Galatians 1:6–9). Let us be faithful in pointing people to the Lord Jesus.

Acts chapter 20

A*fter the uproar ceased*, Paul travelled from Ephesus to visit the churches in Macedonia where he *encouraged them with many words* (1–2). He was concerned to strengthen them and to build them up in the faith (cp. 15:41; 18:23). Paul was more than a great evangelist; he was also a faithful pastor and teacher of the Word of God (27, 31–32). As we read of Paul’s ministry, we will see that there is a repeated emphasis on the teaching of God’s Word. We all need the *comfort* (‘encouragement’) of the *Scriptures* (Romans 15:4) but we must know our Bibles if we are to encourage ourselves and one another!

Paul then travelled south from Macedonia to Greece where he spent three months mainly at Corinth. While there, he wrote his letter to the Romans (cp. Romans 15:25–26). He changed his plan to sail from Corinth to Jerusalem because of a Jewish plot against him and returned through Macedonia to Troas (3–6). Paul had organised a collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem and some of the men from the donating churches went with Paul to take their gift (24:17; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–5). Luke, whom God inspired to write the Acts of the Apostles, joined Paul at Philippi (notice the words ‘*us*’ and ‘*we*’ (5–6).

The early church met on the first day of the week to worship God and to break bread, meeting around the Lord’s Table. The early Christians called the first day of the week, ‘The Lord’s Day’ (7; cp. 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10). **Do you love to gather with the people of God each Lord’s Day in order to worship God and to hear his Word being preached?** Paul preached until midnight at Troas and a young man named Eutychus sank into a deep sleep during the meeting. He fell to his death from his precarious seat but Paul embraced his lifeless body to raise him from the dead. The happy church listened as Paul *talked a long while, even till daybreak* (8–12). He would have been encouraging them *with many words*!

Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost and did not have time to visit Ephesus (13–16). When he arrived at Miletus, he sent for the elders of the Ephesian church and reminded them of his life and ministry among them (17–36). We tend to think of the success of the apostle in planting many churches and of the thousands saved through his ministry but there was a price to pay. This faithful man had humbly served the Lord *with many tears and trials* through opposition to his ministry by unbelieving Jews (19).

The apostle had kept back nothing in his ministry that was helpful but had proclaimed it publicly and from house to house (20). He speaks of two vital elements in his preaching of which he had testified:

- *Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ* (21). We are all sinners and sin is rebellion against God. True repentance involves sorrow for sin and confession to God. We cannot be saved unless we repent of our sin and trust in the Lord Jesus.
- *The gospel of the grace of God* (23–24). Grace is favour bestowed upon us that we do not deserve. The free and sovereign grace of God is a glorious theme. Let us proclaim it and rejoice in it.

Paul was full of foreboding about his visit to Jerusalem. He felt compelled to go there though the Holy Spirit had warned him that imprisonment and trouble lay ahead of him. He told the Ephesian elders, *‘But none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy’* (24). Paul here describes the Christian life as a *‘race’* which he was determined to finish with joy (cp. 2 Timothy 4:7). He had a different set of values to the world around him. Not for him a half-hearted devotion to Christ! **He had sacrificed his own self-interests for those of his Lord and Saviour.** His main aim in life was to live for Christ (Philippians 1:21).

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By his love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

(Katie B. Wilkinson)

Paul was able to testify to the Ephesian elders that he was innocent of the blood of all men because he had not *shunned to declare ... the whole*

counsel of God (26–27). He had been fearless in his preaching and would never compromise his message to please men. If any of his hearers went to a Christless eternity, they could never blame Paul for not warning them of the consequences of rejecting the gospel.

Elders have an awesome responsibility to God for the well-being of every church member and they must give account for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). The Holy Spirit makes them overseers to shepherd the church of God (1 Peter 5:2). The apostle urged these elders, *‘Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock’* (28). Paul warned them that *‘savage wolves’* would come into the church to attack the flock (29; cp. Matthew 7:15–20). They must watch because some of their own number would depart from the truth and divide the church (30–31). **These are frightening warnings! If Satan could cause havoc in a church built on three years of Paul’s ministry, let us not imagine that we will be immune from the attacks of the devil.** Seek to be built up by the word of God’s grace; it will help protect you from *‘savage wolves’* (32). Your pastor and church leaders are special targets for Satan’s attacks. How should you pray for them?

- That God will keep them pure in doctrine and life.
- That they will have God-given wisdom and discernment.
- That they will stand firm in the face of discouragement or temptation to compromise.

