

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.

Chapter 10

This is the pivotal chapter of the Acts. Firstly Peter's prominence will diminish making room for Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. He will be the prominent player in the latter part of this great Acts drama. Secondly the door of salvation will be opened to the Gentile for the first time, leaving behind 10 years approx. when it was *"the Jew only"*, (Acts 11v19).

It is interesting to note that Peter, not Paul is the Apostle used to reach the first Gentile convert. It was to Peter that the keys of the Kingdom had been entrusted by Christ (Matthew 16v19). We have pointed out that the Kingdom and the Church are 2 completely different things, and up to this point the truth concerning *"the Church which is His body"*, ie *"the mystery"*, had not yet been revealed. The hope set before the believers during this period was *"the hope of Israel"*, a hope which had to do with the restoration of the nation and the reign of their Messiah during which Gentiles would come into great blessing.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was based in Caesarea. We are told that he was a devout man who feared God with all his house, that he gave much alms to the people and prayed always. All in all he was a very upright, religious man who was seeking for the truth regarding God and salvation. In a vision he was told by an angel that his prayers and alms deeds had been noticed by God and the angel exhorted him to send men to Joppa to bring Peter with information which will assist him to find the way of salvation. Cornelius acted

immediately and called 2 of his household servants and a devout soldier and sends them on this important mission.

Peter was lodging in Simon the tanners house in Caesarea unaware of Cornelius or his vision but now God gets to work on Peter's heart.

He was on the roof top praying, and when he felt hungry as some food was being prepared he fell into a trance and he too had a vision.

He saw a vessel being lowered to him in a great sheet bound by the four corners. In it were all manners of 4 footed beasts, creeping things and fowls of the air. When Peter is asked to *"Kill and eat"* he recoils in horror with the answer *"Not so Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean"*. The voice speaks to Peter again *"What God has cleansed that call not thou common"*. The vision was repeated three times to impress a great lesson on Peter's heart. We need to recognise that there was something much deeper being revealed here to Peter than simply compliance to the diet law given to Israel. God was preparing Peter for one of the biggest experiences/shocks of his life. Peter gave much thought to the vision and while he meditated God told him that 3 men were seeking for him and that he was to accompany them asking no questions, for said God by His Spirit, *"I have sent them"*. After Peter introduces himself to the men sent by Cornelius he is told of the reason for their visit, they are lodged for the night and Peter accompanies them to the house of Cornelius.

On his arrival Cornelius fell down before Peter but Peter tells him to get up seeing he also is a man. He then calls together all his kinsmen and near friends to hear the words which Peter has to speak. Peter has now come to a full realisation of what the vision he had received really meant, his first words to Cornelius are revealing. *"You know that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation, but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean"*. That was a massive step for Peter to take. Some have mistakenly blamed the Apostles of bigotry and prejudice in their avoidance of reaching Gentiles up to this point, some 10 years after Pentecost, but nothing could be further from the truth. Peter never envisaged that he would be the instrument God would use to speak at the first to Gentiles. Yet it was to him the keys of the kingdom had been given and just as he had opened the door to the Jew in Acts 2 so now it is he who must open the door to the Gentile in Acts 10. It is of interest and of great importance that this is the only time Peter is asked to speak to any Gentile. Paul is God's chosen vessel to carry the life giving message to the uncircumcision, and after Peter puts the key in the lock and opens the door his part has been fulfilled. The reason that Gentiles were at this stage invited to come is revealed in Romans 11 v 11 *"To provoke them to jealousy"*. The brother who opened this passage up in our bible class gave an excellent illustration. It is like the little child who won't eat its food. In order to encourage it the food is offered to the Grandad, to Grannie, even the cat gets an opportunity, all this to provoke a response from the child and encourage it to eat. So God brings Gentiles in at this stage to *"provoke the Jews to jealousy"*. The nation should have been God's missionaries to reach the nations but disobedience and hardness had prevented them from doing so therefore God uses this method of provoking to attempt to get a response.

Things are now changing, no longer *"the Jew only"* but *"the Jew first"*. Right to the end of the Acts Israel will enjoy this privilege, Gentile believers are only looked upon as *"grafted in"*, unnatural branches to the Olive tree, simply sharing in Israel's spiritual things Romans 11. Not much equality there and while this state of affairs existed it was impossible for the truth of the *"Body of Christ"* to be revealed.

The gathered company settled down to hear all that God has to say. Peter starts with these words *"Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons"*. The full weight of the vision now dawns on Peter, obviously if it were not God's will Peter would not be standing in front of Cornelius and his household, amazing to think that years later Peter would succumb and revert back to pre Acts 10 days (see Galatians 2). Peter's message in Cornelius's house is a reminder that the "gospel" was sent unto the children of Israel, telling the nation of Christ's life and miracles, of His death and resurrection, of which he and others chosen by God were witnesses. The Apostles were commanded by the risen Christ to preach to the people (Israel) that it was He who had been ordained by God *"to judge the quick and the dead"*. He was the subject of the writings of the prophets, and adds Peter *"Through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins"*.

As Peter was speaking the Holy Ghost fell on the gathered company. The 7 Jewish men who had accompanied Peter were astonished that on the Gentiles as well had been poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. Their astonishment is proof positive that up to that point no Gentile had trusted Christ nor had any been invited to do so. They then heard them speak with tongues, an evidential gift which was proof of their conversion and there and then they were baptised in the Name of the Lord.

This is a turning point. No longer Jew only but still Jew first. Slowly but surely we are moving toward that place where nationally Israel will not repent and the day of Israel's preference will end introducing a new phase, a momentous change in God's dealings with men will be revealed. Paul calls it *"The dispensation of the grace of God"*, a secret which had been hid in God from ages and generations past.

We will notice as we proceed these great changes taking place before our very eyes.

Chapter 11

When the Apostles and brethren heard of what had happened at Caesarea with Cornelius, the moment Peter arrived back they wanted to talk with him about all that had taken place. There seems to have been a more militant group who are referred to as "the circumcision", they contended with Peter accusing him of going into men uncircumcised and eating with them. These no doubt were "Judaisers" or strict adherents to the law. Peter rehearsed the whole matter blow by blow as it had happened. He tells them of his trance and the vision, of the great sheet being lowered with all manner of unclean beasts birds and creeping things on it. This being repeated 3 times. The command *"Arise Peter slay and eat"*, and his refusal to do so, stating he as a Jew had never eaten anything common or unclean. He reiterates the answer from heaven *"What God has cleansed, that call not thou common"*. It took some time for the real meaning of the vision to finally be realized by Peter. God was showing him that He was now about to bring gentiles into blessing, this was a massive move as no gentiles had been converted from Pentecost which was now some 8-10 years in the past. There is much underlying this momentous event which we must pass over save to say that one of the reasons for bringing in Gentiles at this time was to *"provoke the Jews to jealousy"* as Romans 11 tells us. The Gentile was likened to an unnatural branch grafted into the Olive tree contrary to nature. It can be seen from these statements that the truth of the *"body of Christ"* was completely unknown to Peter or the Apostles and even the great Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was unaware of it when he wrote his earlier epistles but more on this later.

