

STUDY NOTES ON THE KINGDOM AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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THE KINGDOM

(B) THE KINGDOM PROCLAIMED

With the coining of the Lord Jesus the promised king had arrived. Both his fore-runner John the Baptist and the Lord Himself came preaching the same message –

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Mark ch 1 v 14 & 15 (Jesus)

Matthew ch 3 v 2 (John)

The long awaited event had arrived. Neither John nor Jesus needed to offer any explanation to the people as to what the kingdom was. They knew exactly. The miracles of Jesus should have been the proof of his Messiahship because Isaiah ch. 35 had foretold that these signs would precede the bringing in of the kingdom.

Christ's presentation of Himself as king was exclusively to the nation of Israel. He said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew ch 15 v 24).

Wise men looked for one born King of the Jews. Many were looking and waiting for the Messiah.

The prophets wrote of His sufferings and glory to follow. (They did not see the intervening age of grace.)

Christ offered Himself as King to the people.
His miracles were signs of His Messiahship.
He was rejected and crucified, and no kingdom was brought in.

What was to happen now?

Christ's parable (one more year) Luke ch 13 v 6-9

Christ's prayer (Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do) Luke ch 23 v 34

(C) THE RE-OFFER OF THE KINGDOM

We must now examine the Acts of the Apostles and the renewed offer of the kingdom to Israel, and discover when the postponement of this re-offered kingdom took place.

The rejection of the king by Israel's leaders created a major crisis. The king was dead and no kingdom had been established. We now need to look at the Acts period. This will help us to understand Christ's parable about the fig tree and also how His prayer on the cross for the nation was fulfilled. The Acts covers a period of some 30 years. Two personalities are prominent. From chapter 1 to 10 it is Peter and from chapter 11 to 28 it is Paul. Peter is the apostle to the circumcision (Jews) and Paul is the apostle to the uncircumcision (Gentiles).

It is very important for us to understand Acts ch 1. It is the basis for all that is to follow. Four things stand out:

1. The 40 days' discourse between the Lord and the apostles. Their conversation was about the kingdom of heaven. Please notice it was not about the church. These were spiritually enlightened men (Luke ch 24 v 45), and they were under the tuition of the greatest teacher who has ever lived. Their question in Acts ch 1 v 6 is pertinent – "Dost thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"
2. The coining of the Holy Spirit (v4, 5 & 8) which was to precede the setting up of the kingdom, according to Joel ch 2 v 28-31, had taken place, as Peter made clear in his speech to the Jews. He had told them "This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel". Joel's prophecy was only partially fulfilled, as we shall see later.

3. The promised return of the Lord to the Mount of Olives (v 10 & 11) is a definite fulfilment of Zechariah ch 14 v 4 & 9 when Christ will return to set up His kingdom on earth.
4. The choosing of the 12th man to take the place of Judas (v 16-26) has no application to the church, but was preparation which was necessary to enable the promise of Matthew ch 19 v 28 to be fulfilled. There the Lord made it clear there were to be 12 apostles sitting on 12 thrones to govern a restored Israel. All these things were in regard to the kingdom.

It is also important that we recognise the order in which Paul's epistles were written. There were 14 of them in all if we include Hebrews, which I believe Paul did write. Seven were written during the Acts period and seven were written afterwards. The seven written during are:

I & II Thessalonians
I & II Corinthians
Galatians
Hebrews
Romans.

After writing these seven, Paul was imprisoned in Rome, and during this imprisonment he wrote four, which are commonly referred to as his prison epistles. These are:

Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
Philemon.

Paul was then released for a short period, during which he visited the believers in Asia Minor. During this time he wrote two epistles. These are:

I Timothy
Titus.

He was re-arrested and imprisoned once more and wrote his final epistle:

II Timothy.

After writing this Paul was executed, tradition tells us by beheading.

What will become obvious as we proceed is the fact that the truth of "the body of Christ", as we have it set forth in Colossians and Ephesians, was unknown during the Acts period to both Peter and Paul. What we have brought before us instead is the renewed offer of the kingdom to Israel. The Lord had told his disciples in Mark ch 16 v 17 that "signs would follow them that believe". These signs, like our Lord's miracles, were particularly for Israel to convince them of Christ's Messiahship. These continued throughout the Acts period right up to ch 28.

We must now look at the day of Pentecost and what follows.

It is suggested by many theologians and scholars that with Christ's crucifixion and the nation's participation in it, God finished with Israel at the Cross. They tell us that at Acts ch 2, on the day of Pentecost, a brand new movement of God began. That day, so they say, was the inauguration or the birth of the Church which is His body. The church fathers, so-called, were

of the same opinion, and many of them were totally anti-Semitic (see Appendix at end of notes). These include such illustrious names as Chrysostom, St. Augustine, Luther, Calvin and many others. The whole idea was to get Israel out and the church in as quickly as possible, transferring promises and blessings which were specifically Israel's to the "church". The question is - Were they right or wrong to do this? The answer is simple - they were unmistakably wrong, and we trust this will become evident as we proceed. An understanding of what happened at Pentecost is essential to our interpretation of the rest of the New Testament.

