

What must I do to be saved?

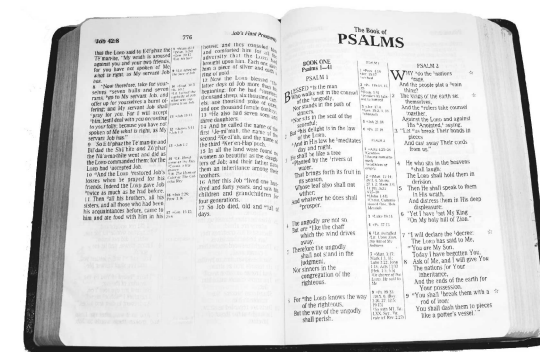
Paul and Silas did not reproach God for their suffering. Bleeding backs and feet bound in stocks could not keep their hearts from overflowing in praise to God and the other prisoners heard them. The jailer who had been asleep at the time of the earthquake knew that if any prisoners escaped in the commotion, 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. Do you know the answer?**

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 baptized. 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. 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. 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.

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



March 2016

Bible readings from Acts chapters 7 to 16

Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears

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'* (cp. 6:13–14). He responds here with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah (49–50). The Lord is far too great and majestic to be confined to a building made by men. God had been present with his people long before the temple had been built (44–46).

The Jews laid great stress on the importance of the temple and upon God's law, which they did not keep (53). They 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 so 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.**

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The Lord opened her heart

Philippi 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. 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 baptized. You will notice that all those who came to faith in Christ in the book of Acts were baptized. If you have not been baptized, 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. 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 we shall be seeing that the Lord overruled it for the advance of the gospel. Are you feeling the onslaught of the devil? Take heart, for God is in absolute control of all your circumstances. He will bring you through if you will trust him.

Come over to Macedonia and help us

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'?

He fell asleep

The high priest and the Sanhedrin were cut to the heart, 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).

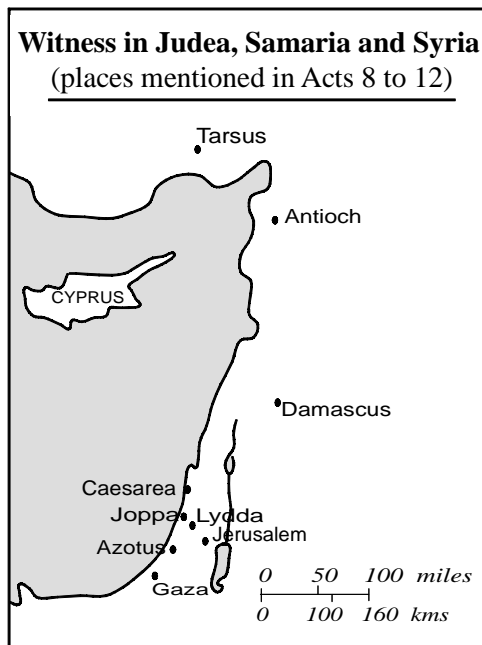
We often wonder why it is that the Lord sometimes takes a believer while they are still young or engaged in a very fruitful and blessed ministry. We have no answer except to say that God is perfect in his wisdom. He knows best and all his ways are filled with love for us. Stephen's prayer for his enemies 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.**

Everywhere preaching the word

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 word, meaning ‘proclamation’, 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.