By the time the vision had ended Peter informs them, the three men from Cornelius were at the door of the house where he was. Led by the Spirit Peter explains he knew he should accompany them and taking with him six Jewish brethren he sets off for Cornelius's house. He then relates how that Cornelius had been visited by an angel who told him to send men to Joppa to fetch Simon Peter and said the angel *"He shall tell thee words whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved"*.

The events which followed were quite extraordinary. Peter preached, the Holy Ghost fell and Cornelius and his household believed. Peter's words at the end of his defence show that even when it happened he could hardly take in the immensity of what had taken place, *"Who was I that I could withstand God?"*

The group who had gathered to hear his defence were silenced and then glorified God acknowledging *"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life"*.

Verse 18 is one of those summarizing verses which takes a look back to the dispersing abroad of those who were persecuted after the martyrdom of Stephen. The interesting thing to notice is that no matter where they travelled their witness was always and only to the Jews. This was the pattern up to the conversion of Cornelius, and Saul, lately converted, was to be God's chosen vessel to carry His message to the Gentiles.

We now are told of a work of God which was taking place in Antioch. There are two Antiochs mentioned in Acts, the one here which was on the Orantes river and was the capitol of Syria and the other which was in Pisidia, Asia minor. We meet with Grecians here again. They are also mentioned in ch6v1, ch.9v29, and in ch.11v20. The word *"Grecian"* in the greek is *"Hellene"* or Hellenist. These were Jews born outside the land of Israel or Greek speaking Jews. We are told that many turned to the Lord and the believers in Jerusalem

when they heard what was happening in Antioch, despatched Barnabas to help with the work. We have met Barnabas before and we know the kind of man he was, "*good and full of the Holy Ghost*" and again we are told much people were added to the Lord.

Barnabas had befriended Saul before and he knew the calibre of the man Saul was. Saul had since last Barnabas saw him, returned to his native Tarsus and Barnabas went, found him and returned with him to Antioch. They remained in Antioch 1 full year meeting with the believers and teaching them regarding the things of God.

It was here that the disciples were first called "*Christians*" no doubt due to the fact that Christ's name was continually on the lips of the believers. It has been suggested that the Antiochans were renowned for giving folks derogatory nicknames and that this was what had happened here. The name was given in order to make fun of the believers but my what a name, it has been used over the centuries since to honour His name and identify His followers.

We meet an interesting character now his name is Agabus. He, along with others is described as a prophet and we will meet him again in ch21v11. He prophesied that there would be a dearth/famine throughout the land and the inspired word informs us it came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. History also records this event, Josephus the first century Jewish historian tells us of a famine which lasted for several years during the reign of Claudius. He writes "Many died for want of food". This information helps us to date the time approx. this eleventh chapter was written. Claudius Caesar succeeded Caligula in 41AD he reigned 13 years and was poisoned by his wife Agrippina and in turn was succeeded by Nero. It was in the 4th year of his reign 45AD approx. that this famine commenced. That would make ch11. to be around 11 to 12 years after Pentecost The famine seems to have set in quite quickly after the prophecy was made and the disciples were exercised about the believers which lived in Judaea and decided to send relief as each could afford to help those who were suffering. It is wonderful to see that even in a practical way the believers were concerned for the well being of their fellow Christians.

Saul and Barnabas were chosen to be the messengers and when the aid package was ready it was by their hands it was delivered to the elders. Interesting to see the way Saul is entering into the picture and how he has already gained the trust and confidence of the saints. Let us not forget Barnabas, a man is blessed to have a friend like him.

Chapter 12.

This chapter commences with Herod the king's persecution of the church. These were sad days for the believers, James the brother of John is executed and because the Jews were pleased with his death he proceeds to arrest Peter, which he did and put him in prison. Herod's intention was to place him on trial after Passover, but as we shall see God had other plans for His servant. It is interesting to note the translators inserted the word "easter" in verse 4. This is the greek word "pascha" which had been rightly translated Passover 24 times previous to this text. The translators no doubt wanted to get the word "easter" in somewhere as it was a pagan feast which was still being celebrated by the religious leaders when the King James version was made. How sad they had not learned to discern the things which differ but were happy to put in a word which refers to the heathen Goddess "Ishtar" and who still was, though perhaps unwittingly, given a prominent place.

From verse 5 on we have described to us Peter's imprisonment and the events which surrounded it. The Holy Spirit has been pleased to reveal to us that the believers of that day, just like us, were very human, this will become clear a little later in the story. Peter was bound to 2 soldiers and there were keepers before the door guarding the prison. All in all a very secure place. It is worth mentioning that though imprisoned and in danger we find Peter sleeping peacefully. What a testimony to this disciple of Jesus. So secure was he in his trust of God that the circumstances and difficulties he found himself in did not unnecessarily alarm him. It has been said we should not look at God through our problems but rather look at our problems through God. Prayer was being made without ceasing by the believers who knew of his plight and their prayers were answered in a most remarkable way. Peter had experienced angel help before (Acts ch.5v.19), and now again "the angel of the Lord" visits him in the prison. We should point out that angelic ministry was quite a

common feature in the Gospels and during the Acts period but in Paul's later epistles there is no mention made of them aiding the believer in any way. We have of course the power and help of the indwelling Holy Spirit to aid us and in this "*dispensation of grace*" we are "*complete in Him*". Angelic ministry was no doubt associated with that Pentecostal very Jewish Acts period.. Miraculously after the angel tells Peter to arise the chains simply drop from his hands and after Peter has put his sandals and cloak on they walked out of the prison past the guards, freed from the soldiers and even the iron gate which led to the city opened of its own accord to allow them into freedom. Peter was unsure exactly what was happening and for a short space seems to have thought that it was only a vision he had seen and not a real happening. No doubt the moment the fresh air hit his face he realized the magnitude of the miracle which had taken place. Here are his own words on the matter after it had all become clear to him "*Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews*".

Now we have the human part. After some consideration Peter made his way to Mary's house she was the mother of John Mark and in that house many had met to pray, no doubt for his preservation and release. When Peter knocked at the door Rhoda answered it and on hearing and recognizing Peter's voice announced to the gathered company that Peter was outside. Firstly they told her she was mad but when she persisted it really was him they suggested it was "*his angel*". The Jewish people believed in guardian angels and as we have said angels played a prominent part in these early days of the Acts. How like us they really were and how human. How often have we asked God for some special request and yet in our hearts even as we asked thought it could never come to pass. How we limit God in our puny minds. Have we not been told that "*He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think*". What rejoicing must have followed when the door opened and they saw Peter standing there freed and well. After he had spoken to them and explained what had happened he gave instruction that word should be sent to James the Lord's half brother and the Apostles of all that had come to pass and having done so he departed to another place no doubt to keep himself out of harms way knowing the problems his release would cause.