First of all, it is quite clear that it was Jews only who were addressed by Peter on that momentous occasion. Acts ch.2 v 5 makes that clear. ("Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem JEWS, devout men out of every nation under heaven.") They had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and had stayed on to celebrate Pentecost which was 50 days later. Many of those present were Jews of the dispersion, i.e. those who had been scattered among the nations during the oppressions Israel had endured throughout the centuries. The sound of the rushing mighty wind and the cloven tongues of fire heralded the promised coming of the Holy Spirit who was to precede the setting up of the kingdom. When the apostles spoke all heard in their own language or dialect. The multitude was amazed and could not grasp what was happening —hence their question in verse 12. "What meaneth this?" Now Peter speaks. His words are of great importance. Please notice he did not say, "This is a wonderful new thing never before revealed; this is the birth of the church which is His body." Such a statement would have been unintelligible to the multitude. Instead, what he announced was, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel." (Acts ch.2 v 16). Joel in his prophecy, written 600 years approximately before Christ, foretold this pouring out of the Holy Spirit which was to precede the restoration of the nation and the setting up of the kingdom. However it is equally clear that what happened that day was only a partial fulfilment of Joel ch.2. What he had foretold was a pouring out of God's Spirit upon ALL flesh and he went on to speak of the sun being turned into darkness and the moon into blood. These events had not taken place but awaited fulfilment at a later date (see Revelation ch 6 v 12-17). The arrival of the Holy Spirit should have been — to a nation who possessed the Old Testament scriptures — proof-positive of what was taking place in their midst. Peter in his message shows that Jesus of Nazareth, the One they had crucified and slain, was risen, ascended and glorified at the Father's right hand, fulfilling the prophetic scriptures and proving Himself to be their Messiah and king. The people were cut to their hearts and cried out, "What shall we do?" The opportunity to repent is offered to them once again as Peter tells them to "Repent and be baptised every one of you for the remission of sins." On that day 3000 accepted the truth of Christ's Messiahship and joined themselves to the apostles. However many hundreds of thousands did not repent. This was a disappointing result, because Peter and the other apostles were looking for national repentance. The next time Peter speaks to these people he pleads once more with them to "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and He shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heavens must receive until the restitution of all things ..." (Acts.ch 3 v 19-21). If the English language means anything, Peter is assuring them that if the nation repents Jesus will return and the restoration and kingdom that had been promised could even yet be set up. Everything however hinged on the response of the nation to this renewed call to repentance. During the whole period of the Acts this was truly a possibility, but we shall see in our later studies what eventually happened.

From Acts ch.2 onwards many remarkable things take place, things which we believe belong to this Pentecostal dispensation, i.e. up to Acts ch 28.

- Lands are sold and the proceeds placed in the apostles' hands for equal distribution to the believers;
- For approximately 10 years no Gentile is invited to come to Christ;
- After Paul's conversion the message was still to the Jew first;
- The Jewish believers continue to meet in their temple and synagogues;
- Evidential gifts like tongues and prophecy are in abundance;
- The sick are miraculously healed and even the dead are raised;
- Among the believers themselves governmental judgements were commonplace;
- The Lord's coming was expected to take place almost immediately.

What did all this mean?

Where do we Gentiles figure in all of this?

What relevance have these things to our dispensation of grace?

The way is now opening up for us to look carefully at exactly what was going on and recognise in all these things the working and wisdom of a God whose ways are past finding out. These and many other issues must be faced and investigated in our future meetings (D.V.). What a wealth of truth lies before us! May we be given the grace and enlightenment to receive it.

APPENDIX

Statements from the church fathers regarding the Jews:

John Chrysostom (344-407 AD)

"The synagogue is a place for the assassins of Christ to meet. I hate the synagogue and I hate the Jews for the same reason."

St. Augustine

"How hateful to me are the enemies of Your Scripture. How I wish You would slay the Jews with Your two-edged sword."

Martin Luther (1543)

"A Christian has no more bitter and galling foe than a Jew. There is no other to whom we accord as many benefactions and from whom we suffer as much as we do from these base children of the devil, this brood of vipers. Their homes should be broken down and destroyed. Their synagogues should be set on fire."

John Calvin

"The Jews are rotten and unbending. Stiff-neckedness deserves that they be oppressed accordingly and without measure or end; that they die in their misery without the pity of anyone."