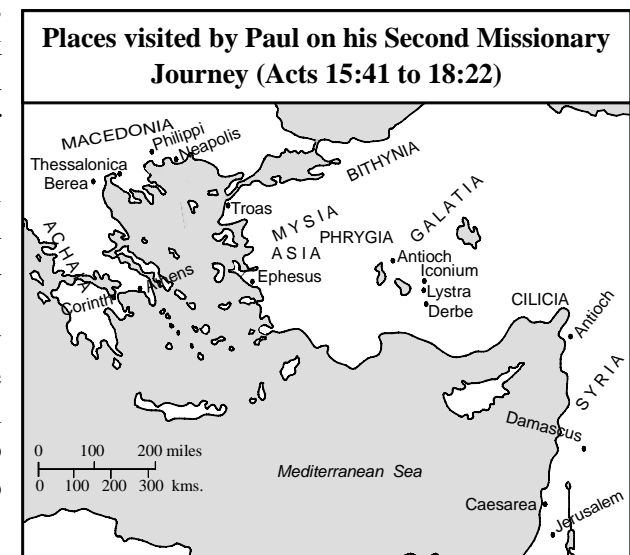
You may not be called to preach before great crowds but you can share your faith with others. Pray for your relatives, friends, neighbours and for those with whom you work. Look for opportunities to bring them the gospel. God honoured those early believers and he will honour you, if you are faithful.



They parted from one another

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 not work out well for Mark in the end. Years later, Paul wrote of him with much warmth and affection (Coloss. 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). God’s grace is such that he can make failures to become useful to himself.



Some ... have troubled you ... unsettling your souls

The gospel was first preached to the Jews who had a very distinctive culture with many rules and regulations. When people from different backgrounds come into the church, it can cause problems and tension. Some Jewish Christians taught that Gentile believers must submit to the rite of circumcision in order to be saved (1). 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 new 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.

Your heart is not right in the sight of God

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 baptized 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 (15–18).

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 baptized 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. Some Christians believe that verses 15–17 prove that we should look for a second experience, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, following conversion. If the spectacular experiences recorded in Acts are to be taken as the norm for today, we must also insist that tongues are recognisable languages (2:8–12).

Do you understand what you are reading?

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 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?**

We believe that through ... grace ... we shall be saved

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). This caused a dispute in the church which then decided to resolve the problem by sending a delegation, led by Paul and Barnabas, to consult the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (2).

News of Gentile conversions should have brought great joy to the Jerusalem church just as it did to other believers, but it resulted in the same dispute over circumcision that had taken place in Antioch (4–7). Some who had belonged to the Pharisees insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised (5). 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).

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 church of Rome insists on works such as penance, observing certain church feasts and suffering in purgatory for salvation. Let us be determined to resist any compromise of the gospel.

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God

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 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.

Lord, what do you want me to do?

Saul of Tarsus was relentless in his mission to destroy the church (1–2; cp. 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 Bible does not teach that you can embrace Jesus as your Saviour and at the same time reject him as your Lord.

He is a chosen vessel of mine

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*’ who was to suffer much for his Saviour (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 baptized him and the new Christian spent some days with the disciples at Damascus (19).

Saul was a chosen vessel of God and Ananias told him so (22:14). He 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!

Turn from these vain things to the living God

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 a cripple. 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 cripple (9). The man 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).

Therefore they stayed there a long time

Paul and Barnabas went on to Iconium which was about seventy miles 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!

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles

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 over the city wall at night (20–25).

Saul returned to Jerusalem, but the Christians in that city 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 and he was sent to his home in 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.**

Full of good works and charitable deeds

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 4). 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).

We do not know whether or not Aeneas was a Christian when he met Peter, but he had been paralysed and bedridden for eight years. Peter did not claim that he was able to heal Aeneas, but said to him, ‘*Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you*’ (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 their region, they urgently sent for him after the death of one of their number. The raising of Dorcas from the dead also resulted in many believing on the Lord (42). 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). 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).

As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed

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 they must adhere strictly to the requirements of Judaism to be accepted by God – 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). We have already seen that Satan is not slow to stir up opposition to the preaching of the gospel, and that opposition 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 (50). Many Gentiles were saved in Antioch and the gospel spread throughout the surrounding area (48–49). 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 must never resort to using gimmicks in order to reach the lost. 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, those saved *are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit* even in the face of persecution (52).

By him everyone who believes is justified

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 Christ. 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) and went on to explain that through the death of Jesus there is forgiveness of sins and justification: *‘By him everyone who believes is justified’* (39).

