

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

HOW THE GOSPEL WAS CARRIED FROM JERUSALEM TO ROME

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(1) THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

One thing is certain – those seven weeks after the Resurrection felt quite different to any other time before or afterwards. In part it was the tremendous joy, which had filled the apostles now they knew for sure the Lord was still alive. They had been so crushed, so utterly deflated at his cruel and unexpected death, but those daily appearances, when behind closed doors he would suddenly stand amongst them, answering their questions, sharing their meals, had eventually convinced even Thomas that Jesus had conquered the grave. However, in spite of their euphoria, there was something strange about the atmosphere. They were not so relaxed as they used to be. They were on edge, as if something was going to happen. Towards the end of the period there was a bright, sunlit morning when he led them out over the Kidron and up into the Mount of Olives. For an hour, it felt just like old times, as they basked in his love, his wisdom, his concern for each of them. And then, to their consternation, he had said goodbye in a very final way, and a cloud had settled round him, taking him out of their sight. They walked home desperately sad that day, sure that nothing would ever be the same again. Since then, they had waited on in Jerusalem, as he had asked. “Before many days” he had promised “you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). Strange words! As they met during the last week in their secret first-floor room to discuss what they ought to do, they felt an excitement, a tingling anticipation.

The call, when it came, took them by surprise. Jerusalem was packed with visitors for the Feast of Pentecost, the time when the green sheaf was waved in the Temple as a token of the harvest to come. The disciples were assembled in the upper room for their usual discussion, the doors locked for fear of spies. Within minutes, the whole place was in uproar, with people rushing along the streets and crowding round the foot of the stairway. What happened was burnt sharply into the memories of all who were present.

The first thing that distracted them was the noise. It was a fine day, and they were sitting quietly in a closed room, yet suddenly there was the howling of a great tempest right inside the house! It was eerie and frightening – the sound of a roaring wind, and yet not a breath of air stirring the curtains. Then, as they stared at each other, wondering what was going to happen next, they saw shimmering flames hovering over the heads of the twelve apostles, tongues of fire that rested on them, and yet left them completely unharmed. The ceiling was unblackened, and not a hair was singed. As the fire died away, the apostles started from their places. A strange and disturbing Babel filled the room. The apostles were speaking, aloud,

and yet the words were impossible to follow. Only when they spilled down the stairway and into the street did the truth become apparent.

Jerusalem was full of foreign Jews who had made pilgrimages from many different countries to keep the Feast. As the apostles continued to speak together, the combined effect was perplexing and confusing. Some bystanders were convinced the apostles were drunk and were just babbling. Peter soon disposed of that idea – “It is only the third hour of the day” he pointed out – much too early for sampling the wine skins. The expression of rapt concentration on the faces of the crowd, and their obvious delight, soon gave the secret away. The apostles were not speaking Greek, the international language of the first century, nor in Aramaic, the local tongue of Jews from Palestine. They were addressing, in faultless accents, Jews from countries as far apart as Persia in the east and Crete in the west, each in their own language. Within minutes, four humble fishermen, a tax collector, an ex-Jewish nationalist and their friends were speaking foreign languages like natives. The overall effect was confusing, but to the individual hearers, the message was crystal clear. “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” they queried “and how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” (Acts 2:7-8)

So, in great drama, the Holy Spirit came to Jesus’ apostles, marking them out as set aside for the great work of preaching the gospel all over the world. ‘Apostle’ means one ‘sent out’. The task for which Jesus had prepared them by his example, his instructions, and by trial runs on two occasions during his ministry, was about to begin.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the God-given powers of the Holy Spirit. There were two periods in the Old Testament when these gifts were bestowed on men. One was in the time of Moses, when special powers were given to Bezaleel, the master craftsman in charge of building the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and the seventy elders who helped Moses rule over Israel. The other was much later, during Israel’s ‘dark age’, when the 10 tribes had turned from God. The great prophets Elijah and Elisha were empowered then to work extraordinary miracles, including raising the dead, in order to strengthen their message to a hard hearted people.

It was the same Holy Spirit that was given to the apostles and their contemporaries at the founding of the infant church. Leaders, councillors and teachers were essential to guide the work, just like Bezaleel and the seventy elders. Miracles, such as speaking with foreign tongues and healing the sick, were just as important, to stamp the preaching of the gospel with God’s authority. The writer to the Hebrews, speaking of the message of salvation, says “It was declared at first by the Lord (Jesus), and it was attested to us by those who heard him (the apostles), while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 2:3-4).

A corollary of this thought is that once the infant church had been set on its feet, the special gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer needed, and would gradually die out. We shall see, as we follow the footsteps of the apostles, that the Spirit gifts could be passed on by them to selected individuals upon whom they laid their hands. As one by one the apostles died, the outpouring of the gifts slowly disappeared.

The apostle Paul writes twice about the use of the Spirit gifts, setting down an order of priority for them and regulating the use of the more audible gifts, such as speaking with tongues and prophesying, to ensure quiet and decorum in the public assemblies of the church. It is interesting to see that the more 'showy' gifts, such as speaking with tongues, were relegated by Paul to a low level of importance. Here is his list, in 1 Corinthians 12 – "First apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28). Note also that from the example of the Day of Pentecost we can conclude that "speaking with various kinds of tongues" was intended for communicating with foreigners – essential as the Galilean apostles moved out into the Mediterranean world in their work of preaching.

We underline these two points, because some churches today claim still to possess the Holy Spirit gifts, and particularly the gift of tongues. Yet Paul says definitely "As for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away" (1 Corinthians 13:8). The claimed miracles and unintelligible 'glossalia', passed off as genuine Spirit gifts, bear no comparison with the powerful, indisputable healings and instant communication with men from foreign lands which are a recurrent feature of the Acts and the epistles.

One last point, as we leave the enthused apostles with their excited crowds. Those flames of fire – what was their significance? Jesus had said the apostles would be 'baptised' with the Holy Spirit. Baptism is usually associated with water rather than fire. Interestingly, John the Baptist, who taught his disciples to wash away their sins in the River Jordan, provides the key. Three and a half years earlier, while his popularity was at its height, he had insisted he was not himself the Christ. "I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming" he warned. "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16-17). John prepared the way for Jesus. We all need to repent and be baptised from our sins before we are fit to meet the one who was the Christ. Jesus was indeed greater than John, and he is to be the judge of men. He is to gather the wheat into his granary" John continued "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17). The apostles were washed and clean by their walking with Jesus. They were fit vessels to have the Holy Spirit poured into them for God's mighty work. Like Daniel's three friends in the fiery furnace, the fire left them quite unharmed. Those who are truly holy will be able to draw near to God in the day when Jesus comes to review our lives, and like the apostles, will be filled with a power that will transform them body and soul. "We await from heaven", writes Paul, "a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself". (Philippians 3:20-21).

(2) The Jerusalem Church

Suppose you had to stand up in a busy market square and tell people of your nearest town as forcibly as possible of your beliefs. Would you go to the library for books on public speaking? Would you spend hours beforehand rehearsing what to say? Would you be brave enough, on the day, to face the hecklers with their rude remarks?

Peter the fisherman had no time to think about his first speech. He and the other apostles had just been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking in foreign languages to pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. A huge crowd had gathered round. Peter stepped forward as spokesman for the disciples, and within minutes was preaching the gospel. He confined himself to two simple but telling points.

Firstly he knew his hearers were avid Bible readers. He could see they were astonished at the apostles 'speaking with tongues'. His first point was dramatic. "Go to the Old Testament prophet Joel" he cried "and you will find that he predicted that in the last days God would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. What you have just witnessed, "he declared is Bible prophecy being fulfilled". Joel had indeed used the words "all flesh". "Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days" he had written "I will pour out my Spirit". (Joel 2:28-29). The Holy Spirit had just come, not to the proud religious leaders of Israel, but to the simple countrymen who made up the band of apostles.

Joel had continued with this significant statement "All who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered". This led Peter to his second point. One Bible prophecy had come true in their hearing. So had another. David the Psalmist had foretold, in what at the time were cryptic words, "Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades (the grave), nor let thy Holy One see corruption (Acts 2:27). Now, explained Peter, although David says 'my' soul, he could not have been speaking of himself, because when he died he did see corruption. He was buried in a normal tomb, which was still there in Jerusalem. No, he continued, David was a prophet. "He foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31). That prophecy had also come true. Jesus of Nazareth was killed and buried, but came out of the tomb alive before he had time to see corruption. "This Jesus, God raised up; and of that we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:52). He and the other apostles, now filled with God's Spirit power, could personally vouch for that historic fact. Jesus was not dead. God had made him Christ.

Peter's audience was more than impressed. They were "cut to the heart". Most of them, six weeks before, had been shouting "Crucify him, crucify him" as Jesus stood on trial for his life. Now they realised they had been guilty of the blood, not just of an innocent man, but of the Holy One of God. Faces furrowed with anxiety, they turned to Peter and the other apostles "Brethren", they asked, "what shall we do?"