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Introduction

It will be easily seen by simply flicking through the pages of the Acts that the 30 years or so after Christ's death were filled with miraculous happenings wrought by the hands of the Apostles, these, like Christ's miracles were "signs" to the nation of Israel of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed their Messiah.

We have already pointed out that the Acts of the Apostles is actually the re-offer of the "kingdom" to Israel, and we will eventually come to that place in God's dealings with them where Hosea's prophecy will be literally fulfilled. Hosea had spoken of a day which would come in their history when the nation would be scattered and when God would pronounce upon them "*Lo-ammi*" which means "*not my people*". He then spoke of a later, future day when they would be re-gathered, when their backsliding would be healed and when He would call them "*My people*" once again. Hosea prophesied of a long period of time when the nation would be without a King and when no sacrifices would be offered. As we explore the chapters we will see this begin to come to pass until we reach that point where they are left in their darkness and disobedience and when at last the "*Lo-ammi*" will be pronounced.

The last verse of Acts 2 says, "*The Lord added to the church*". We must be careful with this word "*church*" during the Acts period. Most versions in fact omit the word "*church*" here in Acts 2. The greek word itself means nothing more than a "*called out company*" and in and of itself has no spiritual connotations. As a matter of fact, later in the Acts we find an ungodly company of people who had gathered to lynch the Apostle Paul referred to as "*ekklesia*". So we can see that any company of people whether Christian or pagan can be called "*ekklesia*" or called out company. The reason we emphasise this is to differentiate the "*church*" of the Acts period from "*the church which is His body*". In the Acts period we certainly have out called gatherings of believers meeting together in unity and fellowship but what we will not find is a company called the "*Body of Christ*" where Jew and Gentile believers are in absolute equality "*twain made into one new man*" as Paul tells us in Ephesians ch 2.

The truth of "*the Body of Christ*" was a later revelation to the Apostle Paul, given to him after the re-offer had been made and the Acts period had come to a close.

More about this will be mentioned later but we need add nothing more here save to say that for Acts ch 2 to Acts ch 10, a period of some 8-10 years not a single gentile comes to Christ nor is invited to do so. As Acts ch. 11 v 19 tells us the message was preached to *"the Jews only"* and even after Acts 10 when Cornelius comes to Christ the invitation was still to *"the Jew first"* Romans ch.1 v 16. It is obvious from these references that without gentiles being invited and later with gentile believers having a "second class citizen" status the *"Body of Christ"* as we have it in Ephesians and Colossians could not exist. This *"Body"* must have Jew and Gentile believers in absolute equality as we have already stated. We encourage the readers of these words to check this out for themselves.

We will now look through the chapters of the Acts, extracting from them those things which will be of great interest and which will show us the truths we have already set forth.

Chapter 3

Acts ch.3 relates for us the details of the first recorded miracle. Many *"signs and wonders"* had already been performed by the apostles as Acts 2 v 43 clearly shows, but the details of these are unrecorded. The fact the Holy Spirit has chosen to give the details here is significant and prophetic. The miracle of healing the impotent man who was begging outside the "beautiful" gate of the temple was a picture of Israel's pitiful state at that time and of the prospect of their healing and restoration if they would accept Jesus was their Messiah. When we compare this first miracle of Peter with that of Paul there is a lot revealed. Paul's first miracle was the blinding of a Jewish man and was no doubt a picture of the blindness and disobedience into which the nation was quickly moving.

It is in ch. 3v 19 that Peter makes his historic statement. After exhorting the nation to repent and be converted he tells them that such action will bring in the times of refreshing promised by the prophets and that Jesus would return and kingdom blessing would be brought in. We must remember that neither Peter nor Paul could have known what the outcome would be and so as the message of re-offer was made by Peter to the Jews living inside the land and by Paul to the Jews outside the land, the possibility of Christ's return was pre-eminent in the Apostles minds. Paul's early epistles are full of references which anticipated the imminent return of Christ.

At that stage, (the Acts period), according to Acts 3v 19 everything depended on the nations response to this renewed offer message.

From the very start the preaching of Jesus and His resurrection was met with the full fury of the Jewish leaders. The High priest, Caiaphas, rulers and elders were united in their opposition to what was being proclaimed. In the case of the impotent man they could not deny the miracle and Peter made it clear all hadbeen done in the Name of Jesus and by His infinite power.

Chapter 4

Peter lays the blame for Christ's rejection and death at the door of the religious leaders. He was indeed *"The stone which the builders rejected"* but through His resurrection and ascension had *"become the Head of the corner"*. The leaders of the nation were livid at Peter's comments but as we have said could not deny the miracle which had been performed publicly in broad daylight and after consultation commanded the Apostles to preach no more in this Name. Might as well ask the sun not to shine.