Paul reminded the elders of his own example among them and told them that they must support the weak, for the Lord Jesus had said, *‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’* (33–35). Have you discovered this to be true in your own experience, or are you more interested in taking than in giving? Paul knew that he would not see these men again and he knelt down and prayed with them all. There were many tears as they parted (25,37–38).

Acts chapter 21

Paul loved to be with the Lord's people. His ship was delayed at Tyre while its cargo was being unloaded so he found believers in the port and stayed with them seven days (1–4). The children would never forget the time when they and their parents knelt on the shore and prayed with Paul and his companions before they departed (5–6). They then sailed to Ptolemais where they left the ship. They stayed with Christians at Ptolemais for one day, and arrived at Caesarea the following day, where they stayed with Philip the evangelist (7–8).

Do you seek out other believers when you are on holiday or away on business? Are you interested enough to learn about churches you visit so that you can encourage them and pray for them. You will need to find out what good churches there are in the area you are visiting before you leave home.

The Holy Spirit again warned Paul both at Tyre and at Caesarea that he would be arrested and imprisoned if he went to Jerusalem (4,11). Was he disobeying God in his determination to go there? Such a thought is out of the question for Paul was always careful to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit (see 16:6–7; 20:22–23). The Christians at Caesarea wrongly interpreted the Spirit's warnings as a direction that he should not go to Jerusalem. He answered, *'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus'* (12–13). He was so devoted to Christ that he was ready to die for him! He was sure that it was God's will for him to go to Jerusalem and this was later confirmed. God was leading him through Jerusalem to Rome (23:11).

Paul and the Christians at Caesarea were submissive to the will of God and said, *'The will of the Lord be done'* (14). **As we face the future with all its uncertainties and when faced with difficulties, let us always make our choices saying, *'The will of the Lord be done.'***

Some of the Christians from Caesarea went with Paul and his companions to Jerusalem where they were warmly received by the

church. They met with James and the elders of the church the following day when Paul gave them a detailed report of God's blessing upon his ministry among the Gentiles (15–19). *They glorified the Lord* for all that he had done through the missionaries but they had reservations. They feared that Paul's work among the Gentiles could cause problems with legalistic Jewish Christians. They said, '*You see, brother*' and went on to explain their problem (20). Many thousands of Jews had embraced the Christian faith but had held on to their zeal for the ritual and ceremony associated with the law. These people had heard rumours that Paul was teaching Jewish Christians to forsake the law of Moses and all their cherished traditions (21). It does not appear that they had checked the reliability of these reports.

Paul's ministry had been greatly blessed by God and he had with him representatives from those churches consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers. They had brought with them gifts to support the poor Christians in Jerusalem having given at great cost to themselves (cp. 2 Corinthians 8:1–5). One can only wonder what they thought of the attitude of the Jerusalem church leaders towards Paul.

Paul was not given an opportunity to answer the malicious rumours, because the leadership of the church had already devised a plan for him to prove that he followed the rules and kept the law (24). James also made it clear that Gentile Christians should not have to observe such a practice (25). Paul himself had made it quite clear to the Galatians, that we are not justified by keeping the law, but by faith in Christ (Galatians 2:16). He was willing however, to forgo his liberty to win the Jews to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19–22). He was a most gracious man and agreed to comply with their plan. **Some Christians have scruples that are based on a misunderstanding of Scripture. We must be gracious towards them but beware of allowing them to bring us into barrenness and bondage.**

Paul agreed to the request of the Jerusalem elders and submitted to Jewish purification ceremonies with four men from the church. From this time everything seemed to go wrong. The apostle was seen by some of his Jewish enemies from the province of Asia in the temple as

some of his Jewish enemies from the province of Asia in the temple as he was ending his purification ritual. They wrongly assumed that he had taken Trophimus, a Gentile Christian, into the temple (which was out of bounds to Gentiles). They stirred up the crowd and he was dragged out of the temple (26–30). The angry mob set upon Paul and would have killed him but for the intervention of Roman soldiers who took him into custody. Paul was taken prisoner just as the Holy Spirit had warned, but the Lord was working out his purposes through these events.

There was such a commotion that the Roman commander could not ascertain the reason behind the attack on the apostle (31–38). The Jews were motivated by such hatred for Paul that they cried out, ‘*Away with him!*’ (36). They were not prepared to listen to his message and some of them may have been among those who used similar words against the Lord Jesus, ‘*Away with him! Crucify him!*’ (John 19:15).