Peter's reply was reassuring. Joel had promised "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). He meant what he said. Peter had proved that Jesus was Lord. By calling on Jesus' name, they could have their guilt taken away. "Repent" he said, "and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." (Acts 2:38). A total of 3,000 people in Jerusalem took him at his word, and asked to be baptised into the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter's command to "Repent and be baptised" echoes down the years. Every one of us, coming to realise for the first time we are in the wrong before a Holy God, has a need to wash away the filth of our sins. Baptism, a complete bathing in water, leaves us morally pure and clean. As Peter wrote years afterward in his first epistle, baptism is not "a removal of dirt from the body, but an appeal to God for a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism makes a boundary between an old life of sin, leading to eternal death, and a new life in Christ, with the prospect of everlasting life.

This first harvest of Jewish believers marked the beginning of the Jerusalem church. (Incidentally 'ekklesia', the New Testament word for Church, has nothing to do with a building; it simply means 'called out', a charming expression, as if God has called out a group of people in a particular place to belong to him).

What did their new-found faith do for those early believers? We are told that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the Breaking of Bread and to prayers (Acts 2:42). The first point shows there was still plenty of learning to be done. Believing and being baptised was only the beginning. They had to grow in knowledge by listening to the apostles' teaching. As Peter wrote in his epistle, we start off like babies in need of spiritual milk, by which we grow up to salvation. Fellowship means sharing as a family. Those early disciples took fellowship so seriously the wealthy ones sold their possessions and gave them away to the poor, a real test of their faith. The Breaking of Bread refers to the symbolic holy meal of bread and wine, an act of love, which Jesus commanded all disciples to carry out "in remembrance of me". There is good evidence that it was on Sunday, the first day of the week, that the early Christians met for this act of worship. And communal prayers, asking God for his help and compassion, have always been an important part of the life of the disciple. One outstanding feature marked out the members of the Jerusalem ekklesia – their gratitude. "They partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people" (Acts 2:26,47).

From Pentecost onwards the number of disciples grew steadily. The believers were soon so numerous that the Jewish leaders decided they had to do something to stamp out what they saw as heresy. Peter and John bore the brunt of their anger.

Twice the apostles were arrested and put in prison. On the second occasion they were called before the full Council of Israel, the same rulers who had tried and condemned Jesus only

months before. Peter must have felt scared, as he faced that great circle of hostile, blazing eyes. But he spoke out boldly and clearly. “We must obey God rather than men” he insisted, a maxim for all who stand up for truth. “The God of our fathers’ raised Jesus, whom you killed....God exalted him at His right hand as leader and saviour, ... and we are witnesses, and so is the Holy Spirit”, he declared. Their reaction was to rise to their feet and demand the death of the apostle. They were saved only by the intervention of Gamaliel, a respected lawyer, who advised against a hasty action. If the disciples teaching was faked, he advised, their Movement would flounder; God would see to that. So the apostles escaped with a beating. However the storm clouds were gathering, and it would not be long, as we shall see, before the first believer paid for his faith with his life.

(3) On the Road to Damascus

Lichfield lies in the pastoral English Midlands, an ancient cathedral city with black and white timbered houses and shops, and a cobblestone market place. In the market place is a memorial tablet with an inscription. It reads “Edward Wightman of Burton-on-Trent was burnt at the stake in this market place for heresy, 11th April 1612”. Strolling round sleepy Lichfield on a summer afternoon, you find it difficult to visualise the jeers of a hostile crowd, the crackle of the faggots, and a brave man dying because he loved his Lord and would not recant his beliefs.

We dismiss such ugly pictures as belonging to an earlier, more violent age. But think of the hatred that wracks Northern Ireland, and you realise that religious bigotry still claims lives. Men do not change. Religion somehow brings out the worst as well as the best in us. It is as if the stronger the light grows, the more intense become the shadows. Jesus strictly forbade his disciples to use violence; “All who take the sword will perish by the sword,” he said. But when churches grow old and strong and find political power, they conveniently forget the pure teaching of the first century, and anything goes. Organised religion has repeatedly crushed the faithful few who love truth more than life, as Edward Wightman found to his cost.

This brings us to the next chapter in the story of the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. Their numbers grew quickly after the preaching at Pentecost. The Jewish leaders had tried to gag Peter and the apostles by threats and flogging, but still the new sect expanded. The wrath of the authorities eventually burst over Stephen. He was a prominent disciple who had upset the synagogue for overseas Jews by his powerful arguments from the Old Testament scriptures. Finding themselves unable to answer the telling proofs he advanced that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, they resorted to the law to silence him. They soon found witnesses who promised to show Stephen in a bad light, and informed the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Parliament, against him.

Feelings ran high as the aged councillors packed the chamber. Stephen was accused of blasphemy – he had taught, they said, that Jesus would destroy the Temple and bring to an end the Law of Moses. Stephen must have known that he had no hope of justice in that biased assembly. His spirited defence recalled that, like Jesus of Nazareth, the great Moses they revered so much had, to begin with, been rejected by the people he came to save. He pointed out that Solomon, the founder of the Temple, had never claimed any permanent role for it; God is not confined to a house made with men's hands. The Old Testament prophets who had predicted the coming of the Messiah, he reminded them, had lost their lives for their message, and now they had killed the Messiah himself. His speech was cut short. Without even the semblance of legality, they dragged Stephen outside the city walls and killed him. It was the first blood spilt since the death of the Master himself, and a shudder passed through the assembly of believers at Jerusalem.

Jesus had always warned the apostles to expect persecution. "If the world hate you" he said "know that it has hated me before it hated you...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you....Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 15:18,20; 16:2).

His words were prophetic. One of the youngest of the councillors who voted for Stephen's death became the mastermind of a nationwide operation to exterminate the disciples. It was as if a catch had been removed, and violence and hatred descended on the heads of those whose only crime was believing in Jesus. The young Saul's zeal became legendary. He admitted himself, years later, that he "persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women" (Acts 21:4)

Have you ever thought what it would be like if the authorities turned against the community to which you belong? To come home and find your wife taken away?

To hear a knock on the door at night and watch your father or husband marched off by soldiers, never to return? You would have to make up your mind whether you really believed in Christ. Those heart searchings would rapidly divide the genuine from the casual believers, just as the sun in Jesus' parable of the sower scorched up the wheat that had shallow roots. Persecution is one of the ways in which faith is tested and, if we are steadfast, strengthened and confirmed.

What should the disciple do when persecution comes his way? Again Jesus had prepared the apostles in advance. "When they persecute you in one town" he advised "flee to the next" (Matthew 9:23). There is no virtue in being a martyr if we have the means to escape. Most of the believers in Jerusalem followed Jesus' ruling, abandoned their homes and jobs, and went away into the country. The result was that the preaching of the gospel now went ahead on a wider front. "Those that were scattered went about preaching the Word" (Acts 8:4). Unpleasant though it was, the persecution had two beneficial effects; it improved the faith of

the genuine disciples, and drove them from the cosiness of Jerusalem to make new converts further afield.

This new turn of events made life more difficult for Saul the persecutor. Little groups of disciples were springing up everywhere. He returned to the attack with renewed vigour, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). He heard of a strong colony of believers 100 miles away at Damascus, right outside the northern boundary of Palestine. The High Priest signed the necessary documents, and he set off to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem.

The events of that journey completely transformed Saul’s life. The story is well known of how, approaching Damascus at midday, a light from heaven even brighter than the sun struck him to the ground, and he found himself listening to the voice of someone he had thought long dead. In a moment of blinding truth, he realised that Jesus of Nazareth was still alive, and that therefore the people he had persecuted were innocent. Their blood was on his hands. It was a crushing blow to a man of pride and intellect, who had genuinely thought he was serving God. For three whole days Saul sat stunned in the house of Judas, unable to see for the light that had burned its way into his eyes and his heart.

We cannot help feeling sympathy for Saul. It is always shattering to find that we have been drastically wrong. He had the added burden of knowing that he had brought irreversible misery and suffering to kindly, upright people he hardly knew. The point we must remember is how easily prejudice warps our judgement. There was something symbolic about Saul’s blindness. Trained as a lawyer, it was his duty to expound and interpret the Law of Moses. He could not conceive that God’s rules for Israel, delivered by angels at Sinai 1500 years before, were now redundant and ready to fade away. He felt he must defend the Law, at all costs, against the threat from the disciples of Jesus. To him, Jesus was an impostor, deluding people into thinking he was the Messiah. In his indignation, Saul had failed to listen properly to what the other side had to say. When he did listen, the conclusion to which their arguments led was so opposed to all he stood for, he mentally closed his eyes. Like the enemies of Stephen, he took refuge from his prickly conscience in a frenzy of activity. His blindness was only cured by the dazzling jolt of the appearance of Christ on the open road. We need to look, each of us, at our prejudices, now and again. It can easily happen that the simple logic of Bible teaching, explained by a friend, seems different to what we were brought up to believe. Like Saul, we instinctively reject it. It might take both courage and humility to face up to the truth. However, where salvation is concerned, we really have no choice between pride and prejudice and listening to God.