Holy Ghost boldness now took hold on these so called *"unlearned and ignorant men"*. Momentous things now begin to take place as the number of the disciples multiplied. We are told of their unity in ch 4 v32 and their love for each other, combined with their firm belief in the imminent return of the King led them to sell their houses and lands and bring the price gained to be used by the Apostles and distributed as every man had need.

It is at this point we are introduced to Barnabas a Levite who came from Cyprus, he is to play a very important part later in Paul's ministry. He too had land and sold it and in turn laid all the proceeds at the

Apostles feet. We need to add that this was not a compulsory action and there was no need to give all or any of the proceeds, this was the personal exercise of each person but in our next chapter we will see the awful end of a couple who through pride and lies forfeited their lives.

You may ask "Should we be practising this to-day?". Of course such action must be the result of personal exercise before God but in the context we have it mentioned here, which was unusual to say the least, these things were done as the believers no doubt felt, what do possessions really matter when the King is coming back and will bring in His never ending reign. This period we live in is "*The dispensation of the grace of God*", and is unlike the Acts period where the New Covenant was working in a partial way bringing with it not only blessing but also judgement.

Chapter 5

We have continuously pointed out that the days of the Acts period were unique and many things were taking place which were peculiar to that time. There were miracles of healing on a unprecedented scale, tongues were a common phenomenon and acts of governmental judgement were happening regularly. It is to one of these acts of judgement that ch 5 commences. We must remember that in 1 Corinthians ch.11 which was written during the Acts period, we have mention made of God's dealings in judgement on His people. We read there of "*many being weak and sickly among you, and many sleep*". These judgements from God were due to some error on the part of the Corinthian believers, "*not discerning the Lord's body*", and many were weak or sickly and indeed many had died due to their shortcomings, and we contend that such judgements are not happening today else it would be recognised quite easily. We have moved on and are in the "*dispensation of the grace of God*" where God is dealing with His people at this time in absolute grace, whereas in the Acts period, with the new covenant in operation, it was a mixture of "*grace and immediate judgement*".

Such is the case with Ananias and Sapphira. They like so many others had a possession and sold it. However we are told that "they plotted together" and decided to lie as to the price they had been paid, leaving only part of the proceeds at the Apostles feet but claiming it was the full amount. We must remember there was no compulsion to sell the "possession" in the first place, nor were they asked to give all or even anything from the sale. It would seem pride had motivated their actions. perhaps looking for place or esteem among the believers but whatever their motive was they "*lied to the Holy Ghost*" and the judgement of God fell on both of them resulting in their sudden deaths. If God were dealing with us today as He did with those Acts believers there would not be enough young men to carry out the bodies. These facts alone should drive us back to the book for answers, especially with regard 1Corinthians 11 and the judgements associated with eating "*The Lord's supper*".

The signs and wonders done by the hands of the Apostles continued, to the extent that the sick were brought into the streets on beds and couches so that Peter's shadow falling on them might bring healing, such was the greatness of expectation. How insignificant are the efforts of our modern "faith healers" to emulate the Apostles. These charlatans are more interested in getting rich quick than helping anyone. How sad that Christians are so easily fooled.

Multitudes were now coming to recognise Jesus was the Messiah, but we must remind the readers of these notes that they were all Jews. Opposition of course followed and the Apostles found themselves in prison. Again we have a strange event taking place, something which we believe did not happen after the Acts period nor in the day in which we live. The angel of the Lord comes and opens the door of the prison and the Apostles are supernaturally released. On investigation by the High priest and others in authority of the prison where the Apostles were being held it was found the guards were watching the doors and the prison was "shut with all safety" but the prisoners were gone.

The Jewish authorities were now afraid as to the growth of this movement and when they found out where the Apostles were preaching had them brought before them and warned them again not to preach in this name and acknowledged the people were now blaming them for Christ's death. Peters reply is admirable and should be the motto of every genuine believer, "*We ought to obey God rather than men*". Nothing could prevent these men preaching about the Lord Jesus, and when the council met to plan how to slay them, Gamaliel's advise to them was full of wisdom and probably saved the Apostles lives, he reminded them of other

movements that had taken place where the leaders were exposed as false and perished, he then made this statement *"Refrain from these men, and let them alone, for if this counsel or this work be of men it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God"*. This satisfied their thirst for blood for the time being and so after they had beaten the Apostles and warned them again not to preach about Jesus they let them go.

The Apostles departed and rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for His sake and they "ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ". What noble, courageous Christians they really were.

Chapter 6

Jerusalem has been the centre of activity for the Apostles ministry from the day of Pentecost, the door has not yet been opened to Gentiles and the Apostle to the Gentiles has not yet been converted. Chapter 6 of the Acts is important on two counts. Firstly we see that even at that early stage problems were arising among the believers and secondly we are introduced to a notable Christian called Stephen who is to become the first Christian martyr.