Herod was furious when he discovered that Peter could not be found and had "escaped" such was his wrath that he ordered the keepers of the prison should be put to death. Herod then left Judaea and went to Caesarea where he abode. The chapter closes with the demise of Herod the king. Josephus the first century historian makes reference to the event recorded here. There were political issues going on which are mentioned between Herod and those of Tyre and Sidon but these are of little importance to us here as we search for truth, however Herod's pride and his eventual death are not to be missed. On a particular day dressed in his royal finery, sitting on his throne he made an oration to the people. They extolled him as a God but little did he know the arrow of death had already left the bow of God and Josephus informs us in a few days he was gone. So ended the life of one of the great enemies of the church. The scriptures are clear "*Be not deceived God is not mocked for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap*".

The word of God on the other hand grew and multiplied. Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem their ministry of relief being fulfilled and we are told they then took with them John Mark who was the nephew of Barnabas. This young man will feature at a later stage with some sad results.

Chapter 13

Chapters 13 and 14 of the Acts of the Apostles are taken up with what is traditionally called "Paul's first missionary journey". Whether this is the correct title or not is debatable. It is obvious from a reading of the chapters that the thing uppermost in the Apostles minds was to reach the scattered Jews, (*diaspora*), with the news that Jesus of Nazareth was undoubtedly their prophesied Messiah. This fact will become clear as we proceed. On this basis alone the journey they made was not simply a gospel outreach.

Barnabas and Saul as we noted at the end of chapter 12 had returned to Antioch in Syria and verse 1 of chapter 13 names some who were noted among the "*prophets and teachers*". The list is by no means exhaustive but those mentioned were probably among the best known. What is interesting is the fact that Barnabas, at this stage, comes first in the list while Saul/Paul comes last. We will see the order reversed, for soon Saul/Paul will take the prominent place, all in accordance with God's plan for Paul's life.

The start of the chapter records the exercise of these spiritual men at Antioch, for, after prayer and fasting the Holy Ghost makes it clear to them that Barnabas and Saul are to be set apart for a work He had chosen them to accomplish. The "*fasting*" was an evidence of their deep sincerity as they sought God's face for guidance and after more "*praying and fasting*" and after having their hands being laid on them, a proof of their fellowship with the two men, Barnabas and Saul are sent forth. John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas accompanies them as "*their minister*" or to serve and help them in any way he can. Although not mentioned as chosen by the Holy Ghost for the journey this young man is named along with them. There will be more to say. about him later.

The Holy Ghost leads them to the port of Seleucia and from there to Salamis in Cyprus, the island where Barnabas had been born and where, right from the start, they visit the synagogues of the Jews and preach the "*word of God*". The "*word of God*" could only refer at this stage to the Old Testament scriptures as none of the New Testament had yet been written. As in all other places where synagogues are visited the object of the Apostle was to convince his Jewish audience that the Old Testament scriptures testify and point unmistakably to the Lord Jesus being the King who was to come, suffer, die, be raised from the dead and return to establish His kingdom. We read nothing of the results of the preaching and after a trek overland of some 100 miles the two sent men reach Paphos. Sergius Paulus was the proconsul for the country, he is spoken of in this passage very sympathetically as "*a prudent man*" and one who "*desired to hear the word of God*". We need to note he sent for Barnabas and Saul so the divine order "*to the Jew first*" was not compromised in any way. Another character is now introduced, a Jewish sorcerer called "Bar Jesus" or by interpretation "Elymas". This man seems to have had some hold over the proconsul, who no doubt like many Romans would have been superstitious and perhaps had been deceived by this evil mans words. Elymas withstood the two Apostles trying to prevent them from speaking to Sergius Paulus, who wanted to hear the word of God. It is at this point Saul becomes Paul and from chapter 13 v 9 he is never spoken of only by that name "Paul" which is held in much affection by Gentiles who have trusted Christ for truly he is the "*Apostle to the uncircumcision*".

Paul now performs his first recorded miracle. After declaring that Elymas is "*full of all subtily and all mischief*" and that he is an "*enemy of all righteousness*" in fact "*a child of the devil*", Paul announces to him that he will be "*blind not seeing the sun for a season*". The judgement fell on him immediately and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand. We have observed Peter's first miracle in Acts 3 the healing of the lame man who sat outside the temple begging. After being healed he went jumping and leaping into the temple glorifying and praising God. This was symbolic of the possibility of Israel's restoration and how God would heal and restore them if only they would repent. Here, in Paul's first miracle we see in the striking of this Jewish man blind a picture of the state into which the Jewish nation was travelling. After years of opportunity they still had not accepted their guilt or received their Messiah, only a small number had been converted, "*a remnant*". The blindness inflicted on this Jewish man prefigured the national blindness which was descending on Israel. We will see this fulfilled when we reach Acts ch, 28. The blindness of course was only "*for a season*" and so it will be in Israel's case for the day will dawn when they recognize their Messiah and will trust Him. During this dispensation individual Jews can be saved as easily as Gentiles, national salvation is however a completely different thing and will not take place until Christ returns. Sergius Paulus after seeing what was done and after hearing "*the doctrine of the Lord*" believed and as far as we know was the only convert in Paphos.

From Paphos these two noble Christians make their way by sea to Perga in Pamphylia and for some reason John Mark departs from them and returns to Jerusalem. It is futile to speculate as to the reason for his departure and rather than surmise we leave this in the hands of Him who knows the end from the beginning in every matter. From Perga they travel overland again to Antioch in Pisidia where they went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and sat down. After the customary reading of "*the law and the prophets*" the rulers of the synagogue invited the two visitors to speak if they had any word of exhortation for the people. It is Paul who stands to his feet and who addresses the gathered company with the words, "*Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience*". What follows is a history lesson of God's dealings with the nation of Israel commencing with their deliverance out of the bondage of Egypt, to their procession of the land of Canaan, through the period of 450 years when the nation was governed by judges, to the appointment of Saul as king until he reaches the point where Saul is removed and King David the "*man after God's own heart*" takes the throne. Paul shows that God, in keeping with promises made in the Old Testament (eg. Psalm 132v11), had of this man's, (David's), seed raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus.

Paul explains how that John Baptist had been sent to prepare the way for Him. The nation were called upon to repent from the leaders down to the commoners. Such repentance was necessary due to their religious state based on much error which had been handed down through the generations, oral teachings and laws given by the rabbis, which had no basis in the word of God. Paul now really drives home the whole point of his discourse, he continues, *"Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you that feareth God, to you is this word of salvation sent"*.