If we behave like those Jews who attacked Paul and reject the Lord Jesus now, we should not be surprised when he rejects us on the great day of judgment. He will then say, ‘*Depart from me, you cursed into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*’ (Matthew 25:41). **There is no neutral ground with the gospel. We are either for Christ and the message of the gospel, or against.** Have you welcomed Christ into your life as your Saviour and Lord? If you have not, I urge you to do so now, before it is too late.

Paul asked the Roman commander, ‘*May I speak to you?*’ The Roman agreed, asking the apostle if he was the Egyptian who had led an insurrection. Paul denied this, telling him that he was a Jew, a citizen from Tarsus. He then asked for permission to address the crowd and his request was granted (37–40).

Acts chapter 22

Paul had been accused of being an enemy of the Jews (21:28) and he was determined to refute this lie. He was respectful towards them, addressing them as '*Brethren, and fathers*' (1). He spoke to the people in Hebrew and this helped calm them. Paul affirmed his own Jewish pedigree saying, '*I am indeed a Jew.*' He told them of his training in Jerusalem at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel and of his own zeal in persecuting Christians (1–5).

What accounted for the change that transformed this zealous Jew who hated Christians, into someone who propagated the faith that he once so vehemently despised? Paul told them how the risen Lord Jesus Christ had met with him while he was on an errand of persecution and had turned his life around. He recalled how he had been struck with blindness by the blazing light from heaven and how he had heard the voice of the Lord Jesus. He then asked him, '*What shall I do, Lord?*' He then said that he had been told to go on to Damascus where he would be told what to do. He told them how Ananias who was highly respected by the Jewish community in Damascus had been sent to him by God (6–12).

Ananias had first prayed for him that he would receive his sight and went on to tell him how God had chosen him to *know his will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of his mouth*. Paul would be a witness to all that he had seen and heard (13–14).

Ananias then asked Paul, '*Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized*' (16). Though baptism is not essential to salvation, it is commanded by the Lord (2:38; Matthew 28:19). **Have you been baptized? If you love the Lord, you will gladly obey him.**

Paul related some details in his testimony which are not recorded in Acts chapter 9. Here, he spoke of his return to Jerusalem where he went into the temple to pray. The Lord told him, '*Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning me*' (17–18).

mention of the fact that he, a Jew, had gone to the Gentiles, was enough to enrage the crowd so that they shouted him down. *And they listened to him until this word* (22). Those who are blinded by prejudice will not listen to sense and reason. We must not despair, however, for the Holy Spirit is able to bring fanatics to repentance; Paul himself was once a religious zealot.

The Roman commander gave orders for Paul to be brought into the barracks to be scourged. He could not understand why the crowd were filled with such hatred for the apostle and hoped to elicit a confession of some wrongdoing from him. Scourging was a terrible punishment in which the victim was flayed with a multi-thonged whip. The thongs were knotted with pieces of metal or bone which tore apart the flesh of the victim. Paul rightly insisted on his rights as a Roman citizen who was not to be scourged without a fair trial and guilty verdict (25–29). It is important to understand that ‘turning the other cheek’ does not mean that we have to accept injustice when there are lawful processes through which we are able to use to defend ourselves.

The commander’s attitude to Paul changed as soon as he found that the apostle was a Roman citizen and he was afraid because he had him bound with straps and was ready to scourge him (25, 29). He had paid a great price to purchase his citizenship but Paul had been a citizen from birth. **Roman citizenship carried great privileges but every Christian is far more privileged.** We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and this citizenship has been purchased for us at great cost. The Lord Jesus gave his life on the cross to save us and to make us his own (1 Corinthians 6:20). We have access to his throne of grace to *obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16). Let us come to him and bring our needs with confidence. He loves us and he is not deaf to our cries!

Acts chapter 23

The Roman commander summoned the chief priests and the Sanhedrin (the ruling religious council) to come to him the next day to present their case against Paul (22:30). The Jewish historian Josephus observed that Ananias the high was a very wicked man. Paul began his defence, saying, *'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day'* (1) Ananias ordered those who stood by him to strike the apostle in the mouth which was contrary to the law (3) Paul warned Ananias that God would strike him because he (Ananias) was seeking to condemn him according to the law while breaking the law himself. Some commentators believe that Paul's response was ironical, for Ananias certainly did not behave like a servant of God (1–5). *'Whitewashed wall'* was a way of describing a hypocrite. The tombs hewn in the rocky hillsides of Judea were often painted with whitewash on the outside. They glistened in the sun, but inside them were the rotting corpses of the dead.