Our sin renders us guilty in the sight of God so that we are not right with him. God cannot let us off and not punish us for our sins because he is righteous. 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). Paul, writing later to the Galatian churches (which included the church at Antioch in Pisidia), stated *that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ* (Galatians 2:16). We cannot be saved through our own works.

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).

A memorial before God

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 was a devout, God-fearing man, prayerful and generous (2). He was dissatisfied with Roman paganism and idolatry and he was seeking 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 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. When God commanded Peter to eat unclean animals, he was not willing to do so. The Lord 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. Even as he was wondering what the vision could mean the three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where he was staying. The Holy Spirit told Peter that he had sent the men to him and that he should go with them (17–20).

We are all present before God

The men sent by Cornelius stayed the night with Peter who returned with them to Caesarea the following day. They were 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 (24–26).

Peter 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)

According to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour

Paul and Barnabas sailed from Paphos in Cyprus to go to Pamphylia (see map, page 20). 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. 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 (13; cp. 15:38–39).

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 and he challenged those who feared God to listen to what he had to say (15–16). An evidence of the fear of God in our lives is a desire to listen to God's Word and to obey it.

The sermons 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).

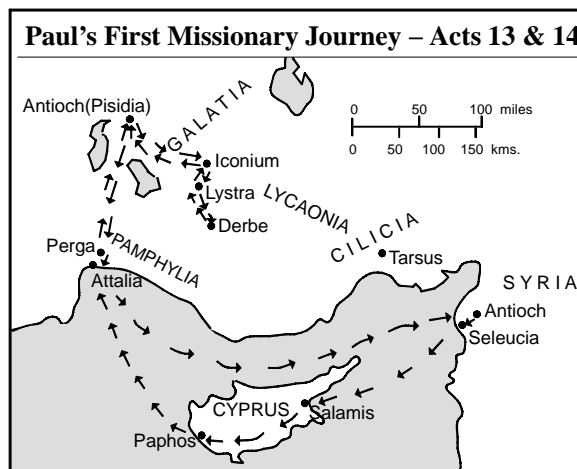
We need to know the Old Testament if we are to understand the New (cp. Luke 24:27,32,44–46). 'We must see that the relationship of the Old to the New is not that of law to grace – for there is grace in the Old as well as in the New, and law in the New as well as in the Old – but rather that of promise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

Being astonished at the teaching of the Lord

Barnabas and Saul took John Mark 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, an apostate Jew, a sorcerer and a false prophet, sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Where men are hungry to know God and his Word, Satan is active, making sure that there is no shortage of false teachers to deceive them or to attempt to turn them away from the faith.

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* (8–12). 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 hostility and opposition 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 for us and that he is far stronger than the enemies of the gospel.

*God shows no partiality*

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 work righteousness and who fear him (34–35). 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). 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.

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.

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, that whoever believes (trusts) in him will receive remission of sins (42–43). Have you trusted in the Lord Jesus to save you?

The Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word

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 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.

They sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit

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 recognised 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 word from which our English word 'liturgical' is derived and is correctly translated *'worship'* in the ESV. The word is also used to describe the worship of angels and the Jewish priests (Hebrews 1:14; 10:11). We must always remember that worship 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.

An angel of the Lord struck him

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.

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.**

God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life

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.

When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad

The persecution which arose with the martyrdom of Stephen had scattered believers as far as Antioch in Syria (some 300 miles or 480 kilometres to the north of Jerusalem) and 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* (20). These were Greek-speaking Gentiles. 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).

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, and people are touched by his grace. There is also a godliness, 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’ ministry of encouragement is again described in these verses. *He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith* (24). 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).

But constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church

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 make no attempt to be at this vital meeting of your church, you despise a precious opportunity to meet with God’s people before the throne of grace.

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 (6–11). Peter went to the house 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 he allows us to 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.