We need to take note afresh that the message Paul was preaching in the synagogue was exclusively for those associated with the nation, including proselytes and those of the nation born outside the land. From verse 27 to verse 35 Paul deals with the rejection of Christ at Jerusalem, their Holy city and the capital of the Jewish religion. Even though the prophets were read every Sabbath day in their synagogues, the rulers failed to recognize the One of whom they spake and when the Lord presented Himself to them as their Messiah, *"they knew Him not"* and though no cause of death was found in Him they desired Pilate that He should be slain. In so doing they were fulfilling all that the prophets had written concerning Him. Truly the prophets had foretold all, He was *"A man of sorrows"*, they did *"pierce His hands and feet"*, His *"visage was more marred than any mans"*, He was *"wounded for our transgressions"*, and did cry from the darkness of Calvary, *"My God My God why hast Thou forsaken Me"*? When He had fulfilled all that was written of Him He was taken down from the tree and laid in a sepulchre. No doubt the rulers thought this was the end of Him but there was still an amazing event to take place which the prophets had also foretold, His resurrection. David had written 1000 years before Christ in Psalm 2v7 *"Thou art My Son this day have I begotten thee"* and again in Psalm 16v10 *"Thou wilt not leave My soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption"*. As previously explained when we dealt with Acts chapter 2 these words could not have applied to David, for, as Paul makes clear in this chapter once more, David *"saw corruption"* after he had fallen asleep but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. His resurrection was witnessed by many and was an indisputable fact.

Paul now applies his message by telling them *"through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses"*. Jesus was their promised Messiah and it was now up to them what they did with the information Paul was giving to them. He warns them not to be like those spoken of by the prophet Isaiah in ch.29v14, who foretold a day in which God would perform a mighty work, which would be wondered at but yet it would not be believed. After hearing these words those gathered in the synagogue left and we are told that many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed after Paul and Barnabas who encouraged them to continue in the grace of God. However the Gentiles, who no doubt had been listening at the door of the synagogue besought Paul and Barnabas that on the next Sabbath this message might be preached to them.

On the following Sabbath we are told the whole city met together to hear the word of God but the Jews were filled with envy, no doubt angry that Paul would speak to a Gentile audience. They blasphemed and contradicted those things which Paul was saying to the point where it became necessary for the Apostles to reprimand them.

That the word of God should have first been spoken to them was the Divine order, as Paul wrote in Romans 1 *"to the Jew first"*, and this was regarded throughout the Acts period, as was proper and right for Paul could add *"So hath the Lord commanded us"* but seeing they had rejected the message and the messengers they were at liberty to speak the words of *"everlasting life"* to the Gentiles. The Apostles refer to a passage in Isaiah 49v6 where the prophet speaks of God's Servant, no doubt the Lord Jesus Himself, who we are informed would not only call the people of Israel back to God but would in fact be a light to the gentiles as well. These were the words Simeon quoted when Mary brought the Christ child into the temple, he also referred to Him as *"A light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel"* Luke 2v32. Paul and Barnabas viewed this passage of scripture as giving them the right at this time to reach out with the life giving message of the gospel to the gentiles in this area. The phrase in verse 46 *"Lo we turn to the Gentiles"* must be seen in context. This was not a final turning away or an abandoning of God's programme to the Jew first, but was rather a local turning away from the Jews in that area, for, as we shall see in chapter 14v1 the moment they arrive in Iconium they immediately look out the Jews in that city and go to their synagogue. This principle is adhered to right through the Acts as we have previously stated.

On hearing this the Gentile audience rejoiced and those who were disposed to receive the message believed and we are told that *"the word of God was published throughout all the region"*. The Jews meanwhile, using the influence of important men and women of the city raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas and through that persecution forced them out of that area. Just as Jesus had commanded the disciples to do they shake off the dust from their feet and move on to Iconium. The shaking of the dust from their feet was a symbolic gesture showing that the guilt and responsibility of the people's actions rested on their shoulders. Those who had truly trusted were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost. At least Paul and Barnabas had the consolation of seeing some come to faith in Christ. The journey continues and little could the Apostles have contemplated the dangers that lay ahead of them.

Chapter 14

The moment Paul and Barnabas arrived in Iconium they immediately went to the synagogue of the Jews. This, as we have said was the divine order for this period, it was always to the Jew first. We had noticed in chapter 13.46 that at Antioch in Pisidia the Apostles had declared, because of the rejection of the Jews in the area, that they would *"turn to the gentiles"*. This was only a turning away in that locality for as we have now seen the moment they reach Iconium they immediately search out the synagogue and bring the message firstly to the Jews. Their preaching resulted in a *"multitude of 'Jews' and 'Greeks'"* believing. The Greeks, as we have pointed out were not people from Greece but Jews who were living outside the land of Israel, they were in fact Greek speaking Jews. This explains why they were in the synagogue on this occasion. However when blessing occurs opposition is never far behind. Jews in that city who did not believe poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the Apostles, so much so that the city was divided, part holding with what the Apostles taught and part with the unbelieving Jews. The Apostle's preaching was accompanied with *"signs and wonders"* which was a confirmation from God as to the truthfulness of what they had been preaching. The situation escalated to such an extent that plans were hatched to cruelly treat the Apostles and to stone them. Thankfully the two men were aware of it and escaped to Lystra and Derbe. Here and in the region round about they preached the gospel.

At Lystra Paul performed a notable miracle, a man who had never walked and was lame from his birth heard Paul speaking. Paul perceived that the man had faith to be healed spoke to the man and told him to stand upright on his feet. He responded by immediately walking and leaping.

The people of the city, who were no doubt very superstitious and idol worshippers, thought that the Apostles were "gods" come down in the likeness of men. They actually called Barnabas, Jupiter and Paul they called Mercury. The situation grew rapidly worse and the priest of Jupiter arrived on the scene bringing with him oxen which he intended to sacrifice, in communion with the people as an act of worship towards the Apostles. Paul and Barnabas were greatly distressed at this and rent their clothes explaining to the priests and the people that they were not gods but men of like passions to them but that their message was to persuade men to turn from such vanities unto the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea; and all things that are therein. God had in times past allowed men to follow their own ways, though He never left Himself without witness, and now He had sent them to testify of these things to those in that area. Even with these words spoken the Apostles still had difficulty restraining the people from what they intended to do in making sacrifice to them.

The narrative continues by telling us that certain "Jews" from Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra to cause trouble. How militant and wicked these men were to follow the Apostles with no other motive than to cause them as much damage as they possibly could. No doubt it would have reminded Paul of his former life, for he too hated the people of God so much he would have went to any lengths to have them imprisoned, beaten and even put to death. These men who came to Lystra incited the people against Paul and Barnabas to such an extent that they actually stoned Paul and thinking he was dead dragged him outside the city. Whether he was dead or not is hard to ascertain from what is said. Some suggest it was at this point Paul had his experience of being caught up into the "third heaven" of this we cannot be certain, what we do know is this, that as the disciples stood round about him, no doubt feeling very despondent at what had taken place, Paul miraculously rose up and was able to walk into the city. The following day he and Barnabas departed to Derbe.

There they preached the gospel once again. It would appear that there was no synagogue in either Lystra or Derbe and therefore the absence of Jews is noticeable in the passage. As a matter of fact we are expressly told that the "Jews" came down from Antioch and Iconium and that they stirred up "the people". The absence of Jews in these two idolatrous cities made it possible on both occasions for Paul and Barnabas to go directly to the gentiles in that area. After their ministry had ended in Derbe they returned to Lystra then to Iconium and on to Antioch in Pisidia "*confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God*". They then chose "elders" in all of the gatherings of believers that had been formed, spiritual men who had the ability to feed and care for the people of God, Then after fasting and prayer commended these new elders to the Lord. The choosing of the elders was a task performed by the Apostles themselves. Paul and Barnabas had undoubtedly the spiritual discernment to recognize men who were in touch with God and capable for such a task. Nowhere in scripture have we the slightest suggestion that sheep choose their shepherd, such a proposal is ridiculous, yet this is the way such an important and responsible role is decided today.