The end of the story of Saul’s conversion is very moving. After three days, Ananias, one of the Damascus believers, came into the room where he sat in silent misery. Touching him gently, he greeted him with the words “Brother Saul ...”.

Those two words, coming from the lips of a man he had set out to kill, expressed a love and forgiveness that brought tears to his eyes. Very soon, by the laying on of Ananias' hands the power of Jesus restored Saul to full sight, and hope.

Without delay he was baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus, and from that day forward became the foremost champion of the cause he had tried to extinguish. He lost prestige, riches and a brilliant career. He gained peace with God, true friends all over the world, and the promise of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

(4) The Call of the Gentiles

You could be forgiven for assuming that as soon as Saul the Persecutor became Paul the disciple, he at once set out on his travels to preach the gospel. A close inspection of his letters shows this was not so. It was to be many years from his dramatic conversion before the great Apostle began those famous journeys which take up so much of the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, the whole process of expanding the scope of the gospel call went ahead surprisingly slowly. Although Jesus had commanded the twelve apostles to "go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15), they had an instinctive bias towards the Jews as the chosen people, and it took them a long time to get used to the idea that God now favoured the call of Gentiles (non-Jews) into the gospel net.

The work received an impetus from two prominent disciples, Philip and Peter. Philip was probably a foreign born Jew. His name is Greek, and he was one of a handful of trustworthy men chosen by the Jerusalem church to supervise the distribution of alms money to the widows of overseas Jews. This background would make him less hostile to foreigners than a home-born Jew. Travelling north from Jerusalem, Philip commenced a one-man campaign to bring the news of Jesus to the Samaritans. These were the descendants of a group of foreigners deported to Israel over 500 years before by the Assyrians. In that time they had picked up the worship of Israel's God and obeyed the Law of Moses, but because they were not descended from Abraham they were despised by the Jews and barred from the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus spent two days among them at the beginning of his ministry, but later found them hostile towards him (John 3:40; Luke 9:52-53). Coming to this maligned and hated minority, Philip set to work and "proclaimed to them the Christ" (Acts 8:5). He told them about the Kingdom of God that Jesus is going to bring, and taught them to call him Christ, which means 'anointed' or king. The reaction was marked. "There was much joy in that city" is the comment in Acts 8:8. "When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). Like the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, they were thrilled to find that God's love extended to them too, and their past sins could be washed away in the blood of the risen Jesus.

News of the developments in Samaria soon filtered through to the Apostles in Jerusalem. They immediately sent off Peter and John to find out what was going on. Perhaps they had reservations about whether it was right to preach to Samaritans. Peter and John, as leaders, must have felt particularly concerned that young Philip had set off without their official support. Whatever their feelings, they could not help but be impressed with the results of his labours, and soon threw themselves solidly behind the brave pioneer. They too “testified and spoke the word of the Lord ... preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:25).

An interesting point, in passing, is that when Peter and John joined Philip they were able to pass on the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptised believers. They did this, after prayer, by the laying on of their hands (Acts 8:15,17). This is important, because some evangelical groups today claim the Holy Spirit is given automatically to all believers, either before or after they are baptised. In the case of the first century Samaritans, the gift had not come by itself to the new disciples, neither was Philip empowered to pass it on. Only the two apostles had the authority that was required.

After Samaria, Philip continued to break fresh grounds. Commanded by the Holy Spirit to journey south, he was waiting beside the main road going down from Jerusalem to Egypt when a chariot came by containing an important looking coloured gentleman who, by coincidence, was reading the Bible as he jogged along. Here was Philip’s opportunity. The Ethiopian had just completed the pilgrimage of a lifetime, travelling all the way from Africa to visit the magnificent Temple in the Holy City. The Ethiopians have a long historical association with the Jews, dating back into Old Testament times, but this man would definitely come into the category of ‘gentile’. He was reading the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, that vivid, moving and incredibly detailed prophecy of the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah. Within minutes the bold evangelist had joined him in the moving chariot, and was busy explaining how the prophet’s words had come true in the last hours of Jesus. To shorten the story – the Ethiopian visitor was soon asking Philip “what is to prevent my being baptised?” (Acts 8:37). It was a momentous decision that Philip had to take, with none of his brethren to turn to for advice. The man was honest, God-fearing, and convinced now of the truth about Jesus. Why should he not share the same privilege as the Jews and the Samaritans? Had not Isaiah written in the very next chapter that God would one day be called the God of the whole earth (Isaiah 54:5)? An oasis pool was before them. After some thought, he led the man to the water side “and they went down both into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him” (Acts 8:38). With a delightful flourish, Luke concludes his account by saying “the eunuch went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39). Like the Samaritans, he had found joy and peace in the forgiveness of his sins. What a story he must have told back home of his great adventure, and the dramatic and unexpected turn of events on his journey. It is by many such a chance meeting, coincidence to the participants but all part of the providence of God, that Bible truth has come to troubled but thirsty souls. If we read the

Bible, like the Ethiopian, and really want to understand what it means, God will always answer our prayers. “He who seeks, finds” as Jesus said.

In the last and most critical development of this stage of the spread of the gospel, the limelight moves to the apostle Peter. Like Philip, he was brought face to face with a crucial decision, which would establish a precedent from which there could be no turning back.

Peter was staying at Joppa with a friend when he had an extraordinary experience.

He was dozing on the flat rooftop, just before dinner, and feeling hungry, when he had a disturbing vision. Animals, reptiles and birds were lowered down from the sky in a huge sheet, and a voice tempted him to satisfy his hunger by helping himself to meat. But Peter protested that the contents of the sheet were all creatures forbidden by the Law of Moses as unclean. The heavenly voice replied “What God has cleansed you must not call common (unclean)” (Acts 9:25).

The meaning of this revelation soon became clear. Within minutes of Peter’s dream, three men began to knock on the door of the house. They explained that 40 miles away at Caesarea, Cornelius, a Roman centurion on duty in Israel, had also had a strange vision in which an angel of God advised him to send for Peter at Joppa. Under the Law of Moses, Jews were forbidden to fraternise with Gentiles, which would include Roman soldiers. Gentiles were like the unclean animals in the sheet, not to be touched. But Peter’s natural reluctance to visit a Gentile was tempered by the message he had just heard. God was now calling the ‘unclean’, cleansed. The coincidence of the dream and the visit were too remarkable to ignore. Taking six fellow disciples as witnesses, he set off for Caesarea.

He found Cornelius a devout, kindly man, already worshipping the God of the Jews, and familiar with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. As Peter explained to him that, through Jesus’ death and resurrection, sins could be forgiven, he and the other Jews present were astounded to hear Cornelius and his household begin to speak in foreign tongues, just like the apostles themselves on the Day of Pentecost. It was the clearest possible sign that God wanted these faithful Gentiles to join his family. Peter faced up to the challenge. “Can anyone forbid water for baptising these people....?” He looked all round, but none of his friends spoke against it. So he commanded Cornelius and his family to be baptised in the name of Jesus. It was a historic day. First the Samaritans, then the Ethiopian, and now a Roman soldier and his relatives – the ripples were beginning to move out across the pond, and Jesus was indeed becoming “a light to the nations”, as Isaiah the prophet had foretold, “that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

(5) Paul tours Turkey

If you were asked to draw up a list of the most important religions, you would probably put,

somewhere near the top, the Christian faith. Millions of people the world over style themselves Christian, and the name is a household word. However, the fact is that the early disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were not known as Christians. Sometimes they were called “The Way” (Acts 9:2), and sometimes “The Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). The book of Acts tells us that it was at a small city in what is now Turkey that the new name was born, and the story of how it happened is important to our theme.

The bloody persecution by Saul of Tarsus had compelled many followers of Jesus to leave Jerusalem for safer destinations. Some went far away into the country districts of Israel but a few travelled much further to get away from trouble. These included a group of Jerusalem believers who had originally come from Cyprus and North Africa. They decided to emigrate a second time, and travelled 300 north to the remote city of Antioch. Settling into their chosen refuge, these brave souls determined to sound the trumpet and let their new neighbours know exactly what they believed. A vigorous preaching campaign followed, and the good news of love and hope soon attracted not only the Jews of the city but also many Greeks.

The courage of these men and women might well make us ashamed, when we think how little we are prepared to risk in the name of Jesus. Would we flee from persecution, and then start preaching again in our place of sanctuary? God blessed their valiant efforts, and soon “a great number that believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). The great news of the gospel is that Jesus of Nazareth is the Anointed of God, the Messiah of the Old Testament, who will deliver both Jew and Gentile from the power of the grave. Translated into Greek, the language of the Mediterranean in the first century, ‘Messiah’ becomes ‘Kristos’ or ‘Christ’. This title probably sounded strange to the ears of the inhabitants of Antioch, and they nicknamed the believers ‘Christ-ians’. The name has stuck ever since.