As we have pointed out money had been made available to the Apostles through the sale of lands, houses and possessions but now a dispute had arisen between the *"Grecians"* ie Hellenists or Greek speaking Jews who had been probably born outside Israel but were now residing there, and *"Hebrews"* ie Jews who had been born in Israel. The dispute was regarding the distribution of funds for those who were widows. The Grecians felt that their widows were being neglected, somehow short changed. The Apostles realising the problem must be dealt with, but feeling it should not take them away from the preaching of the word and prayer, exhorted that seven men should be appointed to look after such business. The credentials of these men was very high, they had to be of honest report, how important that is when dealing with money matters, they had to be full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. Such a matter as this required men of undoubted honesty and integrity but also men with spiritual insight, empowered by God. When we think of the high standard that was required and see the qualifications that an overseer must have and we look around at Christendom today and the men who are in charge of leading and instructing flocks how far from the pattern we have wandered. It is at this point we are introduced to Stephen. He is one of the seven chosen. He is described on the sacred page thus *"A man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost"* and he certainly was all that.

Stephen immediately runs into opposition with Jewish leaders as well, for when in his disputations with them in the synagogue they could not resist the wisdom and spirit by which he spake, they bribed and forced men to tell lies about him just as they had done against the Lord Jesus. It wasn't long before Stephen found himself in front of the sanhedrin. It is of interest that one of the countries mentioned in v9 is Cilicia. Some from that part disputed with Stephen. We do know that Tarsus is in Cilicia and it is not unreasonable to think that probably "Saul of Tarsus" was among the group who argued with Stephen. How large a part Stephen played in Saul's conversion we cannot be sure but Paul the Apostle certainly had a lasting impression of this noble saint etched on his heart for the rest of his life.

After their accusations were made against Stephen we can almost imagine the silence that followed as *"they looked stedfastly on him"* and we are told a most remarkable thing, *"His face was as it had been the face of an angel"*.

The way is now opened up to hear Stephen's defence which takes up all of chapter 7.

Chapter 7

This whole chapter is the account of Stephen's defence before the Jewish council. The High Priest starts the proceedings by asking Stephen to answer the accusations brought against him, *"Are these things so"* he inquires? Stephen takes the council on an historical journey through their 2000 year old history to show them that their hearts were just the same as their fathers had been who rejected God's prophets and messengers, and were in fact resisting the Holy Spirit.

Three main personalities present themselves to us in Stephen's presentation, Abraham the father of the nation, Joseph the Saviour of the nation and Moses the deliverer of Israel.

Abraham is only briefly mentioned at the start of the chapter.

1. His call out of Ur of the Chaldees, where, with his family he was an idol worshipper.
2. The promise God made to him concerning the land for an inheritance and to his seed after him, the remarkable thing about the promise being that as yet, though in old age Abraham had no heir.
3. God also prophesied to Abraham that his posterity would be in bondage in a strange land but that God would visit them and bring them out into the land He had promised He would give to him and his seed as possession forever. So it was Issac the son of promise was born, then Jacob and then his 12 sons who were to be the twelve patriarchs.

The movement to Egypt could only have been foreseen by God. Joseph, the beloved son, hated and rejected by his brethren, through envy is sold by them into slavery and ends up in Egypt. Mark these words *"but God was with him"*. Later in the historical account Joseph could announce to his brethren *"You meant it for evil but God meant it for good"*. On the first occasion Joseph presented himself to his brethren as the one they should bow before they rejected him. This of course would strike a chord in the hearts of those Stephen was addressing, had they not done the same thing? Stephen quickly added that the day did come when Joseph's brethren did bow the knee and accept him, he refers to this in verse 13 and calls it the *"second time"*. What a day it will be when their King returns that *"second time"* then he will be received and worshipped by the nation.

Moses figured highly among their greatest heroes. What lowly beginnings he had. Hid in the ark of bulrushes by a mother of faith. Though Pharaoh had decreed all male Hebrew children should be put to death, she feared not the commandment of the King, but by faith hid him believing God had a glorious plan for her son (see Hebrews 11 v 23). Stephen again points out that Moses was rejected in his first offer to be their redeemer. He recounts the story of how Moses slew an Egyptian and buried him in the sand and on the next day tried to separate two Hebrews who were quarrelling. His efforts were met with ridicule and rejection *"Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us"* they asked him? This was the same scenario all over again on the first occasion he offered himself he was rejected but when he returned much later (ie the second time) he was received. We are skipping over much of what Stephen said to get to the relevant point we want to make. Stephen is reminding the council that just as their forefathers had rejected both Joseph and Moses the first time they offered themselves as *"ruler"* so this *"stiffnecked"* people living at that time, had done precisely the same. God delivered them through the blood of the lamb and by power from Pharaoh's bondage, yet in a short time they had rebelled and were worshipping a golden calf. Prophet after prophet had been sent but they were persecuted by the people. These prophets had foretold the coming of *"the Just One"* and when He came, just as their forefathers had rejected Joseph and Moses as we have seen, they murdered Him and rejected His messengers.

