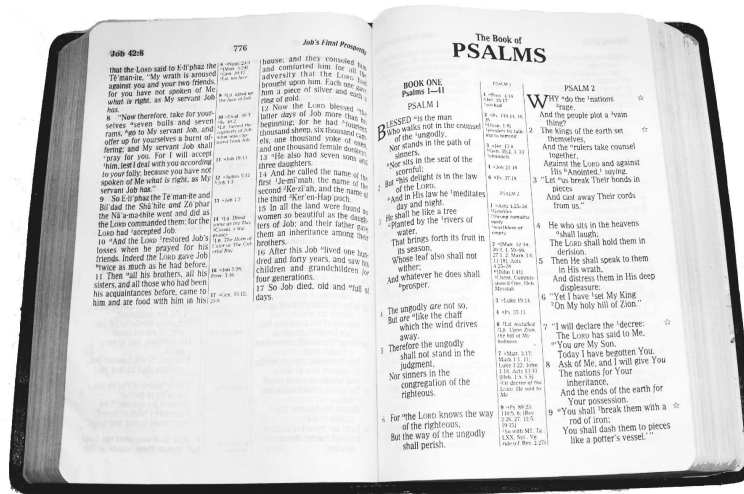


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



February 2016

Bible readings from Joshua chapters 20 to 24
Acts chapters 1 to 7

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Cities of refuge

The Lord reminded Joshua of his command to Moses to set aside six *cities of refuge* in the promised land (1–4). They were to provide a place of asylum for those who had accidentally killed another person. In many nations long ago, the nearest relative of a murder victim was expected to take vengeance by slaying the murderer. There was always the possibility that revenge would be taken against someone who had not intended to kill but was guilty of manslaughter. The Lord provided for such people in the promised land by setting apart six of the Levites' cities as *cities of refuge* (Exodus 21:12–14; Numbers 35:6,9–28; Deuteronomy 4:41–43; 19:1–13). These cities were among those allocated to the Levites, three on the east of the Jordan and three on the west (7–8; 21:13,21,27,32,36,38).

The person guilty of manslaughter was safe from any rough justice as long as he remained in a city of refuge. The cities were spread throughout the land to make them within the reach of all who would flee to them. The killer was able to flee to one of the cities of refuge and to have his case fairly judged. If found guilty of murder he was handed over for execution. If he was guilty of manslaughter he had to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest when he was given an amnesty. He left the city before such a time at his own peril (Numbers 35:24–29). God was concerned for the fair treatment of Gentile strangers as well as the Israelites (9).

The cities of refuge give us a picture of our safety and security in Christ. The Lord Jesus is a refuge from the wrath and judgment of God to all who trust in him whatever their race (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:13–18). *The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe* (Proverbs 18:10).

*Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on thee!
Leave, ah, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me!* (Charles Wesley)

Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken

The Levites were not given a tribal territory but were allocated forty-eight cities spread throughout the promised land which are listed in this chapter. The tribe of Levi provided the priests and also men to instruct Israel in the law of God (Deuteronomy 33:10). Their dispersion throughout the land would enable them to undertake this most important task.

There were three family groups in the tribe of Levi – The Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites. The family of Aaron who were Kohathites, provided the priests. The thirteen cities allocated to the Kohathites were in the area nearest to Jerusalem, the territories of the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin (4). Their services were needed in Jerusalem where the tabernacle and later the temple would be situated.

The chapter ends with a statement about the faithfulness of God. He had given Israel all the land which he had promised to their fathers (43). He had also given them rest and victory over all of their enemies as he had promised (44). God always keeps his promises! *Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass* (45).

The Israelites later lost so much through their unbelief and disobedience to God's Word, but there was no failure on the part of God. He delights in believing, obedient people (think about Hebrews 11:6). Abraham was commended because he *did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief ... being fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to perform* (Romans 4:20–21). **God has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises (2 Peter 1:4). Do we really believe them?**

To love the LORD your God

The 2½ tribes who had settled east of Jordan had promised that their men would help Israel to possess the land (1:12–18; cp. Numbers 32). After seven years, their job was done and Joshua commended them for their loyalty. Good Christian pastors and leaders do not flatter God’s people, but they do remember to commend them and encourage them when they serve God faithfully. Joshua said to them, ‘*You have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I commanded you. You have not left (forsaken) your brethren*’ (2–3). Joshua discharged these men to return to their families in the east. We read that they returned home rich with the spoils of battle. They did not lose out by keeping their promise (8).