The founding of the church (ecclesia) at Antioch meant the gospel was now being preached outside the land of Israel, and to people who were mainly non-Jews. News of this daring advance of frontiers soon got back to Jerusalem, and Barnabas, a trusted ‘elder’ was sent off to investigate. To his credit, he accepted the position without fuss, and gladly entered into the work, adding the stability of his own faith and experience to the youthful assembly. Barnabas realised that skilled help was needed to feed the minds of the new disciples and to keep up the momentum of the preaching. He knew just the man.

Saul of Tarsus had once visited Jerusalem, very briefly, just after his baptism. Barnabas had been impressed then by his courage, his knowledge and his deep repentance. The two men had become friends, Barnabas acting as Saul’s champion when many had doubted the genuineness of his conversion, fearing he had come as a spy. He had lost touch since that time. 12 years had passed by, and Saul had settled into the comparative obscurity of his home town, Tarsus. It was here that the noble Barnabas tracked him down, and persuaded him to move to Antioch.

The two men formed a powerful team, and Saul was able at last to practise the task for which he had been chosen by the Lord Jesus, to go to the Gentiles “to open their eyes ... that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

Barnabas and Saul remained firm friends as the years passed. They were chosen by the believers at Antioch to be the official bearers of a collection taken up to help the believers at Jerusalem during a temporary famine – an excellent example of solidarity between Gentiles and Jews bound together by the gospel.

Paul mentions in his letter to Galatians that while at Jerusalem on this visit he exchanged views with Peter, James and John, who endorsed with the right hand of fellowship his work of teaching the Gentiles. He must have felt very happy as they returned to Antioch, their task completed.

It was the Lord Jesus, probably through the mouthpiece of one of the Christian prophets mentioned in Acts 13:1, who set in motion the next major advance in the outward movement of the gospel “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” came the message (Acts 13:2). It was a signal that could not be ignored. The two men, with the blessing of their friends at Antioch, set off by sea to Cyprus, taking John, Barnabas’ nephew, for their assistant.

Cyprus was a natural choice for their first ‘overseas’ adventure, since Barnabas had been born in the island and knew his way around. It is likely he had been away many years, and his old friends would be surprised, and perhaps embarrassed, at the message he came back to press upon them. As we walk through that sun-blessed island with the newly qualified apostles, we can sense their desire to make an impression on the busy country folk, to turn them from the futility of toil to the hope of the Kingdom of God that sweetens human care and sorrow with a vision of the future. It must have seemed a daunting task. They began with the Jewish synagogues, where at least they would be guaranteed a hearing by people who knew the Bible well. They do not appear to have made much of an impression, though, during those early days, for no baptisms are recorded. However, they made a valuable ally in the person of the Roman Pro-Consul, Sergius Paulus, who heard of their visit and asked for an interview. Luke labels the Governor “a man of intelligence” (Acts 13:7), and Paul’s power to work miracles convinced him their teaching was true.

Soon Saul (or Paul, to use his Roman name) and his companion crossed over to the mainland, where they made at once for the hill country 150 miles inland. No preaching at all is mentioned between leaving Cyprus and arriving at Antioch (not the other Antioch from which they had set out), a centre of the Roman administration on the main highway from Syria to Ephesus. It is not clear why they avoided staying in the coastal region, although it is

known the area was badly infested with malarial mosquitoes, and some have conjectured that Paul may have been taken ill soon after landing. He certainly was ill when he first came to the cities of the high country, since he mentions this fact in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 4:13). At Antioch Paul headed for the large Jewish synagogue on the first Sabbath after their arrival. Following the daily readings from Deuteronomy and Isaiah, Paul used those chapters to build up an impressive case for Jesus being the promised Saviour. With many references to the Psalms, using, in fact, the very same passages that Peter had once quoted on the Day of Pentecost, he proved that the Messiah must die, and rise from the dead, to bring a forgiveness of sins that the Law of Moses was powerless to confer. He convinced a number of Jews, and some of the Gentiles who also regularly attended the synagogue. Word of his message got round during the week, and the next Sabbath practically the whole city turned out to listen. Sadly, the leaders of the Jews, envious of Paul's success, began a campaign to discredit him, ending with a vigorous assault which meant he had to leave and move on to another province. It was Paul's turn to taste the pain of persecution. He left behind, nevertheless, a group of new disciples "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" including a number of Gentiles. His first preaching campaign was beginning to bear fruit.

From Perga, Paul and Barnabas moved to Iconium. Again they were opposed, by both Jews and Gentiles this time, and so fled over the border into Lystra. Here Paul's whole career came close to a violent end. On entering the city of Lystra, Paul began to address the citizens with his good news. After a while, he noticed in the audience a man with crippled legs, listening eagerly to his words. He decided to heal the man with the power of the Holy Spirit. "Stand upright" he called, and the man at once sprang up and walked. The crowds were enormously impressed. Their reaction, however, was not quite what Paul had expected. Steeped in Greek mythology, they immediately jumped to the conclusion that Paul and Barnabas were the gods Mercury and Zeus come down to visit them. The priests from the temple of Zeus actually came out with garlands of flowers to honour the two travellers, and cattle that he had made ready to sacrifice. Distraught with the way their miracle had misfired, the two preachers ran into the crowds and tried to put things straight "we ... bring you good news" they cried "that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heavens and the earth" (Acts 14:15). Paul was now suffering from the prejudice of idol worshippers, as he already had from the prejudice of the Jews.

Before long Jews visiting Lystra from Antioch, where Paul was now well known, and others from Iconium, recognised their opponent and set about inciting the people of Lystra against him. Paul was already somewhat of a disappointment to them after the garland incident, and it did not take much persuasion to set up a full scale riot. For the first time in his life (but not the last) Paul tasted the full fury of a howling mob. Stones began to fly, and struck the apostle with many a terrible blow. Before he sank into unconsciousness he would no doubt remember that fateful day, half a lifetime ago, when he had himself witnessed the stoning of Stephen, the first disciple to die for the faith. He had changed sides since then, and now, with

a dreadful irony, was paying the price. Paul's friends watched with horror as his body was dragged out of the city and left for dead.

Once the crowds had disappeared, the disciples gathered round their brave leader, shocked beyond belief. But to their surprise and enormous relief, Paul revived and sat up, and was soon able to walk into the city. God had still plenty of work for the apostle to do. In fact, he went on the next day with Barnabas to Derbe, where they were soon making more disciples. (Acts 14:21)

Paul's first preaching tour was drawing to a close. You might have expected that after such a hostile reception at Lystra, Iconiom and Perga, Paul would have returned to Antioch by a different route. It is a tribute to his courage, faith, and dedication to his ministry that he insisted on returning through the same cities. He wanted to see his new converts again, to strengthen their faith and exhort them. "Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God" he said (Acts 14:22), and as they saw his bruises and scars, they knew he had all but given his life to save them from eternal death. It was with a quiet satisfaction that the two travellers gathered together the members of the church at Antioch "and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. (Acts 14:27)

(6) Division Threatens the Church

The news that Paul and Barnabas brought back from their tour of Turkey was well received at Antioch. The disciples there had been pioneers in setting the good news of the Kingdom of God before people who were not of Jewish birth. It was from Antioch the two travellers had set out to cast the gospel net into Gentile waters further west, and the obvious success of their mission, the miracles God had allowed them to work, and the many baptisms they had witnessed would bring a warm glow of excitement to their supporters and friends.

The rejoicing, unfortunately, was not universal, as we shall see. There seems to have been a regular line of communication at that time between Antioch and Jerusalem, and news of Paul and Barnabas' work filtered through to the capital. Before long Peter came up to Antioch, his visit being noted in Paul's letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:11).

Peter himself had no qualms about the baptising of Gentiles, and was happy to enjoy their fellowship and eat at their table, as he had done previously when he preached to Cornelius, the centurion at Caesarea.

It was while Peter was staying at Antioch that a nasty cloud of dissension began to creep across the horizon. Most members of the congregation at Jerusalem were Jews, brought up in the Law of Moses. Some of them felt very strongly that Paul's Gentile converts ought to be circumcised, as Abraham's descendants had been for thousands of years. Zealous to put their

Gentile brethren right, they took down their travelling cloaks and set off for Antioch, the centre of Christianity.

Their arguments were persuasive. Circumcision, they could argue, was the sign of the covenant between God and his people. It went back in time even further than the Law, to Abraham, the founder of the faith. Jesus and all the apostles had been circumcised, and Jesus had at no time called for the rite to be withdrawn. If God had once called circumcision an “everlasting covenant”, what right had Paul to cancel it? They went so far as to insist that “unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1)

Peter was impressed by their arguments. He began to feel guilty at the way he mixed freely with Gentile Christians, and decided it was wrong to go to their houses. Peter was an influential person, being a chief apostle, and others followed his example. To Paul’s disgust, Barnabas, his loyal friend, joined the opposition. “Evan Barnabas”, he writes bitterly in Galatians “was carried away” (Galatians 2:11)

How would you have felt if you were a newly baptised Gentile at Antioch, as your Jewish brothers and sisters, embarrassed, began to turn you the cold shoulder? Suppose these teachers from Jerusalem were right. Would you be prepared to undergo a painful operation, to ensure that you would be saved? The congregation rocked with argument and dissent, and the love and joy of a year ago was fading rapidly.