They then passed through Pisidia and on to Pamphylia. They then preached the word in Perga and headed to the coastal town of Attalia. There they secured passage by boat back to Antioch in Syria from where they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. What a lovely way to end this narrative by informing us that these two men in spite of all the difficulties and tribulations completed what God had in mind for them to do.

Having arrived safely back home the believers were all gathered together and Paul and Barnabas rehearsed to the company all that God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. The chapter ends by relating that after such a tiring and hazardous journey the two Apostles abode long time with the disciples.

Chapter 15

We left chapter 14 with Paul and Barnabas after their long journey, which would have taken some 18-24 months, among the believers in Antioch in Syria. News of their exploits would travel quickly and the fact that "gentiles" were now being included in the gospel invitation was annoying to some in the Jewish community, especially those we would call "Judaisers". These Judaisers were legalists and were very zealous in rigorously observing the "law of Moses" and they were, as we shall see, very much opposed to Paul's preaching and teaching. We should perhaps give the scriptural reason as to why at this stage God was now inviting gentiles to come. Peter had opened the door in chapter 10 to Cornelius and his household, the first gentiles to be "saved" from Pentecost some 8-10 years previous. Peter had been entrusted with the "*keys of the kingdom*" by Christ and as he had opened the door at Pentecost to Israel so it was his responsibility to open the door to the Gentile. After this event in Acts 10 we never read of Peter being asked to speak to another gentile sinner. Paul, on the other hand, as we know was a chosen vessel and had been especially set apart by the Holy Spirit for this great work of reaching the gentiles. As we know from our studies so far, Paul always went to "*the Jew first*" everywhere he travelled, and this was in keeping with the divine programme. One of the main reasons for the gentiles now being included is revealed to us in scripture. It was always God's plan to bless the Gentiles, He had promised that through Israel and her testimony all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Israel however had failed in her God given privilege and God was now bringing Gentiles in, as it were before the time, "*to provoke the Jew to jealousy*" and to give the nation the opportunity to repent and come back into the will of God for them. Gentile believers were plainly told they were only "*unnatural branches*" and were totally dependent on Israel for any blessings they should receive. These blessings were earthly and had to do with the kingdom which was to be set up. While such a state of circumstances existed, though there could be unity, there could be no equality between Jew and Gentile believers and so it is evident that the truth of the "*Church which is His Body*" was completely unknown either to Peter or Paul at that time and would in fact be the subject of a later revelation from God to the Apostle Paul after the Act's period had ended.

Chapter 15 commences by informing us that some of these Judaisers had come down from Judaea teaching that in order to be saved it was necessary to be circumcised. Circumcision was of course the seal of the covenant God made with Abraham but has nothing to do with Christianity. Paul and Barnabas disputed and argued against the error they were propagating. Eventually it was decided that the two Apostles should go up to Jerusalem and meet the Apostles and elders there about this situation. No doubt the Judaisers hoped that

they would have a sympathetic ear from men like Peter, James and John who they thought would give them backing and support. Paul and Barnabas made the journey to Jerusalem passing through Phenice and Samaria declaring as they went how the Gentiles were being saved, this caused great joy among all the believers. Arriving at Jerusalem they were received by the apostles and elders there and they told of all that God had done with them. They were not there long before some of the Pharisees which "believed" suggested again that in order for gentiles to be converted it was necessary for them to be circumcised and also keep the law of Moses. A meeting was called and much disputing took place until at length Peter stood up. His words were very simple, he reminded his audience that God had chosen by his mouth that the gentiles should first hear the gospel. By giving the Holy Ghost to those believing gentiles God was showing that as far as the gospel and salvation were concerned there was no difference between the Jew and Gentile sinner. This is exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 10 *"The same Lord over all is rich unto all them that call upon Him and whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved"*. Peter's argument is clear these first gentiles were saved without any law keeping or circumcision so why would anyone want to put a yoke around gentile necks which neither their fathers nor says Peter "we" are able to bear. He closes his remarks by reminding them that it is by the grace of God both Jew and Gentile have come into blessing.

After Peter finished Paul and Barnabas related the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the gentiles by them. Having done this they then waited for James to speak. This James is the Lord's half brother and seems to have held a prominent authoritative role in the Jerusalem assembly. He sums up all that has been said, reminding them again that as Peter had remarked, he had been the first to preach to Gentiles and all of this was in keeping with O.T. prophecies. His final decision was that the gentile converts should not be troubled by imposing upon them regulations they could not bear but that there were 4 decrees which they should observe. These decrees were with regard to things which would have caused offence to Jewish believers and if observed would hopefully lead to greater unity. These decrees were to be written out in letter form and sent to the gentile converts in Antioch and all other places. This was pleasing to the Apostles, elders and the whole church and certain men were selected to go with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch presumeably so that they could report back to Jerusalem that what the Apostles had requested had been adhered to. It is of interest to note that one of those chosen to go with Paul and Barnabas is a man called Silas who will play an important role in future events during the Acts. Verses 23- 29 contain an exact copy of the letter which was sent and in it there is one point made clear that being that it was not the Apostles or elders at Jerusalem who gave the Judaisers, who had originally troubled them, any commandment to say any of the false teaching they had given.

On arrival at Antioch the company of believers was gathered together and the letter was read to them. Afterwards Judas and Silas the two men who had come from Jerusalem exhorted the believers and after they had remained there for a period they were let go with the blessing of the saints in Antioch to return to Jerusalem. Silas however stayed on, no doubt under the leading of the Holy Ghost and in preparation of what lay ahead. Paul and Barnabas also continued in Antioch where with many others they taught and preached the word of the Lord. What follows is one of the saddest incidents recorded in the New Testament. Paul suggests to Barnabas that they should go again and visit those that had been saved in their previous journey to see how they were progressing. This care for the saints was something always on the Apostles heart, however when Barnabas strongly suggested they should take with them John Mark who had turned back and left them at Pamphylia on their last journey Paul objected. No doubt he had his reasons for doing so but the disagreement among them was so great we are told *"they departed asunder one from the other"*. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed to Cyprus and Paul chose Silas to accompany him. Barnabas had been a great friend and fellow labourer with Paul they had been through much and accomplished much. How sad they should part under such circumstances. The young man at the centre of the controversy would at the end of the Apostles life be requested to come to the imprisoned Paul for, said Paul, *"He is useful unto me in the ministry"*, no doubt Paul had occasion to use John Mark after this event took place. These things have not been hid from us and we can speculate as to how the situation may have been better sorted out but we draw back from making any suggestions in the presence of two highly spiritual men, who were after all human and fallible like us. God knows all about these things but we like to think that if Mark was reconciled to Paul then at some stage Barnabas was also.