Matthew Henry comments, ‘He dismisses them with good counsel, not to cultivate their ground, fortify their cities ... but to keep up serious godliness among them ... What good counsel was here given to them, is given to us all; God give us grace to take it.’ Joshua blessed them and reminded them of the command of Moses *to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul* (5; cp. Deuteronomy 11:22). The Bible makes it quite clear that this is God’s will for us also (Matthew 22:37).

If you are a Christian you belong to God and he demands your love, worship and obedience (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The Lord Jesus says, ‘*If you love me, keep my commandments*’ (John 14:15). Are you faithful and true, holding fast to God (that means rejecting all forms of idolatry in your life)? Are you seeking to serve the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul? Do you *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* in your life (Matthew 6:33)? God gave his precious, sinless Son to die a horrible death to save us from our sins. **Half-hearted love, obedience and service is not good enough for God; he wants your best.**

It is a witness between us that the LORD is God

When the men from the 2½ tribes returned home, they built *a great, impressive altar* by the Jordan (10). When the remainder of Israel heard about this they were alarmed. They knew that God had commanded that offerings and sacrifices only be brought to the one place appointed by him (Deuteronomy 12:10–14). The rest of Israel gathered at Shiloh to prepare for war against the 2½ tribes (11–12). Before taking any action, they wisely sent a delegation led by Phinehas to speak to the tribes east of Jordan. He had a record of zeal for God (Numbers 25:3–13) and was ideally suited to lead this delegation.

Phinehas told them that God would judge them if they rebelled against him and reminded them of the incident at Peor (16–17; cp. Numbers 25:1–3). He offered to allocate them land west of Jordan if they considered their possession unclean (19). They replied that their motive for building the altar was quite honourable; they had not built it to offer sacrifices. They said, *‘It is a witness between us that the LORD is God’* (28,34). They built the altar because they feared that the descendants of those on the west of the river would tell their descendants that they had *no part in the LORD* (24–25). Phinehas recognised that their intentions were good and that they were not rebelling against God (32–34; cp. 16).

What are the lessons for us in today’s reading?

- **Good intentions are not always wise.** The 2½ tribes appeared to be rebelling against God in building this altar. The altar, though a witness, could have later been used for offering sacrifices contrary to the will of God.
- **Satan often exploits misunderstanding among God’s people.** But for the wise attitude of Phinehas (19), a disastrous war could have broken out. We must be gracious in our attitude and never act upon rumour. We should always be sure of the facts before we act.

*Be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the
Book of the Law*

Joshua addressed the leaders of Israel before he died (chapter 23) and then he spoke to all the nation (chapter 24). He reminded the leaders of the nation of all that the Lord had done for them and he encouraged them to possess the inheritance which had not yet been taken (2–5). They had seen how God had fought for them (3) but they could not afford to relax. He urged them, *‘Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law’* (6). The Lord had said to same thing to him when he began to lead Israel (1:7).

We do need courage to swim against the tide of unbelief and wickedness around us today and to obey God’s Word. Israel had to remain faithful to the Lord and to love him if they were to know his blessing (7–11). Idolatry and intermarriage with the heathen people around them would bring the anger and judgment of God upon them (7,12–16). These principles remain for every Christian. Idolatry has many subtle forms and we must keep ourselves from it (cp. Colossians 3:5). We must also keep ourselves from marriage to non-Christians (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

Joshua again reminded the people that God had kept all of his promises (14; cp. 21:45). The Lord had fought for Israel and would continue to fight for them as long as they remained faithful to him (3, 10). He will also fight for us if we love him and obey him (cp. Isaiah 54:17; Romans 8:37). He is worthy of all our devotion and praise! **Think about the greatness of God and worship him; remember his past faithfulness and praise him; look to the future, trusting in him.**

*When all thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view, I’m lost
In wonder, love and praise.*

(Joseph Addison)

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve

It is significant that Joshua summoned the Israelites to Shechem to hear his farewell speech. It was there that the blessings were uttered for obedience from Mount Gerizim and the curses for disobedience from Mount Ebal (8:30–35). Joshua recounted their history from Abraham to the time in which they lived (1–13). Their history was a record of the grace and goodness of God to them. He challenged them to serve God, ‘*Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve*’ (15).