When Paul stated, *'I am a Pharisee'* (6), he was pointing out his orthodoxy as a Jew and his belief in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees held strongly to this truth which was denied by the Sadducees. The two groups on the Sanhedrin then engaged in an unholy squabble in which the Pharisees expressed their support for Paul. The so-called religious council then behaved like a violent mob and the Romans again rescued Paul from his enemies (7–10).

The Pharisees on the council warned the high priest and his fellow-Sadducees, *'Let us not fight against God'* (9). Paul's words to Ananias, *'God will strike you'* (3) proved to be prophetic. In AD 66, Ananias was assassinated by Jewish zealots because of his pro-Roman sympathies. When rulers *take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed* (the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ) *he who sits in the heavens shall laugh* (Psalm 2:2,4). ***If God is for us, who can be against us?*** (Romans 8:31).

The Holy Spirit had repeatedly warned Paul on his third missionary journey *that chains and tribulations* awaited him (20:23). Why did

God allow Paul to suffer so much? He not only allowed these things to come upon the apostle but also ordained them to happen (9:15–16). It is a mistake to imagine that God keeps bad things from happening to the believer. Paul was a great Christian but he was human. He would have felt the pressure and weariness of false accusation, riot and mob-violence and needed to be encouraged. The night following his rescue from the mob, *the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul’* (11). God promised that just as he had testified for him in Jerusalem, so he would also bear witness in Rome. **When we are under pressure, we must never forget that God is with us. He always stands by us and he will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).**

The next day, more than forty fanatical Jews vowed that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. They had devised a scheme in which the Roman commander would be asked to send Paul to the Sanhedrin for further questioning. They would then ambush him together with his escort and kill him (12–15). God has his own ways of protecting his servants. Paul’s nephew heard of the plot and reported it to him. When the commander heard the young man’s story, he wrote a letter to the Roman governor Felix and sent Paul away at 9 o’clock in the evening, protected by four hundred and seventy soldiers (16–23). Paul was escorted to Caesarea by the horsemen the next day. Paul was escorted to Caesarea by the horsemen the next day and they gave Felix the letter from Claudias Lysias. The Roman governor told Paul that he would hear his case when his accusers had come (31–35).

God used a young man to thwart the satanically inspired plot against Paul. *The Lord stood by him.* Christian, are you facing difficulties and pressures that are dragging you down? Do you feel that you are unable to cope? Remember, the Lord stands by **you**, and cast *all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7).

Acts chapter 24

Ananias the high priest came to Caesarea with a delegation to give evidence against Paul before the Roman governor. Felix was a cruel tyrant but he would not have been convinced by the nauseating flattery of the orator Tertullus (1–4). The orator accused Paul of being the *ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes* and a troublemaker who had tried to desecrate the temple; he even accused the Roman commander Lysias, of *great violence* (5–7).

Paul's sincerity in answering his accusers vividly contrasted with their hypocrisy. He told Felix that he had come to Jerusalem twelve days earlier to worship God and to bring alms and offerings. The charges against him of profaning the temple or causing trouble were quite untrue. He had not disputed with anyone in the temple, nor was he guilty of inciting crowds in Jerusalem or in the synagogues. He challenged his accusers to prove their case against him; there had been no trouble in the temple until he had been seen by some Jews from Asia who had stirred up the crowd against him (10–18; see 21:27–30).

Paul did confess to worshipping God as a Christian, *according to the Way which they call a sect* and to his belief in *a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust* (14–15). Every person who has ever lived will be raised at the second coming of Christ to be judged by God. Paul ended his defence by saying that he was really being tried for his statement concerning the resurrection of the dead (21).

Paul stated, *'I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men'* (16). Man's conscience has been affected by Adam's fall into sin; it can be hardened so that it does not trouble us when we sin (cp. 1 Timothy 4:2). Our consciences are purged when we are saved (Hebrews 9:14) but we must regulate them by the Word of God. **Let us always strive 'to have a conscience without offence toward God and men.'** It is an evidence of true godliness.

Felix now had *a more accurate knowledge of the Way* and he postponed making any decision about Paul until he had seen Lysias the commander but he allowed the apostle to have liberty and visits from his friends (22–23). The Roman governor was living in an adulterous relationship with Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (whom an angel of God had struck down in judgment; 12:23).

Paul did not water down his message when Felix later sent for him to hear more *concerning the faith in Christ* (24). *He reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come* with this wicked man. His powerful witness had such an effect, that *Felix was afraid* (25). Felix needed to know about a righteous God who was offended by his sin, and who would surely judge him.