For Paul, the situation was a crisis of the first order. If circumcision was regarded to be essential, he could see his whole work among the Gentiles collapsing in ruins. Furthermore, he believed the visitors from Judea were less than sincere in their motives. “I saw” he writes “that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14). To Paul, their zeal for the Law was a form of egotism; they were like Red Indians, out collecting scalps to boost their own reputation. He knew something about zeal for the Law himself, but his early crusades against the Christians always sprang from a genuine desire to defend the Law from attack. These ‘Judaisers’ as they have been labelled, were trying to compromise following Jesus with their old, comfortable Jewish pride as the chosen race. With Peter and Barnabas already won over, the spotlight fell on him as the undecided looked for a lead.

Paul was never one to give way on a matter of principle. To him, the ‘truth of the gospel’ was more important than his reputation and the reaction of his friends; he had proved that already, when he gave up his career as a Pharisee. He saw Peter as a key figure in the battle of Antioch. Peter, under pressure, was always inclined to be fearful when he most needed to be bold. He had knuckled under once before, at the trial of Jesus. Although the fisherman was older, and one of the original twelve, Paul decided on open debate with him. “I said to Cephas (Peter) before them all, ‘if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile ... how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (Galatians 2:14).

Peter had to admit that before the Judaisers came, he had been perfectly satisfied that salvation comes through faith in Jesus, not from keeping commandments out of the Law. If Christ died to take away our sins, we ought to stand before God clean and holy without cuttings in the flesh. It was true that Jesus did not attack the commandments of the Law in his teaching. The time was not ripe. But he had stated clearly enough that the old wine skin of the Law was already stretched and past its peak. His teaching, like new wine, would need new bottles. To try to mix the two was a recipe for disaster. It seems that Barnabas was pulled back by Paul's cool logic, and re-joined his travelling companion in the fray. Luke, with typical under-statement, sums up the conflict with the phrase "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them" (Acts 15:2).

The existence of the letter to the Galatians suggests that the travellers from Jerusalem moved northwards and west from Antioch, infecting with their teaching the new churches (or ecclesias) Paul and Barnabas had recently founded. This behind-the-back approach was particularly galling for the apostle, who could see his newly baptised friends at the other Antioch, Perga and Iconium being thrown into doubt and confusion. His letter is urgent and strongly worded. The Jerusalem party had cast aspersions on his qualifications to be an apostle. He insists he was commissioned and taught by the Lord Jesus himself, and was in no way inferior to Peter, John and the other apostles. He points out in terse, clipped phrases that God had promised all nations would be blessed because of Abraham and his seed or descendant. It was one of the greatest covenant promises of the Old Testament. Jesus was that seed, argues Paul, and the blessing was the forgiveness of sins. If they had once been baptised into Jesus to receive that blessing, how could they now take the backward step of trying to keep the Law of Moses? The Law, he said, was like a junior-school teacher, preparing men's hearts for the grown-up stage of following Jesus. The Law and circumcision had both become redundant. "O foolish Galatians" he cries "who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1). Against this background, it is interesting to read right through the short book of Galatians, to listen to the apostle cajoling, insisting, persuading, and drawing on his great knowledge of the Old Testament to prove his case with apt and powerful quotations.

We can presume from later events that his timely epistle stayed the tide, and the Galatians stuck to Paul's point of view. Things were far from settled, however, at Antioch, where Paul was still fighting bravely. Eventually a decision was made that the whole subject should be referred to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for their comments and advice. Paul and Barnabas led the delegation, together with others, as observers.

The great debate that followed was a watershed in the history of the church. Paul must have waited for the outcome with some trepidation. It is described in detail in Acts 15. The proceedings opened with a lively discussion between the Judaisers and those who followed Paul's point of view. After a while, Peter decided to make his own position clear. He reminded the assembly that God had chosen him to open the door of the gospel to the Gentiles right at the beginning, when he had been sent to Cornelius. The fact that the Holy

Spirit had been given to that Roman soldier and his family, proved that God wanted them to join the family of believers with no strings attached. Why put the yoke of the Law on people like Cornelius, he argued, when we believe that salvation is by grace?

It was the turn of Paul and Barnabas next. The great gathering fell silent as they recounted their adventures in Turkey, and how God had approved their labours with signs and miracles amongst the Gentiles, without any suggestion that the Gentiles should be circumcised. The sympathies of the audience began to move in their direction. It was James, the brother of Jesus, and the most influential of the apostles at Jerusalem, who had the last word. He summed up the situation with a neat quotation from the book of Amos. "I will rebuild the dwelling of David" God had promised through the prophet, in a clear reference to the coming of his Kingdom "...that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name" (Acts 15:16-17). God obviously intended Gentiles to be saved. James suggested that it was quite unnecessary for Gentile Christians to be burdened with the Law, but in view of the offence that might otherwise be caused to Jews in the cities where they lived, he recommended that they be asked to refrain from eating meat with blood in it, from associating with idol worship in any way, and from immoral behaviour, restrictions that would cause no great hardship. It was a gesture that Jewish believers appreciated, and it carried the day. As a result of the debate, a formal letter was drawn up, addressed "To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia" and summarising the feelings of the council. Silas and Judas were sent back with Paul and Barnabas, to act as witnesses.

The reaction of the congregation at Antioch was predictable; "They rejoiced at the exhortation" (Acts 15:31). The danger of division had been avoided, and Paul's work could continue unchecked.

(7) The Gospel reaches Europe

After the favourable decision of the Council at Jerusalem, Paul enjoyed a period of tranquillity at Antioch which must have been one of the happiest times of his life. The controversy over membership of Gentiles had been resolved, and his brothers and sisters, both Jew and Gentile, could grow together in knowledge, love and grace.

Eventually, however, the urge to return to his work of preaching seized him once more, and he held a consultation with his friend Barnabas. "Let us return" he suggested, "and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are" (Acts 15:36). Barnabas was happy to go, but insisted they should take his relative John Mark as their assistant. An unhappy quarrel developed, because although Mark had gone with them during their first expedition, he had abandoned the work after Cyprus and returned to Jerusalem. Paul wanted someone more reliable; Barnabas stuck up for his young cousin. It is surprising, after working together for so many years, the two veterans should have such an argument, but neither would give way, and a rift developed which could not be healed. We

are left with the embarrassing spectacle of the partners going separate ways. Barnabas and Mark set off, predictably to Cyprus, his home, while Paul took with him Silas, who had come up to Antioch from Jerusalem. It should be added that in later years Mark must have redeemed himself in Paul's eyes, for he is mentioned with approval in three of his letters. We all make mistakes when we are young, and no one deserves to be branded for life because of an early weakness. Besides, Paul himself probably mellowed as he got older.

Paul and Silas spent some time in Galatia, visiting their old friends and passing on the decisions of the elders at Jerusalem. At Lystra Paul invited a young disciple called Timothy to join his band. Timothy became his assistant, replacing John Mark, and stayed faithful to the apostle's service to the end of Paul's life. He became as close as a son, and Paul's two letters to Timothy are the most personal and tender in the New Testament.

At this stage Paul seems to have been given strong hints about where he should go next. The record in Acts is cryptic – they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” ... “they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not let them” ... “A vision appeared to Paul in the night; a man of Macedonia ... saying ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” Acts 16:7,8,9). Evidently the Lord Jesus was deciding their priorities. One result of this manoeuvring was a stay at Troas, a sea port on the northwest coast of Turkey, where someone else joined Paul's travelling company. The fact is not underlined and the person is not named, but as we read through Acts 16 the grammar alters abruptly between verse 9 and verse 10. It changes from ‘they’ third person, to ‘we’, first person plural. With one brief exception, it stays that way for the rest of Acts. The implication is that the writer of the book of Acts, Luke, is now reporting to us what he experienced first hand. We thus discover that Luke, the doctor, came from Troas. His presence during Paul's journey is confirmed by occasional mention of his name in Paul's letters.

Macedonia is part of Greece, on the opposite side of the Aegean Sea to Troas. Paul boarded a ship and sailed part of the way, coasting northwards in two days to Neapolis, not far from modern Thessalonika, averaging 75 miles per day. This excellent time implies a following wind or, as Luke puts it, “a direct voyage” (Acts 16:11). As they landed at Neapolis, the travellers crossed over an invisible boundary into what we now call Europe. The gospel was marching west.

Philippi, a few miles inland, was Paul's next stop. There was no synagogue in that city, but the Jews who lived there met for prayer outdoors on the bank of a river. By coincidence, a business woman from Thyratira, 300 miles south, was among the worshippers. Lydia was a trader in purple cloth, and may well have come to Philippi looking for customers. She was deeply moved by Paul's quiet reasoning, and was eventually baptised, along with other members of her family.