Dale Ralph Davis observes, ‘Joshua appears to do a strange thing. Not every one notices that his famous choose-you-this-day command calls Israel to choose between two sets of pagan gods! Back up. Joshua calls Israel to “serve Yahweh” (v.14). But if Israel will not serve Yahweh, they must at least choose some god(s). He presses Israel to the wall; they must come down somewhere ... He says, “Serve Yahweh; but if you won’t, choose which non-gods you will serve”’ (JOSHUA – NO FALLING WORDS, pages 199–200). Joshua was the people how absurd it would be to serve pagan gods rather than the Lord.

What is involved in serving God? We must:

- *Fear the LORD* (14). This is not a cringing, craven fear, but a sense of reverence and awe in the presence of a holy God (5:14; Isaiah 6:5; Hebrews 12:28–29).
- *Serve him in sincerity and truth* (14). The same word is translated ‘*perfect*’ (Genesis 6:9; Psalm 19:7); ‘*blameless*’ (Genesis 17:1) and ‘*without blemish*’ (Leviticus 1:3,10). God’s service has no place for hypocrisy. ‘Faithfulness’ is also implied in the meaning of the word ‘*truth*’. We must be faithful to God’s truth and never compromise it.
- Show total allegiance to God (14). He must be first, and all other gods put out of our lives, whether idols or riches (‘*mammon*’ – Matthew 6:24).
- Obey God’s Word (24).

Have you chosen to serve God? Can you honestly say like Joshua, ‘*But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD*’ (15)?

Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua

The people were very quick to say, ‘*We also will serve the LORD*’ (18), bringing a caution from Joshua (19). They then repeated their promise to serve and obey God (24). *Joshua made a covenant with the people that day ... Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God* (25–26). John Currid writes, ‘The covenant is the very foundation and heart of Israel’s existence. This is true for believers today as well. The covenant is certain, true and steadfast; we can rely unreservedly on our covenant-keeping God and his promises to us’ (STRONG AND COURAGEOUS, page 256). This truth is a tremendous encouragement to the hard-pressed believer. He knows that the Lord will never leave him nor forsake him (Hebrews 13:5–6).

Joshua set up a large stone as a witness to all the words that God had spoken. It had heard everything that was said being likened to a living being (27). Joshua died at the age of 110 years. Verse 31 contains a telling comment: *Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua*. Without good leadership they soon went astray (cp. Judges 2:7–12).

The book of Joshua ends with three burials; those of Joshua and Eleazar and the burial of the bones of Joseph which they had brought with them from the land of Egypt (29—33). We sadly miss great men of God who have been called home to heaven but we must never forget that the Lord lives and reigns for ever.

Pray that the Lord will be pleased to raise up godly, discerning leaders in the church today. There is a great need for godly pastors who are full of faith and the Holy Spirit, men who preach with power and who love the people under their care. **Will you yourself be determined to follow the Lord with all your heart in these confusing and wicked times?**

ACTS

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.

Many infallible proofs

I hope that you have read the introductory notes on the Acts of the Apostles found in the previous two pages. 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). The Acts 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 of the Acts of the Apostles 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).**

You shall be witnesses to me

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 in giving his Son to die and to rise from the dead to save sinners. This message is desperately needed today because it 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?

*O fill me with thy fulness, Lord,
Until my very heart o'erflow
In kindling thought and glowing word,
Thy love to tell, thy praise to show.*

(Frances R. Havergal)

He was taken up

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 told them that he 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. 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 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?**

And they prayed

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 (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. Matthew 13:55; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). The Holy Spirit inspired Jude to write the last but one book of the New Testament (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.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit

The Feast of Pentecost was celebrated seven weeks after the Passover (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 drunks. 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 determined counsel and foreknowledge of God

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. 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.**

The gift of the Holy Spirit

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).

The apostle again quoted David (from Psalm 110) to demonstrate that Jesus is David's Lord. The people in the crowd were cut to the heart after Peter reminded them that Jesus, whom they had crucified, was both Lord and Christ (34–37). They came under conviction of sin and asked Peter, '*What shall we do?*' He told them that they must repent of their sin and be baptized. They would then receive remission of sins and *the gift of the Holy Spirit* (38).