The Roman answered Paul, ‘*Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.*’ Though he was filled with fear, he sent for Paul and heard him often, but he was more interested in obtaining a bribe from Paul rather than obtaining peace with God (26). Though Felix knew Paul to be innocent, he left him captive, *wanting to do the Jews a favour* (27). this gesture did him no good at all. Secular historians inform us that Felix was recalled to Rome by the emperor Nero in AD 59 after the Jews had complained about Roman atrocities. He was disgraced and probably escaped execution through the influence of his brother Pallas, who was a favourite of Nero.

If your heart is not right in the sight of God, do not wait for a convenient time to come to Christ. The Lord may not grant you a convenient time. *Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2). **Felix saw the gospel as bad news because it made him feel uncomfortable. For those who repent of their sin, however, the gospel is the most wonderful news, offering free forgiveness, peace with God, eternal life and everlasting joy!**

Acts chapter 25

Paul had been a prisoner Paul for two years when Felix was recalled to Rome (24:27). He was succeeded by Porcius Festus. Three days after his arrival in Caesarea, the new governor went to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the Jews (1–2). They sought to have Paul brought to Jerusalem with a view to standing trial but their real intention was to lie in wait and to kill Paul as he was escorted from Caesarea. Festus told them that they should first send representatives to Caesarea where they would be able to present their case against Paul (3–5).

Festus remained in Jerusalem for ten days before returning to Caesarea. He heard the charges against the apostle the day following his return. Paul's opponents laid many serious complaints against him which they were unable to prove (6–7). They repeated their charges of heresy, sacrilege and sedition which Paul strongly denied (8; cp. 24:5–6). Festus did not want to offend the Jews from the beginning of his rule. *Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour*, asked Paul if he would be willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried (9). He knew, and Paul knew, that they were unable to prove their case against him. Festus wanted to please the Jews in order to obtain their cooperation.

Paul knew his fellow-countrymen better than Festus. He was aware that they would attempt to kill him if he travelled to Jerusalem and he exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar (9–11). This meant that he would have to go to Rome for the personal decision of the emperor upon his case. Paul should not have been obliged to resort to such an appeal because Festus knew that he was innocent (10).

Paul exercised the civil right that he was able to claim according to the laws of Rome. This principle applies to Christians in the 21st century though many believers are denied this and are ruthlessly persecuted in many lands. **We must not give in to the pressures put upon us by those who hate the Bible and its teaching.**

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I, who had James, the brother of John, killed (12:1–2) and had himself so dramatically died at

Caesarea (Acts 12:23). He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who had sought to kill the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 2:13). He paid a courtesy visit to the new governor, accompanied by his sister Bernice (13); Drusilla, wife of Felix was their sister (24:24). Bernice lived with her brother after she was widowed and after the break-up of her second marriage.

Paul's appeal to Caesar left Festus with a problem. He was required under Roman law to send a written account of the charges against Paul, but he did not possess any convincing evidence. He enlisted the help of Agrippa who had an intimate knowledge of the Jewish faith and culture (26–27). Agrippa told Festus, '*I would like to hear the man myself*' and Festus readily agreed with his request (22). Gordon Keddie writes, that Festus had unwittingly set the stage 'for one of the greatest defences of the Christian faith the world has ever heard' (ACTS – YOU ARE MY WITNESSES, page 397 (Welwyn Commentary Series).

The next day, Paul was to speak to his most distinguished audience – the governor, King Agrippa and his sister, high-ranking army officers and the most prominent men of Caesarea (23). They were sinners with the same spiritual needs as every other human being. Only the gospel which Paul proclaimed could meet their needs. Festus may have had problems in understanding the Jew's case against Paul but he was left in no doubt concerning Paul's message about Christ. '*Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive*' (19).

Paul spoke plainly so that unbelievers could clearly understand what he was saying. The message has not changed and God has not changed! Those we meet day by day are sinners who need to hear the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–4). **How great is our desire to tell them about our glorious Lord and Saviour?**

Acts chapter 26

Agrrippa was an expert in Jewish affairs (3) but Paul fearlessly challenged him as he testified and preached the Word of God. He asked Agrippa, *‘Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?’* (8). The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not a message to be reserved for Easter; it should be our constant theme and a source of great rejoicing.