We do not know how long Paul spent at Philippi, but his sojourn there came to an abrupt and dramatic end. He had just healed a mentally disturbed slave girl. Her masters, annoyed because people used to pay them for her to tell their fortunes, dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates of the city. “These men are Jews” they cried. It was an old ruse, guaranteed to arouse emotions. “They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practise” (Acts 16:20-21). Without a trial Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten heavily with rods and thrown into prison. The ruins of this ancient stone building are still shown to tourists, and it is easy to picture the two bruised disciples sitting side by side in the darkness, trying to keep their sore and bleeding backs from touching the wall. Sleep was impossible, so they passed the time in prayer and singing hymns. The sound of their voices, cheerful and confident in adversity, rings down the years to inspire all who suffer for Christ. It made a strong impression on the prison keeper. At midnight, a sudden deep rumbling hit the prison, followed by a violent earthquake tremor that shook the walls and loosed the prisoners’ chain staples from their sockets. The terrified jailer ran to the prison, where Paul assured him that all the prisoners were still there, alive. His reaction was to take Paul and Silas upstairs into his own house and wash their wounds. He had never had prisoners like this before.

The irrepressible Paul, battered and shocked, at once seized on an opportunity. In the middle of the night he set to work to preach the gospel to the jailer and his family. Regardless of the cost to himself, he was always ready to save souls, and before long the jailer joined the infant church of Philippi.

Next day Paul left Philippi, Luke staying behind to look after the new disciples. Travelling southwest along the coast, he and Silas stopped at Thessalonica and Berea, but suffered from mob violence at both places. After Berea, the brethren decided Paul’s life was in great danger, and put him onto a ship for Athens, leaving Timothy and Silas to follow more slowly on foot. This meant that Paul found himself in the capital city of Greece with time on his hands, waiting for his friends to catch up with him. What should he do till they arrived? What would you have done with a few days to spare in Athens? There was plenty of sightseeing, then as now, with the soaring pillars of the Acropolis white in the sun, the elegant temples, the busy shops and taverns humming with people. It would be easy to persuade yourself you deserved a break after the troubled time at Berea, and enjoy the attractions of the big city.

Not so Paul. For him, the teeming crowds at Athens were a challenge – thousands of lost souls, doomed to perish unless he could win them to the service of Christ. The fact he was the only Christian in Athens did not deter him in the least. “He argued in the synagogue with the Jews” writes Luke “and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there” (Acts 17:17). What an example to us, when so often we discreetly hide our light under a bushel and let the world go by. Paul’s teaching came to the ears of the philosophers of Athens, the descendents of Pythagoras, Aristotle and Plato, who had flourished in an earlier age. They conducted him to an open-air forum, the Areopagus, and asked for a resume of his beliefs. It was a golden opportunity, and Paul did his best, spicing his arguments with

quotations from the Greek poets, to prove that there is only one God. That great, loving, Creator God, he warned, calls on all men to repent, because a Day of Judgement is coming, which has been guaranteed by an incontrovertible fact, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul's arguments were sound, but the wise men were unimpressed. Some laughed at him. Others put him off to another day.

Disappointed, Paul gave up waiting for Timothy and Silas, and moved on to Corinth. Here he decided to preach a very simple gospel. "When I came to you" he reminds them years afterwards "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom" That approach had not worked at Athens. Instead "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified ... that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:2,5).

Paul's experience was bitter, but true to life. Professors and princes have always found it hard to listen to God. It is the fishermen and farmers, the tent makers and tradesmen, who are humble enough to accept that we are all sinners, and desperately in need of the mercy of God.

After a long and fruitful stay at Corinth, Paul eventually sailed back to Palestine, full of the tales of his campaign. His second journey was complete. It was not long, naturally, before he decided to set off on the road again.

(8) Problems at Corinth

Paul did not rest long at Antioch before the call of duty launched him on his third great preaching tour. This time he travelled overland for another visit to his old friends in Galatia, and then headed southwest towards fresh pastures in the Roman province of Asia. It was at this point that disturbing news came through to Paul from the direction of Greece. He had spent the last 18 months of his previous trip at Corinth, a major commercial city on the narrow isthmus between Achaia and the mainland. Corinth had been the big success of the second tour. Although the Jews of the city had made life uncomfortable for him at first, the Lord Jesus had appeared to Paul in a vision, and encouraged him to press on. "Do not be afraid" he said, "but speak and do not be silent, ... for I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). For the first time great numbers of genuine Greeks had flocked to hear Paul, people with no background in the Law of Moses and no knowledge of the Bible. It was a case of starting from scratch. Many of his converts had come from the worship of gods and goddesses in heathen temples, and he had to teach them to follow Jesus, the Son of the one true God, the great creator. Many of them had been social outcasts and worse. Immoral, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, revilers and robbers – all these he writes "were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:10-11).

It had been a tremendous step for people with this sort of background to leave their old life behind, and start again as children of God. Paul was justly proud of his role in that great work. “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” he reminded them (1 Corinthians 4:15). His own native Jewish prejudice against Gentiles was left light years behind, as he warmed to them and their families, encouraging them by word and by his own example.

Paul had been anxious to know how his “children” were progressing in the months after he returned to his headquarters at Antioch. There is a clue in 1 Corinthians 5:9 that he had already written a letter to them giving them counsel and warning. But now a visitor from across the Aegean had brought the apostle a report that left him distinctly worried. It seems likely that also he received an ‘official’ letter from the Corinthian church elders, quite possibly brought by the hand of the same messenger. This letter contained a number of urgent questions upon which they sought an authoritative ruling, in order to restore peace and harmony in the Corinthian church or ecclesia.

Characteristically, the apostle at once dictated a reply, which dealt first with the problems “reported to me by Chloe’s people” (1 Corinthians 1:11) and then with the questions the Corinthians had raised in their letter. The First Epistle to the Corinthians (first, that is, in our Bible, for he had already written an earlier letter from Antioch) is a perfect example of Paul’s style. On one page he tells them firmly what they should do, and on another he writes with tears in his eyes to persuade them to come back to the truth he had taught them. His affection for them, his concern, his urgent desire to lift them up from sin and strife to Christ’s standards of truth and peace, comes tumbling out of these chapters. That is why we feel it would be good to take a quick look at this important epistle, to get the feel of what living the gospel meant to first century disciples in a city of idolaters, and an insight into the character of the apostle himself.

We have only to read a few verses into the epistle to find out the first heartache that the Corinthians were causing Paul. The infant congregation, within months of his leaving, was already dividing itself into rival groups, each following one prominent Christian leader. “Each one of you says ‘I belong to Paul’” he laments, “or ‘I belong to Apollos’ or ‘I belong to Cephas’ or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1 Corinthians 1:12). Apollos was an earnest disciple and a powerful orator who had just come to Corinth, and Cephas is another name for the apostle Peter. To make Peter and Apollos equal to Jesus was to tragically misunderstand the supreme position of Christ in the plan of salvation. He hastens to put them right. It is easy to be impressed by a vibrant, outgoing personality, or a man with a razor intellect able to grapple with the abstractions of philosophy, but in the end being saved from death is independent of any human leader. “Jews demand signs” he tells them “and Greeks wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Unfortunately people today still fall into the same trap. Dozens of rival religions fill the

world, each based on the teaching of one particular leader. They run right through the spectrum from the Roman Catholics with the Pope, the Muslims who follow Mahomet, the Mormons with their Joseph Smith, the Christian Scientists with Mary Baker Eddy, and the Unification Church of Mr. Moon. In contrast, the structure of the first century church was devastatingly simple. Jesus was the only leader, in heaven. Each church, or ecclesia had a small group of elders to give guidance and advice, and that was it. No vicars, no archbishops, no hierarchy, no stifling bureaucracy. The elders are sometimes called 'bishops' in our New Testament translations, although each congregation had not one, but several of them. They had no power to insist on obedience from those in their care. "Tend the flock of God...." Peter exhorts elders everywhere "not domineering those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3). If you are looking for a community that claims to have the truth at heart, check out its organisation first. Paul allowed no hero worship at Corinth. "The head of every man is Christ" was his motto (1 Corinthians 11:3).

The next topic that occupied Paul's attention was a serious case of immorality that he felt ought to be dealt with immediately. One of their members was co-habiting with his father's wife – probably a second wife to his mother, for many Greeks had more than one wife. Such behaviour was completely opposed to the Christian ideal of a young man and a virgin being joined in marriage for life. To break the marriage vows, or to indulge in sexual relations outside marriage was abhorrent to Jesus and the apostles. We cannot avoid brushing shoulders with immoral people in the world as we go about our lives, Paul concedes, but in the church such behaviour merits the expulsion of the offender, unless he or she repents. "I wrote to you" (in his previous letter) not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed" (1 Corinthians 5:11). Paul's ruling utterly condemns today's free-living, promiscuous society. "Do not be deceived" he insists, for it is easy to be taken in by the serpent voice of the 'excusers' "neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves.....will inherit the Kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). God's standards have not changed. He has always condemned adultery and perversion, as far back as Genesis. How can people feast their eyes hour after hour on plays and films where adultery and homosexuality are the norm, and go out and practise these evils, while still calling themselves 'Christian'. Corinth was full of such vices, but the disciples had been called to leave them entirely behind.