Israel's Messiah will return the second time, not as the babe of Bethlehem or the Suffering Christ but as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. *"Every eye shall see Him, they who pierced Him and all the tribes of the land shall weep because of Him"*.

This was more than the leaders could bear, they stopped their ears and ran upon him with one accord, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Before his demise Stephen got a glimpse of the glory where Christ is. He said *"I see the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God"*. Many explanations have been given as to the meaning of this revelation to Stephen, some too foolish and unscriptural to mention. I believe that the title *"Son of Man"* belongs to Christ in His relationship to the earth and to Israel as her rightful King. We get it many times in the Old Testament and in the Gospels relating to Christ's second coming. As we have explained that coming was expected at that time, all that stood in its way was the repentance of the nation and as yet that was still possible. So Stephen looking steadfastly into heaven saw the Lord Jesus standing, as it were, ready to return if Israel would respond. The rulers had heard Peter preach on the matter

and knew exactly what he had said. Everything was dependent on their repentance and that is why we believe a bona fide offer to repent had to be made to Israel during the Acts period.

Stephen dies with almost the identical words of His Master on his lips, *"Lord Jesus receive my spirit"*. Then he asks for their forgiveness, *"Lay not this sin to their charge"*. When he said this he fell asleep. What a lovely term for the death of a believer. Death is our enemy but it is likened to sleep. Death for the believer will be interrupted by resurrection and then to be forever with the Lord.

Stephen becomes the first in a long line of heroic men and women who became *"Christian martyrs"* prepared to lay down their lives for the One they both loved and served.

"The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet whose name was Saul". This is how we are introduced to the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Saul never forgot Stephen's martyrdom and at a later stage in his life shows it was never far away from his mind. Wonderful the vessel of honour God can make out of the most unlikely clay. We will talk more about him later, he is destined to be one of God's greatest servants and will in a coming day shine as one of the stars in the firmament.

This chapter has revealed to us the hearts of the Jewish leaders in their wilful rejection of their King and of their hatred of His servants.

Chapter 8

After Stephen's martyrdom, he was buried with much sadness by devout men who carried him to his burial. A great persecution soon broke out against the Christians in Jerusalem. Saul of Tarsus was no doubt one of the main antagonists and indeed we are told that *"Saul made havoc of the church.....and haling men and women, committed them to prison"*. Those who were scattered abroad because of the persecution went everywhere preaching the word. Perhaps we need to add a word of caution here. Many think that this is the gospel now reaching out to Gentiles as well, but nothing could be further from the truth. Acts ch.11v19 removes this myth. There we are clearly informed, *"Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen, travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the the word to none but unto the Jews only"*. No Gentile had yet been invited nor would be until Peter would use the second key of the Kingdom and open the door for Cornelius and his family.

We now are introduced to Philip "the evangelist", he was another of those who had been chosen in Acts ch.6 along with Stephen and 5 others. He was busily engaged preaching to the people of Samaria. Once again we hasten to add the "Samaritans" were not Gentiles but a review of their history will show their close links with the nation of Israel. We well remember the woman of Samaria's words to the Saviour when she spoke to Him of *"our father Jacob"* and also her words *"I know that Messias cometh which is called Christ"* revealing her awareness of these things. We leave the reader of these notes to research this point for themselves. The people of Samaria gave heed to the things Philip was preaching, and as they witnessed the miracles which were performed by him great joy filled the city. As we have seen these evidential miracles continually accompanied the preaching of the word, these were signs that Christ was indeed the Messiah and proved that God was working through these men in their proclamation that Jesus was indeed the *"Anointed One"*.

Simon the sorcerer now rears his head. This man had exalted himself in the eyes of the people and through the sorceries he performed had bewitched the people claiming that he was some great one. It seems, like many in this 21st century, that his only interest in the things of God was to promote himself and make monetary gain. We are told that he "believed" and as he watched the wonders wrought through the hands of Philip an unwholesome plan was being hatched in his mind. At that time, Peter and John were sent for to witness the work of God in Samaria and when they arrived they laid hands on those who had believed that they might receive "Holy Ghost". Please note the definite article is not here. It does not say *"The Holy Ghost"*, not the Giver, but *"Holy Ghost"* the gifts which the Holy Spirit gives. This is obviously what Simon witnessed, *i.e.* those gifts in operation, and he foolishly offers to give the Apostles money if they will give him this power to lay hands on people and give these gifts. As we have said just another charlatan wanting to

use spiritual things to promote himself and line his pockets. This was never going to end well. Simon was certainly not truly converted, Peter tells him, *"Thy heart is not right in the sight of God"*, and again *"Thy money go with thee to destruction"*(JND). Spiritual things may not be bought with money and it reveals the carnal state of his mind that he thought it could. Peter exhorts him to repent and to seek Gods face for forgiveness if it is at all possible. We leave the story with Simon pleading with the Apostles to pray for him that no judgement from God might fall upon him and we are left to realise that there are false professors in all ages. After this incident Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching in many villages of the Samaritans as they returned.