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 baptized 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.**

The apostles' doctrine and fellowship

Three thousand people were saved after hearing Peter's sermon. They gladly received the word and were baptized 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.**

* I understand the difficulties of those who find it increasingly difficult to find a good evangelical church or have problems because of age or infirmity.

The breaking of bread and prayers

We continue to think about the description of the church in Jerusalem after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

- *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?**

Expecting to receive something from them

The verses in our reading 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).

Peter and John commanded the lame beggar to look at them and he did so, *expecting to receive something from them* (4–5). He was expecting to receive money but he received something far more precious – salvation and healing (7–10). 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* (8). The people recognised that this man had been miraculously healed and they were filled with wonder and amazement (11–12).

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?**

Repent therefore and be converted

The lame man was healed through faith in the name of Jesus (16). A crowd gathered around him as he clung to Peter and John; 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 (12–16). 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).

Peter 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 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). **Have you repented of your sin?**

Times of refreshing ... the times of restoration

I wish to direct your thoughts today to ‘*times of refreshing*’ and ‘*the times of restoration*’ (19–21):

- ‘*Times of refreshing*’ (19). The religion of Israel during apostolic times was lacking in spiritual life and vigour. The Jews had their great religious festivals such as the Feast of the Passover and they had plenty of ritual, but their hearts were far from God. Peter told them 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 are ‘*times of refreshing ... from the presence of the Lord*’. Heaven is the place of perfect happiness, but *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*’.
- ‘*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*’?**

By what power or by what name have you done this?

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.

Nor is there salvation in any other

Peter quoted a verse from Psalm 118 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, published by Banner of Truth).

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!'

They realised that they had been with Jesus

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. They could not deny that *a notable miracle* had been done through them (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 are so many of us lacking in basic godliness and Christlikeness? Could it be that we do not take time to be with the Lord Jesus? We often crowd personal devotions out of our lives for things which have little importance – favourite television programmes, 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.

*Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus like him thou shalt be;
Thy friends, in thy conduct, his likeness shall see.*

(William Dunn Longstaff)

And they spoke the word of God with boldness

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 place in the Bible for the teaching of the 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, *and they spoke the word of God with boldness* (31). **Do you wish to witness with confidence to those around you? You need to spend time in prayer each day and to read and learn the Word of God.**

And great grace was upon them all

We have seen that the church at Jerusalem was a praying church; it was also a church whose leaders (the apostles) were able to witness with great power to the resurrection of the Lord (33). The church was also a caring church. *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. 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). The old saying is quite true, ‘When God touches a man’s heart, he also touches his wallet.’ **Are you a generous person? Do you have this ‘great grace’?** *God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Corinthians 9:7).

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)

Why has Satan filled your heart to lie?

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 gave only part of the proceeds from the sale of their land 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)

The people esteemed them highly

Satan's attack on the church backfired on him. After the fear of God came upon the church and the people (11), multitudes of men and women were saved (14). 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).

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!** The apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and were godly, and *the people esteemed them highly* (13). 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).

The apostles were preaching and performing miracles in the precincts of the temple ('*Solomon's Porch*' – 12,25). 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. They were to have a great surprise (21)! 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.*'

We ought to obey God rather than men

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 charged them with ignoring the command of the Sanhedrin not to teach in the name of Christ. He 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.

Peter and the apostles 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 let the council members forget that they were responsible for the murder of Jesus. God had raised Jesus and exalted him to his right hand *to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins* (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). The Lord Jesus is described as ‘*the Prince of Life*’ in Acts 3:15 (the Greek word translated ‘*prince*’ is sometimes translated ‘*author*,’ eg. Hebrews 12:2). 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*.

Counted worthy to suffer shame for his name

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 was 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 had 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 Jesus as the Christ* in the temple and in private homes (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?**

Men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom

The disciples *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. 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 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 they had neglected prayer and the ministry of the Word.

The wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke

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 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.

Then God turned and gave them up

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 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 hankered after Egypt, the place of terrible bondage and misery (39; cp. Numbers 14:1–14).
- They 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 to idol worship. 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).

If you are not a Christian, remember the repeated opportunities that you have had to repent of your sin. The Lord will not always be patient with you. Come to Christ now lest God give you up to your sin and no longer speaks to you.