Paul told his distinguished audience how he had been a strict Pharisee whose hatred for Christians had driven him on a mission of relentless persecution against them (4–11). He had set out to persecute the Christians in Damascus, having the authority of the chief priests, but the risen Christ had appeared to him and had completely transformed his life. Jesus had commissioned him to preach to both Jews and Gentiles *‘to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins’* (9–18). He was able to say, *‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’* (19). He had declared to Jews and Gentiles that *they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance* (20). He again proclaimed that Jesus died and rose from the dead (22–23).

Paul could not remain silent about the great truths of the gospel. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Christian, how is it with you? How motivated are you to tell others about Christ and to support Christian missionaries with your prayers and your money?

What does it mean to be a Christian, to belong to Christ? It means that God has opened our eyes to see the truth about himself and about ourselves. It means that we have been delivered from the power of Satan and have received forgiveness of sins. It means that we have an inheritance reserved in heaven for us (18; cp. 1 Peter 1:4). Think about these things and lift up your heart in gratitude and joyful praise to God. If you are not a Christian, come to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to save you. He will accept you if you turn from your sinful ways and trust in him.

Shortly before his death, Paul wrote to Timothy, *‘Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evil-doer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained’* (2 Timothy 2:8–9). The truth of these words is illustrated in these verses. Paul was a prisoner, but the Word of God flowed out of his mouth as he presented the gospel to the most distinguished company in the land (29).

Festus recognised that Paul was not a fool, but a very learned man. When he heard the apostle speak of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, however, he interrupted him. He said that *much learning* was driving Paul mad but God’s servant responded by stating that he spoke *the words of truth and reason* (24–25). Paul was not mad because Festus was having problems with the challenge of the gospel. He told the governor that King Agrippa was fully aware of the impact of the Christian message on many thousands of Jews who had heard it and had followed Christ. *This thing was not done in a corner* (26).

We are sometimes accused of being ignorant or stupid because we believe that the Bible is true, that God created the world in six days, that we are all sinners who need to be saved from coming judgment, that the Lord Jesus died to bear the punishment of sinners, and that he rose from the grave. The gospel is foolishness to the unbeliever, but *the foolishness of God is wiser than men* (1 Corinthians 1:23–25). The hearts of those who are lost are darkened and they are spiritually ignorant (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17–19). **Do not allow yourself to be intimidated into silence by scoffers, but speak words of truth and reason. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten them so that they will come to faith in Christ. Pray that God will be pleased to use your witness as you depend upon him.**

Paul was not put off by the scorn of Festus and he went on to challenge Agrippa, *‘Do you believe in the prophets? I know that you do believe’* (27). The king said, *‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian’* (28; The ESV is probably a better translation: *‘In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?’*). The apostle reasoned with Agrippa and sought to persuade him to come to Christ for salvation. Persuasion is essential in preaching and in witnessing. This

concerns me very much because there are some whose ‘preaching’ lacks any element of persuasion. They ramble on while their hearers understandably wander in their thoughts. Others are very orthodox and ordered in their presentation; they have excellent material in their sermons, but they appear to be detached from their message and do little to persuade their hearers.

Our preaching and witnessing must be soaked in prayer, and come from a heart throbbing with love for God and for those who are lost, if we are to persuade unbelievers that our message is true and relevant (see notes on Acts 19:8–10). Paul was in chains, but he was more concerned for the salvation of his hearers than his own needs as a prisoner (29).

Agrippa’s words, *‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian’* show that he obviously felt the strength of Paul’s persuasion (28). He was not persuaded enough, however, to accept the cost of submitting to the lordship of Christ. He stood up and called a halt to the proceedings and later concluded that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment (31–32).

I know of men and women who have attended church for many years and have heard good preachers but they remain in their sins. If you are not a Christian, I urge you to seek the Lord with all your heart. You can have no hope for the future if you do not enjoy peace with God. **It is not good enough to be almost persuaded! You must be fully persuaded and committed to Christ. Where do you stand?**

* I recommend pastors and preachers to read ‘AN EARNEST MINISTRY – THE WANT OF THE TIMES’ by John Angell James and published by The Banner of Truth Trust. John Angell James was greatly used of God in Birmingham in the 19th century.