Paul and Silas were commended to the work by the brethren in Antioch and they went through Syria and Cilicia confirming the saints.

Chapter 16

Having travelled through Syria and Cilicia Paul and Silas came to Lystra and Derbe, where Paul on the previous journey had been stoned and left for dead. It is at this point we are introduced to a young man, who no doubt had been converted through Paul's preaching and Paul was therefore his spiritual father. This young man's mother was a Jewess but his father was a Greek (*hellenes gk*). We have already pointed out that a "*hellenist*" was a Greek speaking Jew, one who had been born outside the land of Israel and who no doubt had adopted many of the cultural features of the place they were living. In Timothy's case he had not been circumcised in accordance with the law of Moses and Paul felt that it would make him more acceptable to the Jewish community in the area so he had this rite performed on him. Let us hasten to add this was not a change of mind by Paul regarding the need of circumcision for salvation which he strongly objected to and opposed but was simply a safeguarding of Timothy's acceptability by Jews that he may have to preach to who may very well have rejected his ministry seeing he was a Jew but had never been circumcised. Paul put no emphasis on circumcision, he could write "*circumcision availeth nothing nor uncircumcision*", to the Jew he would become a Jew and to the barbarian a barbarian so that "*by some means I might win some*". Timothy was a much respected man among the believers and so Paul decided he would have him accompany Silas and himself to the work.

As they passed from city to city they delivered the "*decrees*" which had been ordained by the apostles and we read in verse 5 "*so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily*". They passed through Phrygia and the region of Galatia and being led by the Spirit were not permitted to preach the word in Asia. They came on to Mysia and when they attempted to go into Bithynia the "*Spirit suffered them not*" v7. Eventually they reached Troas a seaport on the coast of Mysia and it was there that Paul had the famous vision of the man of Macedonia praying him to "*come over into Macedonia and help us*". It is of interest to note that Luke who wrote this historical account of the Acts for the first time in verse 10 starts to use the pronoun "*we*" instead of "*they*" and "*them*", leading us to surmise that it was at Troas the little party were joined by Dr. Luke. He would become a lifetime friend of the apostles and is affectionately referred to by Paul as "the beloved physician", never leaving Paul's side right up to the end of his life. In his last epistle, on the eve of his death Paul comments, "*only Luke is with me*" and how useful he must have been helping Paul through sickness and recording for us so many major events both in his gospel and here in the Acts. Assured that it was the Lord's will for them to go they sailed from Troas straight to Samothracia and the next day sailed to Neapolis the seaport of Philippi which was about 10 miles away. This is a momentous move as far as we Europeans are concerned, for these are the first steps of the gospel on its journey into Europe.

Having arrived in Philippi, a city which was a Roman colony, they stayed there for some days. Being a colony of Rome the city of Philippi, though removed a great distance from Rome enjoyed privileges that those living in Rome itself enjoyed it was in fact like a miniature Rome. Many army veterans had settled there and being near a seaport there would be a vast array of nationalities represented, it was indeed a cosmopolitan city. It would seem there was no synagogue in the city for we are assured from what we have already learned had there been Paul would have went there first. Somehow word reached Paul's ears that at a riverside outside the city some Jewish women went to pray, so they went to the place sat down and talked with the women who met there. One particular lady comes into prominence, her name is Lydia. This woman was a seller of purple, a valuable expensive material which had to be expertly dyed and was purchased only by the wealthy. No doubt Lydia was a woman of some means but what is most important in the narrative is the fact she listened to the things the apostle was saying and eventually her heart was opened to the overtures of mercy and she became the first convert in Europe. After being baptized she constrained the visiting preachers to stay in her house which they did.

The second person we meet is a complete contrast to Lydia, she is described as a damsel who was possessed with a spirit of divination. She had brought her masters much gain through soothsaying, which was a foretelling of fortunes and of the future. For days she followed the group of messengers about crying out, "*these men are the servants of the Most High God which shew unto us the way of salvation*" v.17. Eventually, Paul being very grieved at this, for he knew that it was the demon who was speaking in a derogatory way, spoke to the spirit and said, "*I command thee in the name of Jesus of Nazareth to come out of her*". This the evil spirit did and when the girl's masters saw what had happened and that their hope of making gain through her was gone they caught Paul and Silas and took them into the marketplace to the rulers of the city. We leave the "*damsel*" with the Lord and although it is not plainly stated we hope she did indeed put her trust in Christ after so great a deliverance. The magistrates in the city, after hearing the accusations of those who had brought them before them deal with the Lord's servants

despicably. The magistrates are told that the men before them were Jews and were causing a lot of trouble in the city by teaching customs which were not lawful for them as Romans to observe. This enraged the multitude that had gathered and we are told in a fit of rage the magistrates rent their clothes and commanded that they should be beaten. Many stripes were laid on them and they were then cast into prison, where the jailor who had been put in charge of them put their feet in stocks and placed them in the most secure cell in the prison. What pains and privations they had to bear for Christ's sake, yet we must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in all of this, in the background God was busily at work arranging circumstances that would bring this hard callous jailor to faith in the Lord Jesus. I remember vividly a few lines of a little poem which the late great Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter quoted to me many years ago, I record them here for your blessing;

Back of all that foes have plotted,
Back of all that saints have planned,
Back of schemes by men and demons,
Moves a higher, hidden hand.

How true it is, little could the jailor have imagined that morning when he awoke that this would be the day which would revolutionise his whole life, yet that was exactly how it worked out. Paul and Silas though imprisoned were not cast down instead they are actually singing praises to God and praying. We can be assured that the jailor would feature in their prayers and undoubtedly his salvation would be prayed for. The other prisoners could hear these two saints singing but the jailor was fast asleep oblivious to all that was going on around him. Everything was soon to change, at midnight there was an earthquake and the prisoner's bands were loosed and the doors of the prison were opened. The jailor of the prison then awoke and realizing the doors were opened and thinking the prisoners had escaped, which would have meant execution for him, drew his sword and was preparing to kill himself. A voice then rings out in the prison, it was Paul's, *"Do thyself no harm, for we are all here"*. The jailor called for a light and sprang in to their cell, he was trembling and fell down before them. His first words were these "What must I do to be saved?" How delightful these words are to the ear of every gospel preacher. This is earth's greatest question and it has only one answer, here is the reply the preachers gave, *"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved"*., and believe is what he did, not only him but also all that were in his house who could understand the message that was spoken to them. What a change salvation makes, this formerly hard man has now brought the Lord's servants into his house, bathed their wounds and given them food. This jailor along with others who had been saved were the nucleus of the assembly of believers in Philippi.

On the morning of that eventful night the magistrates sent word through the sergeants that Paul and Silas were to be released. The jailor carried the word to the two prisoners and suggested to them that they should act quickly and depart in peace. Paul's response must have surprised even the jailor, for what Paul now reveals throws a completely different light on the way they had been treated.