Another area of conflict where the Corinthians needed Paul's advice was over the purchase of meat for their dinners. Much of the meat for sale in the markets had first passed through the temples of the local gods and goddesses. It had an association with idols. Some disciples had no qualms about eating such food because they had learnt that there is only one God, and idols have no real existence. The problem was that other members with weaker consciences saw these 'strong' brethren tucking in to what they still regarded as idols' food, and were encouraged to slip back into their old ways, no longer separate from the heathen world they had left. Paul makes what seems a very strict ruling here, and says if we can find no other meat to eat than that offered to idols, and to eat it will upset the faith of our weaker brethren,

we should be prepared to go vegetarian. “If food is the cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat” he declares (1 Corinthians 8:13) When we think of how much Jesus gave to save us from the emptiness of life without God, giving up anything we enjoy is a small sacrifice if, through this, we in turn help save others.

There are more topics covered in the last few chapters of the epistle, including the central importance of believing in Christ’s bodily resurrection, and the proper use of the first century Holy Spirit gifts, but perhaps the best known and most powerful chapter of all is Paul’s teaching on Christian love in 1 Corinthians 13. What more fitting conclusion could we have to our brief survey than Paul’s masterly statement of the single most important trait that the follower of Jesus must seek to develop. “Love is patient and kind” he writes “love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful” How often have we been caught out in every one of these failings! “Love does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right” he concludes “love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Right to the end of the world love will continue, strong, joyful and unfailing, for love, in truth, is part of the very nature of God the Creator himself.

(9) The Great Collection

The highlight of Paul’s third missionary journey was his stay at Ephesus. There is not much left of Ephesus today apart from ruined columns, an enormous amphitheatre, and ancient paving stones along which tourists plod in the summer heat. 2,000 years ago Ephesus was a great commercial metropolis, from which roads radiated out into the Asian continent. Teeming with traders, it also housed what was reputed to be the grandest temple in the world, the centre of worship of the great goddess Artemis, or Diana. This was not Diana, the lithe huntress, but a multi-breasted fertility goddess, ugly to modern eyes, but a fruitful source of income for the army of priests, hostel owners and souvenir manufacturers who milked the stream of worshippers who flowed to her door.

For the apostle, Ephesus was a challenge. Such rampant idolatry, so many thousands of human beings being deluded into trusting a lump of stone and losing their money in the process, when the God of Israel could bring them joy, hope and everlasting life, called forth his strongest efforts. He began, as usual, with the synagogue. God’s people deserved first refusal of his good news. “For three months he spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the Kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). Neither argument or plea made much headway, so at length he gave up with the Jews, hired the hall of Tyrannus, and spent the next three years preaching to the Gentiles. Paul’s work seems to have been specially blessed by God. Magic arts were common in this city of superstition, so he was given the power to work extraordinary miracles to prove that his God truly lives. People even took home handkerchiefs that had been touched by Paul, and their sick relatives were cured by them. At one stage Paul’s converts showed their change of heart by making a public bonfire of black magic books, thousands of pounds worth of handwritten volumes going up in flames. It was all good

publicity, and the central position of Ephesus meant that “all the residents of Asia (i.e. the Roman province) heard the Word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

What Luke does not record in his chapter in Acts, is the intense pressure under which Paul was working at this time. For one thing, he had very little money. He always made it a rule to be self-supporting wherever he travelled, to disarm those critics who would have accused him of preaching for gain. This meant that he had to fall back on the trade of tent manufacture he had learnt as a young man, heavy work with poor pay. He once reminded the Thessalonian believers how “with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:8). It was the same at Ephesus. What is extraordinary is, that in spite of working night and day, Paul still found time to preach the gospel, “teaching you in public and from house to house” he pointed out to the elders of Ephesus “For three years” he says “I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears” Imagine that – slogging all day, including overtime, and then going out night after night, to hold public debates, home Bible study classes and instruction sessions for new believers. People from Ephesus were drifting away from Diana so fast that the souvenir trade began to dry up, and that really made Paul enemies. He had always feared the assassination gangs from the synagogues, jealous of his success. “You know” he recalled to the elders “the trials which befell me through the plots of the Jews” (Acts 20:19). Added to that now were the vested interests of Demetrius the silversmith and the members of his guild, along with the hoteliers and other beneficiaries from the worship of the goddess.

Small wonder that Paul writes of this period in his second letter to the Corinthians, “we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8) It is salutary to think of the cost to this great man as he poured out his health and his nerves to save sinners from death by his preaching. How utterly feeble by comparison are our efforts in the service of God. He puts us to shame.

Paul sensed his time at Ephesus was coming to an end, so he sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead to visit the churches in Greece and prepare for his coming. Around this time he also wrote the first letter to the Corinthians, and after a short interval sent off Titus, probably by sea, to visit Corinth and report to him on the reception given to that important letter.

Meanwhile the clouds were gathering fast. The storm broke when Demetrius decided to get rid of Paul by the simple expedient of raising a riot. “You know” he said to the Craftsmen’s Union “that from this business we have our wealth. And...not only at Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable company of people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods”. It was a handsome tribute to the apostle, but it enraged the supporters of Diana, who could see their profits slipping away. They started a mass chanting of the catch phrase “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” and marched towards the amphitheatre. They managed to grab hold of two of Paul’s travelling

companions, but the apostle himself, fortunately, was not with them. When he heard of the disturbance, he was keen to go down himself and make his defence to the hostile crowd, but his friends persuaded him it would be an act of folly. For two whole hours the city was in an uproar. Luke remarks that the assembly was in a confusion, and most of them did not even know why they had come together. We have seen, tragically often in recent years, the power of a mob. The Law of Moses, very wisely, insisted “you shall not follow a multitude to do evil” (Exodus 23:2). We do well to keep away from angry crowds. The chanting of the mob, in the case of Jesus, brought about the death of the world’s most innocent man. The riot at Ephesus was at length defused by the skilful intervention of the Town Clerk, who reminded Demetrius that the courts were the place for business complaints, and sent the townspeople home. But Paul knew he was no longer safe in the city, and packing his bags, set off north along the coast towards Troas.

Paul would have enjoyed staying at Troas, because it was the hometown of Luke, and there was plenty of scope for preaching. But he was anxious to hear how Titus had fared at Corinth, so the little party pressed on round the coast to Greece, where he met up with Titus travelling north towards him. He was greatly cheered by his news. “We rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus” he writes, “because his mind had been set at rest by you all” (2 Corinthians 7:13). The Corinthians had received Paul’s first letter in a spirit of repentance; they had put right the malpractices he complained of, and were looking forward to his visit. Paul had deliberately delayed coming to them until Titus’ report. Even now, there was still an important, if sensitive, point to get across to them, and he decided to write again to the Corinthians, so that the message would get there before he arrived. This letter was the second letter to the Corinthians in our Bible.

The topic of this second letter was one that was close to the apostle’s heart. Long ago, when he first began his preaching work, he and the other apostles at Jerusalem had come to an agreement that he would go to the Gentiles, and they would continue preaching to the Jews. But he had promised them he would remember the poverty of the Jewish Christians, and seek to relieve it. He had already taken one public collection from Antioch to Jerusalem. Now he wanted to see the Gentile believers from Greece and Corinth pulling their weight in contributing to the needs of their Jewish brethren. It was a lovely idea, expressing the unity that belongs to true Christianity, bridging barriers of race and prejudice, and uniting together disciples across the seas. He wanted the Corinthians to have the money put by in good time, so that there would be no scurrying around when he arrived. He takes two whole chapters, 2 Corinthians 8; 9, to explain the principles of Christian giving. Discipleship is not just a matter of believing. Salvation is certainly by faith, not works, but God expects our faith to move us to acts of sacrifice. “As you excel in everything” Paul wrote “in faith, in utterance, in knowledge ... see that you excel in this gracious work also” (2 Corinthians 8:7). In the most delightful way, Paul explains that it is a case of sharing. “Your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14). If we give generously when others are in need, God will

see to it that help is there when we are in trouble ourselves. And we must always remember, he adds, that when we give to others, we give what God first gave to us. He is able to replace what we give with much more. “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your resources, and increase the harvest of your righteousness ... thanks be to God” he concludes “for His inexpressible gift” The gift of His Son, with all that cost, is more than we can ever repay.

All ended well. The Corinthians paid their contributions. Paul added the money to that he had already gathered in Greece, and accompanied by a few trusted brethren, set sail for Jerusalem. Before setting off, he penned the Epistle to the Romans. New plans were already forming in his mind. “I no longer have room for work in these regions” he told them “I have longed for many years to come to you; I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain” (Romans 15:23). Rome was Paul’s next objective, as the white sails drew him speedily to the Holy Land.