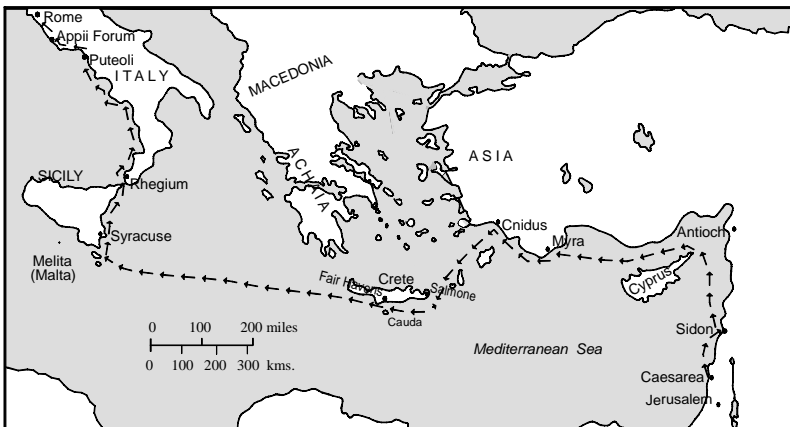
Acts chapter 27

Paul had appealed to Caesar to obtain justice and he had to go to Rome (25:11–12). He was accompanied by Luke (note ‘we’ in verse 1) and Aristarchus, a member of the church at Thessalonica (2). Aristarchus was a loyal friend to Paul and had remained with him through dangerous times (cp. 19:29). Paul describes him as his ‘fellow labourer’ and as his ‘fellow prisoner’ (Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10).

God has his ways of encouraging us and he even uses unbelievers to that end. The Roman centurion *Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends (at Sidon) and receive care* (3). Though he was a prisoner the apostle had a remarkable amount of liberty. The Lord encouraged Joseph in a similar manner when he was in prison. God was with him and *gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison* (Genesis 39:21). **We sometimes need the favour of unbelievers but we do not need to compromise our message to gain such favour because the Lord is able to make them treat us kindly. How wonderful to know and to belong to such a God!**

Sailing conditions became increasingly dangerous but the centurion was determined to continue the journey despite Paul’s warning of impending disaster (4–12).

Paul’s journey to Rome (Acts chapters 27 & 28)



Paul knew that God wanted him to go to Rome (24) and so did Satan, who did everything he could to frustrate God's purpose. The voyage was beset from the beginning by high winds and dangerous seas (4,7–10). The ship had left Fair Havens to sail to a sheltered port further along the coast of Crete (see map, page 88) and conditions appeared favourable at first (13). A terrifying storm arose soon afterwards, which became so severe that they were obliged to throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship. The storm continued for *many days* and any hope of survival was lost (14–20).

An angel visited Paul at night and assured him, telling him that he must be brought before Caesar and that God would preserve the lives of all who were sailing with him. Paul told of the angel's visit and of his message from God. He then said, '*Take heart, men, for I believe God.*' He reassured them that they would all survive when the ship ran *aground on a certain island* (20–25). Paul belonged to God and served him (23). **When we belong to God, no harm can come to us except by his permission. Even in the most distressing times, we know that nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39).** Have you been beset by fear or anxious thoughts? Take those cares to God in prayer; he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

The ship's crew were seeking to escape in the ship's skiff and Paul warned the centurion that this must be prevented and the sailor's plan was thwarted (30–32). Those on the ship had not eaten for fourteen days and Paul encouraged them to eat and *gave thanks to God* in their presence before they began to eat (33–36). Paul was a wonderful witness to all on the ship when they were terrified and without hope.

Satan was bent on Paul's destruction even after he survived the shipwreck. The soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners (including Paul), to prevent any attempt to escape. The centurion, wanting to save Paul, rejected their plan, and ordered that all who could swim should jump overboard to reach land (42–43). **Never forget that the devil can only do what God permits him to do.**

Acts chapter 28

Paul was no stranger to shipwreck, and peril had been his constant companion. He had written to the Corinthians more than ten years before this, '*Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and day I have been in the deep*' (2 Corinthians 11:25–26). In all these dangers he knew the presence, encouragement and help of God.

The people of Malta showed *unusual kindness* to Paul and those who were shipwrecked with him (2). The bedraggled survivors received more help than they could have dared expect. Satan again sought to kill Paul through a snake-bite. The islanders thought that he must be a murderer and that justice had caught up with him, but they were amazed and thought he was a god when he *suffered no harm* (5–6).

Publius, one of the leaders of the people, also treated Paul and his companions kindly (7). The apostle prayed for his father who was healed of his fever and dysentery (8). We can be sure that Paul not only healed the sick, but also preached the gospel during his three month stay on the island (7–11). The people he met there would never be the same again!

Luke writes concerning the grateful people, *They honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary* (10). It is interesting to note that Paul was quite happy to receive honour from the people. Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to celebrate birthdays because 'they exalt the creature, making him the centre of attention rather than the Creator.' ('THE TRUTH THAT LEADS TO ETERNAL LIFE', page 146). What faulty reasoning! They would have had problems with Paul.