God is always interested in individuals. Philip is taken away from Samaria, where such a mighty work of God was going on and is told by the Angel of the Lord to go toward the south. No further information is given to him and like Abraham he went out not knowing whithersoever he went. Wonderful to be in touch with God to act implicitly on His word.

There was a man crossing the desert that God needed Philip to speak to. An Ethiopian eunuch, of great authority, a chancellor in charge of finances, under Candace queen of the Ethiopians. He had come to Jerusalem to worship. While there he had somehow got possession of a scroll of Isaiah the prophet. The wording here makes it clear that he was a proselyte *i.e.* a convert to Judaism. At the prompting of the Holy Spirit Philip joins himself to the chariot and hears the eunuch read aloud from Isaiah's prophecy in ch.53. Like many others the eunuch could not understand what he was reading and desired Philips help in guiding him to the truth. *"Of whom speaketh the prophet of himself or of some other man"* he asked? Philip had no problem in starting at that very scripture and preaching unto him Jesus.

The subject of baptism has always been a thorny one. We must be honest and perfectly frank. Firstly the New Testament knows nothing of *"infant baptism"*. Calvin until his dying day clung on to his belief in it but there is not one verse in scripture to support it. Secondly the practice of baptism for believers today is far removed from that of the Acts where those who believed were baptised immediately upon conversion with no delay in between. Verses like this one spoken by the Lord *"He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved"* are difficult to fully grasp. Then we have believing and baptism linked together for the remission of sins *eg.* Acts ch.2 v38 *"Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of the Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins"*, and when Saul was converted he was told by Ananias *"Arise and be baptised and wash away thy sins"*. Both of these statements are difficult to understand when looked at through the traditional view held on baptism. The eunuch must have been told by Philip of the necessity of baptism hence the urgency he expressed in his words *"See here is water what doth hinder me to be baptised"?* It seems pretty certain that without baptism one could not be saved. The baptism mentioned we feel is no doubt "John's baptism" which was a baptism unto repentance for the nation and was a necessary requirement before any one could be "saved". It was an identification with the rejected Messiah and an affirmation and agreement that what God's word had declared concerning the backsliding of Israel was true. Later we intent to write a paper on this important subject.

The eunuch is baptised and as they come out of the water Philip is supernaturally caught away and is found at Azotus and preaches in all the cities until he reaches Caesarea. Another miracle establishing in our minds the uniqueness of that Acts period. I have to freely admit I have never heard of such a thing in our time happen to any gospel preacher.

Chapter 9

Saul of Tarsus was without doubt, one of the leaders of the persecution against the Christians. If anything the recent events, including the multiplication of the believers and Stephen's martyrdom, seem to have enraged him even more. We can also see in the narrative that Saul's conscience was also troubling him. How could a sincerely religious man like him seeing the conduct of Christians that had been arrested and the noble way Stephen laid down his life for Christ not be moved to some extent.

He was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus with letters from the High Priest giving him authority to arrest and bind any he found following *"that way"* and bring them back to Jerusalem to be no doubt, punished and in some cases put to death. Little did he think that this would be the day which would revolutionise his life.

As he and the others with him were nearing Damascus, at around midday, a light from heaven struck him to the earth. The Lord spoke to him and asked *"Saul, Saul why persecutest thou me?"* Saul was no doubt terrified but managed to ask *"Who art thou Lord?"* What a shock when he was told, *"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest"*. Saul would quickly realise that the people he had been persecuting were so closely united to Jesus that in persecuting them he was persecuting Christ. The change in his attitude was extraordinary and immediate, he responded *"Lord what wilt Thou have me to do?"* He was a *"chosen vessel"*, God's instrument to reach the Gentiles and destined to be the writer under inspiration of most of our New Testament. More of this will become clear as we examine the rest of the Acts. Saul/Paul has now entered the arena, Peter's role will recede and Paul will become the prominent figure after Acts ch.10.