Paul reveals that they are Roman citizens and that they had been publicly humiliated without a fair trial which every Roman citizen was entitled to, such unlawful actions towards Roman citizens could carry grave consequences if made known. Paul's decision was that seeing they had been publicly humiliated and wrongfully so then nothing less than the magistrates coming themselves to release them would suffice. When the sergeants brought the news back to the magistrates they were afraid, knowing they should never have treated Roman citizens in such an illegal way and so they came to the prison and pleaded with them to depart out of the city.

Paul and Silas left the prison and went to the house of Lydia where they met with the other believers. It is of note that although it was the two preachers who had suffered so much they were not said to be comforted by the saints but rather the opposite the saints were comforted by them. These two giants of the faith now leave Philippi following the leading of the Lord and moving into new areas of opportunity and service which involved much hardship and danger.

Chapter 17

It would seem from of Acts ch. 16 that "Dr." Luke remained in Philippi, most likely at Paul's request to encourage and establish the new believers there. This is suggested by the fact that after the pronoun "we" appears in verse 16 of that chapter it does not appear again until chapter 21.1 when Luke rejoined Paul at Ephesus. How useful such men and women must have been to the apostle and we shall see later in this chapter that Silas and Timothy fulfill the same roll at Berea where they also stay behind to help the saints.

From Philippi Paul Silas and Timothy pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia and move on to Thessalonica where we are told there was a synagogue of the Jews. We read in ch. 17v2 that Paul *"as his manner was"* went in unto them. We have continually pointed out that this was according to the Divine order at that time as the message was *"to the Jew first"*. All of this has been explained in earlier chapters and we desist in this brief analysis of adding anything more for now. The message Paul preached to them was based on the Old Testament scriptures, and for three Sabbath days he reasoned with them showing them that those self same scriptures proved that the Messiah must suffer and then rise again from the dead, the bombshell to them was that Paul went on to say that their Messiah was in fact Jesus of Nazareth the One who had been rejected and crucified. Some did believe and started to talk and commune with Paul and Silas and a great multitude of others called *"devout Greeks"* also believed along with many important women. These devout Greeks were Israelites who had been born outside the land of Israel hence their connection to the synagogue and the fact they are referred to as being devout.

Unbelieving Jews however unhappy with what was taking place and moved with envy started to stir up trouble. They probably bribed certain *"lewd fellows of the baser sort"* to tell lies about Paul and his companions. They were successful in their endeavour to the extent that they caused the whole city to go into uproar. The house of Jason was attacked because he had received the preachers and shown them kindness. The ungodly crowd were looking for Paul, Timothy and Silas and undoubtedly if they had found them they would have treated them very cruelly, but when they could not be found they instead dragged Jason and some other believers before the rulers of the city. This rabble mob, among other things accused the preachers who had now come to their city of turning the world upside down, adding that they were being disobedient to Roman law and presenting another king, one Jesus, in opposition to Caesar. These accusations were of course false, Paul had no intention of starting a revolt against Caesar nor was he a law breaker. In Romans ch.13 he actually insists that believers were to *"be subject to the powers that be for the powers that be are ordained of God"*, thereby proving his obedience to man's law so long as it doesn't interfere with the will of God. Thankfully after the rulers heard the accusations they took control of the situation and Jason and his friends were set at liberty.

The believers fearing for the safety of Paul and his friends sent them away by night and they came to Berea. In Berea there was a synagogue as well but unlike the city they had left the Jews there were more noble than those in Thessalonica. They listened carefully to what was being preached and received the word but searched the scriptures daily to ensure that the things they had been told were true. If only believers today would follow their example how much error could be avoided and how many traditions would be exposed which have no scriptural foundation. Many of these Bereans believed and with them many men and women who were Greek speaking Jews. So bitter was the hatred of the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica that when they heard that Paul was preaching the same gospel he had preached to them they pursued him to Berea and stirred up the people there as well. The believers in Berea immediately sent Paul away by sea. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to teach and help the believers as we explained earlier but Paul set sail, accompanied it would seem by a few believers from Berea who escorted Paul to Athens. Paul sent a message back with those who had escorted him from Berea that when they returned they should tell Silas and Timothy to come as quickly as possible and meet him at Athens. So they departed with Paul's command leaving Paul himself waiting at Athens for his co-workers to join him. Athens, what a city it must have been. The city of learning and culture. The great philosophers were Greeks. men like Socrates and Plato and in that city there were still those who loved to debate and hear any new thing. Paul had saw much idolatry on his journeys thus far, on writing to the Thessalonians he said they *"had turned to God fom idols to serve the living and the true God"* 1 Thessalonians ch. 1v9, yet nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to experience in this heathen city. We are plainly told that the apostle's *"spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry"*. Moved though he was Paul sought out the Synagogue first and disputed with the Jews and the devout persons, laying before them once again the fact of Jesus being their long awaited Messiah. He then went to the marketplace to preach to the crowds who would meet there and eventually these "new" teachings reached the ears of the philosophers of Athens, some of whom were "Epicureans" and others were "Stoicks". These were two different schools of philosophy, the Epicureans believed that after death there was nothing and had said, "death is nothing to us, for what is dissolved is insensible". Concerning the creation they held that although the universe was created it came together by chance, "a fortuitous concourse of atoms". This reminds us a little of what modern evolutionists believe. The Stoicks on the other hand were pantheists and fatalists. They taught that the Deity pervades the matter of the world, just as honey fills the comb of the hive. They undermined the doctrines of Providence, and personal responsibility, and judgement to come, and also believed that under the One God, who ruled above, were divine beings, called demons, who acted as mediators. It is against this backdrop that Paul had to meet and confront these men. Obviously it would be of no avail to present Jesus as Messiah to heathen philosophers who knew nothing of the Old Testament scriptures nor of the Saviour who had come, Paul must talk to these men in a way they could understand.

Verse 18 reveals to us the contempt in which they held him, they called him "*a babbler*" which in the Greek is "*spermologos*" primarily a small bird or "*a seed picker*", no doubt bringing into question whether or not he could know anything compared to their "vast" knowledge. As we have explained, by accusing Paul of being a setter forth of strange demons, for this is what the word "*gods*" means in verse 18, a demon to them was not a devil but a lesser divinity and they thought by Paul's preaching of Jesus and the resurrection he was introducing another of the many demons with which the pagan world abounded. They took Paul to the Aeropagus and asked him to explain to them this new doctrine he was preaching. Luke in his account tells us that "*the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear something new, (newer)*", no doubt in case it would be of importance to them. We should add that the words "*Aeropagus*" and "*Mars Hill*" refer to the same thing the one being Greek and the other Latin and English. The legend which gave the place its name was the belief that Mars had been tried in that very spot for murder. Mars Hill was a rocky elevation and on the top of the hill was a platform about 60 yards long and 24 yards broad, this was where the discourse took place.