Satan will always seek to attack us if we are walking with God. Have you noticed this as you have read the book of Acts? Attacks, difficulties and suffering, but God always triumphs over the enemy of our souls. In Malta, Paul received *unusual kindness ... suffered no harm and was honoured ... in many ways*. **When God is for us and with us, what have we to fear (Hebrews 13:5–6)?**

The Romans escorting Paul and other prisoners spent three months in Malta before continuing their journey to Rome. They boarded a ship for Italy which landed at Syracuse in Sicily, staying there for three days. They then sailed north and reached Rhegium on the southern tip of Italy. They disembarked next day at Puteoli further along the west coast of Italy (11–13).

When he arrived in Italy, Paul and his companions *found brethren* at Puteoli. We saw in our reading from Acts 21:1–14 that Paul always sought out Christian fellowship on his travels. The centurion, Julius, continued to give Paul *liberty to go to his friends and receive care* (27:3), and the apostle was allowed to stay seven days with those Christians (14). When believers in Rome heard that Paul was heading for their city, some travelled the 43 miles (69 kilometres) to Appii Forum to meet him, others, the 33 miles (53 kilometres) to the Three Inns. The apostle knew many of the Christians in Rome, including Aquila and Priscilla who had worked with him (Romans 16:3–16). Though the Romans had good roads, they did not have the modern transport that we take so much for granted. Those believers were eager to see Paul and thought nothing of making the journey to see him. This token of love and concern was a great encouragement to the apostle. *When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage* (15).

All Christians need to be encouraged, even leaders like Paul! A thoughtful and kind deed, an encouraging letter, email or phone-call may mean very much to a hard-pressed believer. In what way do you seek to encourage others?

*Give me a faithful heart,
Likeness to thee,
That each departing day
Henceforth may see
Some work of love begun,
Some deed of kindness done,
Some wanderer sought and won,
Something for thee.*

(Sylvanus O. Phelps)

Paul was put under house arrest in Rome and three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul called the leaders of the Jews to meet him (17). He explained that though he was not guilty of any offence against the Jews or their customs, he had been treated as a criminal who should be put to death (18–19). He was in Rome because he had been compelled to appeal to Caesar. He was in chains *for the hope of Israel* (20; this is a reference to the Messiah; cp. Jeremiah 14:8). The hope of Israel does not lie in a future restoration of the nation to spiritual and political greatness, but in Christ, who alone saves from sins. In Christ, both Jew and Gentile are one; there is no difference; they both know a circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 3:26–29). The church is ‘*the Israel of God*’ (Galatians 6:16).

The Jews in Rome were not aware of the charges against Paul but they arranged another meeting with him to hear about *this sect ... spoken against everywhere* (22). At this meeting, Paul *explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus ... from morning until evening*. Some were convinced but others did not believe (23–24). The apostle quoted from the prophet Isaiah to warn them about spiritual blindness and hardness of heart. He pointed out that salvation had been sent also to the Gentiles who were responding to the message of the gospel (25–29). However much God may be pleased to bless our witness, there will always be some who will reject the message of the gospel. We must persevere like Paul and never allow discouragement to silence us.

Paul was under house-arrest for two years, but he continued to serve the Lord, *preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ* (30–31; cp. Philippians 1:12–14). **He so loved Christ, he so loved people and wanted to win them to his Saviour, that he could not help but declare the gospel to sinners. Is it any wonder that God greatly blessed him and used him?**

After Acts chapter 28

Paul was imprisoned in his own rented house for two years (28:30). During this time (AD 60–62) he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and the Philippians. He was released from this imprisonment and was able to continue his missionary work for a year or two before being re-arrested.

William Hendriksen suggests in his commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus (pages 39–40) that after his release, Paul:–

- Journeyed to Asia Minor, leaving Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5).
- He then went to Colosse as planned (Philemon 22) and then to Ephesus, where he was joined by Timothy who had been at Philippi (Philippians 2:19–23).
- Paul left Timothy at Ephesus to go to Philippi as previously planned (Philippians 2:24; – though he was hoping to return to Ephesus; 1 Timothy 3:14–15). While in Philippi, Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy and also to Titus (approximately AD 63).
- He went from Philippi to Nicopolis to spend the winter and was joined there by Titus (Titus 3:12).
- He may have visited Asia Minor again and even Spain before his final imprisonment (cp. 2 Timothy 4:13; Romans 15:24). Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from prison, shortly before he was executed.

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