The result of Paul's encounter with the glorified Christ on the Damascus Road left him blind and for 3 days he was in that condition. In Damascus there was a disciple called Ananias, later when Paul gives his testimony in ch.22 he refers to Ananias as a devout man, it was he that the Lord spoke to in a vision telling him where he would find Paul and how he should restore his sight. After some hesitation, which was understandable considering Paul's former activities, Ananias sets off encouraged no doubt by the Lord's testimony concerning His newly converted servant, *"He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel; For I will show him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake"*. How true it was, eventually Paul would find himself before the most powerful monarch of his day "Nero" himself the supreme Caesar of the Roman empire.

Paul's sight was restored and on leaving the house of Judas in the Street called Straight he immediately started to preach Christ that He was indeed the *"Son of God"*. This amazed those who heard him preach for they knew of his pedigree but Paul increased in strength and confounded the Jews in Damascus proving to them that this is very Christ.

The opposition was not long in starting. The Jews in Damascus took counsel to kill him. Somehow Paul got wind of it, and such was their intent that they watched the gates day and night. A plan was hatched for his deliverance and he was let down over the city wall in a basket, and on this occasion avoided punishment and perhaps death.

His next stop was Jerusalem and of course he was infamous there as well. In fact they doubted if he was a disciple at all and maybe thought that it was a ruse to infiltrate the Christian companies to do them damage. Barnabas takes up his cause and tells the Apostles how he had met the Lord and of his exploits for Christ in Damascus. They obviously accepted the testimony of Barnabas and we are told he was with them *"coming in and going out at Jerusalem"*. Again Paul starts to witness in Jerusalem and speaks boldly in the Name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the "Grecians" *i.e.* Greek speaking Jews, who like the Jews in Damascus, went about to slay him

The believers thought it wise to remove him from Jerusalem so they brought him to Caesarea and then sent him to his home city of Tarsus. We will hear nothing more about him until we reach ch.13 but no doubt during his absence from public view God was preparing him, like Moses during his 40 years in the wilderness, for greater and wider service.

This section ends by telling us the churches had a time of rest, probably from persecution to some measure, that were edified and walked in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit and that the believers during this period were multiplied.

The concluding verses of ch.9 relate to Peter and two exceptional incidents he was involved with. Peter had made the journey to Lydda, which was in the plain of Sharon about a days journey at that time, west of Jerusalem. When there he came into contact with a man named Aeneas who was sick of the palsy for 8 years. Peter performs a remarkable miracle of healing on this man. His words to the man were *"Aeneas, Jesus Christ*

maketh thee whole", and immediately he arose, supernaturally healed. As we have explained such miracles done in Christ's name were to convince the Jews of the authenticity of His Messiahship. The effect on the people was startling for we are told *"All that dwelt at Lydda and Saron saw him and turned to the Lord"*.

The second incident was even more outstanding. We are told of a lady called Dorcas who had been a believer but had sadly died. Her hebrew name was "Tabitha" which by interpretation means "gazelle", perhaps a nickname given to her because of how speedily she worked. This woman had a great testimony in Joppa because of the *"good works"* and *"almsdeeds"* which she had done. Seeing Lydda was near to Joppa and the believers had heard Peter was there they sent two men to ask him to come quickly. On arrival he was taken into the upper chamber where she had been laid and the widows who were present showed him the coats and garments she had made. Peter put everyone out and turning to the corpse said, *"Tabitha arise"*. Immediately she opened her eyes and when she saw Peter sat up. Peter held out his hand to her and lifted her up and then presented her to the believers alive.

Where was Dorcas between her death and resurrection? Tradition says she was with Christ in heaven. How could this possibly be true? What advantage or blessing would it have brought to Dorcas to bring her out of an environment where she could not sin or ever be sick again, where she had beheld the face of Jesus and then to bring her back to earth, to sin again, to be sick again and to be separated from her Saviour. This is not what happened nor does the bible teach any such thing. Dorcas was dead. She was in the state of death and was aware of nothing. Peter called her out of that state back to life to be re united with her friends and family, and how delighted she was. Common sense would tell us that the first question she would have been asked when raised would have been, "What was heaven like", and she would have been puzzled at Peter bringing her back from such a glorious state and place but no such conversations took place. The dead are dead and will not live again until resurrection. The space between death and resurrection, though it be 1000 years, will be but a blink. The saint who has died will close his eyes on earth and to him or her scarcely a second will seem to have passed before they open their eyes in the presence of Christ. When we hear the response of some learned men as they try to justify the orthodox position it becomes laughable. It has even been suggested that these were special cases of resurrection and that those involved were in some sort of Limbo. How much easier to believe what the bible says *"Man lieth down and riseth not again til the heavens be no more they shall not wake nor be raised out of their sleep"* Job ch.14v12.

The result of the miracle again was that many believed on the Lord. We leave Peter in the house of Simon the tanner awaiting what was to be a turning point in God's dealings with the Gentiles.