Paul's address to this council is both intellectual and searching. It is interesting to note that although they had referred to Paul as a babbler twice over in his message he refers to them as being "ignorant" and we can be assured they were struck and impressed by his language. He commences by telling them that he can see they are very religious, this is what the word superstitious means. It is difficult for us to appreciate rightly Paul's message to them without some understanding of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies. Bishop Wordsworth in his commentary on this event has written the following which is a brief survey and summary of how Paul's preaching applied to them. We quote from his writings;

"This speech contains a statement of the Unity of the Godhead, (v23), against Polytheism; of the creation of all things by Him, against the Epicurean theory of a fortuitous concourse of atoms; of its Government by Him, against the Stoic doctrine of fate, and the Epicurean notion of indifference, (vv.23,24); of the Divine Omnipresence, and of the self sufficiency of the One Great First Cause (v25) in opposition to the popular theology; of the origin of all nations from one blood against the Athenian conceit of their own dignity as "autochthones" (indigenous to the soil, as distinct from a settler); of the spirituality of the Godhead in opposition to idolatry (v29); of the witness to God's existence, and other attributes, in man's conscience and in human nature, and in the invisible world (v29). It concludes with a reply to the objection that these are new doctrines (v30), and with a statement of the doctrine of human accountability and universal judgement to come by One whom God has appointed; of which He has given pledge by His resurrection from the dead".

This summarises very ably the content and logic of the apostle's preaching. He contends that they worship in ignorance, as their altar to the unknown God shows. He shows them that God can be known, indeed He is not far from any one of us, that He is the creator of matter and of all human life, that He cannot be housed or confined to any building, no matter how elaborate, nor can men give Him anything as though He is in need, indeed He is the great Giver says Paul for He gives to all "*Life and breath and all things*" (v25). He explains the Godhead is not some graven image whether made of stone, silver or gold and even their own poets had said "*we are His offspring*", how ridiculous and unreasonable it was for them to think that the Godhead is like unto gold or silver or stone. Instead He is the living being who holds man responsible for his actions and in a coming day will judge the world in righteousness through the Lord Jesus whom He raised from the dead. Men may in a past day because of ignorance of these things been excused but now with light being given God commands "*All men everywhere to repent*".

The whole episode ends with some mocking Paul's claims of resurrection. Others said, we will hear you again of this matter and so Paul takes his leave of them, however there was some success for we are told certain men believed, notably a man called Dionysius who was an Aeropagite and one of the council who had interviewed him. A lady called Damaris is also named, we know nothing of her social standing but was another trophy of grace in Athens along with the others who responded.

Chapter 18

On leaving Athens Paul arrived at Corinth and in that vast city he found two believers, Priscilla and his wife Aquila, who had come from Italy due to the expulsion of all Jews from Rome by decree of Claudius Caesar. These two were to become life long friends and supporters of the Apostle. Paul was by trade a tentmaker and seeing Priscilla and Aquila were of the same craft joined them so that he could support himself and not be in any way dependent on any one to support him. While there he used the opportunity to reason with the Jews and Greeks, (*Hellen Gk.*) in the synagogue. During that time Silas and Timothy came back from Macedonia to rejoin the

Apostle. Their arrival no doubt encouraged Paul and he was so moved in his being so much that he immediately challenged the Jews and presented the Lord Jesus to them as their Messiah. As had happened many times before they opposed themselves to the Apostle's testimony and in an act of vindication, he shook his garments and declared their blood was on their own heads and that he would now reach out to the Gentiles.

This does not mean that was to be the last time in the Acts he would go to the Jew first but locally, in that area, the Gentile would have opportunity to hear the gospel. Paul moved into the house of a man called Justus, who was a *"worshipper of God"*, no doubt a believer. His house joined hard to the synagogue, and this still gave Jews who were truly interested the chance to hear the gospel. We are told that Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue believed along with his house, this was a tremendous testimony in Corinth and through his conversion many Corinthians hearing believed and were baptized. We need to remind ourselves of the constant danger the Apostle was in, his enemies were numerous and many times they had plotted to kill him, however on this occasion he was greatly encouraged the Lord making it known to him in a vision that no one in the city would hurt him and the added promise that the Lord would be with him as there were many people in Corinth who would come to know Christ.

Paul continued in that city for a year and six months during which time he taught the word of God among them. However although the Lord promised him safety, there was still much opposition. The Jews rose up against him and took him to the *"judgement seat"*, (*beama Gk.*) the place where criminals were tried. Luke informs us that Gallio was the *"proconsul"* of the city. Gallio was the brother of Seneca, Nero's tutor, and it has been written historically that he was an *"amiable and gracious man!"*. The Jews accused Paul of *"persuading men to worship God contrary to the law"*, and before Paul could make any defence Gallio spoke up. He wanted to make it clear that if Paul had done some criminal act then it would have been necessary for him to have heard their complaint, but seeing it was an accusation against him which was with regard to their law he told them to look after it themselves as he would not take it upon himself to judge such matters which he knew nothing about and so the lictors were ordered to clear the court and the Jews were driven from the judgement seat. The statement *"Gallio cared for none of those things"* has been I believe greatly misunderstood. It is not a statement that shows his contempt for the gospel but ratherly for these Jews who were forever finding fault and quibbling about one point of the law or another. The Jewish mob in the meantime took Sosthenes, who it seems had succeeded Crispus as the chief ruler of the synagogue, and publicly beat him. It seems obvious from their actions that Sosthenes, like Crispus, had become a Christian.

Paul remained in Corinth a good while after this episode and eventually moved on and taking Priscilla and Aquila with him went by ship to Syria. At Cenchrea Paul had shorn his head because he had a vow, this was in accordance with Jewish law and on occasions of some major obstacle having been overcome or some great deliverance being experienced the recipient would undergo this vow as a demonstration of their gratefulness to God. The shaved hair had to be taken to Jerusalem and burned in the temple to fulfill the vow and we will see this taking place later in the Acts. Although a believer and an Apostle Paul was never the less a Jew, and as yet the truth of the *"mystery"* had not been revealed for in the *"body of Christ"* all national identities are removed. He then moved to Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquila and although the Jews he taught in the synagogue would have liked him to stay longer he refused, telling them that *"I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem"* but he promised he would return to see them again if it was the Lord's will. So he left Ephesus and sailed to Caesarea where he landed and met with the believers from there he moved to Antioch, spent some time in that area and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia where he strengthened the believers no doubt through his testimony of what God was doing and through the ministry of God's word to them.

At verse 24 there is a little parenthesis, for we find ourselves back in Ephesus. A man had arrived in the city, a Jew from Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the scriptures. He was well instructed in the way of the Lord and was zealous to spread the good news. We are told he knew only the baptism of John. Apollos spoke boldly in the synagogue all that he knew, however Aquila and Priscilla heard him preach and no doubt perceived there were some matters he was not exactly correct about and so they befriended him and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. How graciously they would have done this and what a lesson for us all to learn, as Paul exhorts we must always *"speak the truth in love"*. When Apollos felt it was time for him to move into Achaia, the believers in Ephesus wrote a letter telling the disciples in Achaia to receive him. Obviously the request was answered and Apollos was of great help to the believers in that area. He worked mightily among the Jews convincing them from the Old Testament scriptures that Jesus was indeed the Anointed Messiah who was to come.

To be continued