(10) Trouble at Jerusalem

As the great ship ploughed east across the Mediterranean bearing Paul and his companions towards the land of Israel, a troubled look would occasionally cross his weather-beaten face. It was not the safe keeping of the bullion they were carrying that worried the apostle, although the total value of the Great Collection for the poor disciples in Jerusalem probably amounted to thousands of pounds. It was something else. He had already expressed his fears in his letters to the Romans some months before, as he outlined to them his plans for the journey. “Strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf” he had begged them “that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints” (Romans 16:30-31)

The first point was an obvious one. Several years had elapsed since he last visited the Jewish capital, and his work of preaching to the Gentiles had made him many enemies amongst the orthodox Jews. He was showing great courage in going to Jerusalem at all, equivalent to walking into the lion’s den. However, the collection of money from the Gentile believers for the Jewish Christians had been his own idea, and he felt obliged to see the project through to the end, whatever the dangers. His prayer that the collection would be accepted by the people for whom it was intended, shows that he was suffering another anxiety. It would prove embarrassing and hurtful indeed if Jewish pride was to reject the kindness shown at such self-sacrifice by the Gentiles, and he was made, crestfallen, to take the collection back.

In the event his fears were justified. Landing at Caesarea, Paul travelled on foot from the coast up to the capital, accompanied by his friends. It had been arranged that he would stay with a disciple from Cyprus who was living in Jerusalem. Next day a meeting was called of the Jerusalem church, or ecclesia, and Paul presented a detailed report on his work overseas –

“he related one by one” writes Luke “the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:18-19).

At this point we would expect to read about the handing over of the collection, and the gratitude of the people receiving it. Unfortunately the record is silent. It looks as though Paul’s alms giving, undertaken in such a loving spirit, was received with little enthusiasm. Worse was to follow. After making his report, he was forced to take an important decision, the results of which were to change the course of his life for years to come.

The fact was Paul was an embarrassment to the Jerusalem believers. They respected the dramatic results of his preaching – “when they heard it, they glorified God” Luke records (Luke 21:20). But Paul himself had acquired a reputation for teaching not only the Gentiles, but the Jews as well, in the countries he had visited, that it was no longer necessary to keep the Law of Moses. This upset the Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. They had to rub shoulders every day with the unbelieving Jews, who viewed them as heretics, in the same way that Paul himself had done when he used to be Saul the Persecutor. Most of them had decided to reduce this friction by continuing to observe the Law of Moses themselves, as well as following Christ. After all, they could argue, there was nothing wrong with the Law of Moses. If you accepted it could not bring salvation, observing the Sabbath and praying in the Temple did no harm, and certainly made life easier. So they said to Paul ‘we want you to go along to the Temple straightaway and take part in a public service of purification, so that everyone will realise you are still a supporter of the Law’.

This put Paul in a difficult position. The fact was he, like them, had continued to observe the rules of the Law of Moses after his conversion. His reason was different. It was not to avoid persecution – he collected plenty of that from the unbelieving Jews. It was to give him the facility of entering the synagogues in the cities he visited overseas, in order to preach the gospel to the Jews. If he had stopped observing the Law, they would have refused to listen to him, and he would not have been able to follow the principle he insisted was God’s way – “the gospel is the power of God for salvation to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16). His observance of the Law was not out of compulsion, but as a means to an end. “To those under the Law” he wrote “I became as one under the Law – though not being myself under the Law – “that I might win those under the Law” (1 Corinthians 9:20) So, to go into the Temple as if he were a law-abiding Jew would draw the teeth from his Jewish critics, but it would weaken the emphasis of his gospel, that salvation is by faith in Jesus. It was a nasty dilemma. He slept on it.

By morning light, Paul had decided to humour his Jewish brethren. With four other men, he purified himself, set off for the Temple and gave notice that in a week’s time he would be returning to offer sacrifices. He then had to wait around in Jerusalem until the seven days had elapsed. That delay proved fatal. Amongst the crowds of worshippers, thronging the Temple like flocks of saintly birds, were visitors from overseas, including Jews from the province of

Asia. They recognised the diminutive figure of the apostle, and the sight of his face brought back unpleasant memories of wordy battles in their home towns, when he had drawn away many of their members from the synagogue to be followers of Jesus. This was an opportunity for revenge. The unsuspecting apostle, quietly worshipping, was seized by rough hands. "Men of Israel, help" they cried "This is the man who is teaching men everywhere against the people and the Law and this place..." (Acts 21:28). Their shrieks of rage warned Paul that, not for the first time, his life was in the hands of a fanatical mob. They dragged him, bruised and defenceless, outside into the street and began to beat him to death.

The Romans had built a large fortress overlooking the Temple area for the very purpose of controlling such riots, which were all too common amongst their Jewish subjects in that sacred place where feelings ran high. The frenzied disturbance below was noted by the guard, and reported at once to the Chief Officer. He rushed out with a strong detachment of soldiers, and was able to intervene in time to save Paul from the mob. Assuming the battered figure before him had disturbed the peace, he formally arrested the apostle, chained him securely, and began to march him off to the barracks for interrogation.

The fire of Paul's character shines out in what happened next. Addressing the tribune in Greek, he asked permission to speak to the crowds from the barrack stairs. In spite of his pain, Paul was not going to let this opportunity pass to address his fellow countrymen on the subject nearest to his heart. He had kept a low profile during the week in order to avoid trouble, but now he had been recognised, he was determined to let them know why he had become a Christian.

It was a strange circumstance to start preaching. Most of us would have been thankful just to escape from a violent death. But to Paul, these men who so hated him were sinners to be saved. His oration got off to a good start. It was an extraordinary spectacle, as the dishevelled little man peered down from between the burly Roman soldiers, waving his manacled hand until a deep hush fell over the crowd. They listened intently as he explained how Jesus of Nazareth had appeared to him in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. They followed his account of his baptism, and his commission to be an apostle. But when he came to Jesus' command that he should preach to the Gentiles, the spell was broken. Howling, waving their clothes, throwing dust into the air, they so alarmed the Roman tribune that Paul was immediately rushed inside.

That day was the beginning of a long, dark chapter in Paul's life. He was to stay in prison, first at Jerusalem, then Caesarea and Rome, for a period that was to be measured in years. He had done nothing unlawful. He was brought before court after court, with different judges, but somehow, although they could find no good reason for his being kept in prison, they never got round to setting him free. Roman law was good, but its execution depended on officials who were more concerned with their pockets and careers than strict standards of

justice. The Jews, Paul's enemies, had influence in high places, and saw to it that Paul, if not dead, was at least silenced from his preaching.

Even in prison, Paul was hardly safe. While he was being kept at Jerusalem, a band of assassins planned to set up a roadside ambush while the Jewish leaders arranged for Paul to be brought out of prison to appear before the Jewish Council. Only the sharp ears of Paul's little nephew foiled their plot. Our picture, based on Acts 23:12-22, shows the lad warning the tribune that Paul's life was in danger. But such excitement and danger was soon to be a thing of the past, as the apostle found himself locked away for long, dreary days in damp, harsh cells. It must have been galling, frustrating and downright depressing, especially when he had done nothing wrong.

Why, you might well ask, did God allow his servant to finish up like this, after years of faithful service? It is a good question, and we must attempt an answer before we conclude. Firstly, we cannot hope to understand the reasons for all God's actions until the Day of Judgement, when the full perspective of His work will be revealed. We have to recognise that we are only servants, doing our duty. It may be that Paul's appointed task of founding new communities of believers was now complete, and it was time for others to carry on, while he took a back seat. Secondly, suffering comes to all God's servants sooner or later. It teaches them patience, faith and trust in God. Even Jesus is said in the book of Hebrews to have been made perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). Perhaps Paul still had something to learn from those lonely hours in prison. Lastly, there is one definite benefit from Paul's imprisonment, for which we give thanks. Unable to visit his dear friends overseas, he wrote to them instead; long, meaty letters of counsel and warning, full of principles for the life of the disciple. Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Timothy and probably Hebrews – all these have been preserved, and in them we have the finest fruits of the apostle's wisdom and experience.

(11) Paul's Voyage to Rome

Paul had spent at least two years in Roman jails. He had shown, both in open court and in private conversation with his captors, that he was innocent of any crime under Roman law, but somehow nothing seemed to happen. He realised eventually there was no hope of justice at the hands of Felix, the local official who was in charge of his case. He needed to go to the top.

Roman law, like British law, was designed to protect the innocent. Since there was always the possibility of bias on the part of the judge hearing a case, it allowed for an appeal to a higher court. This facility was open to any Roman citizen. If he felt consistently denied a fair hearing, he had the right to go to the very highest level, and ask the Emperor himself to try his case, just like an Englishman appealing to the House of Lords today.

Paul's opportunity came when Felix was replaced by a new Governor, Festus. Only three days after his taking office, the Jewish leaders petitioned him to have Paul sent back to Jerusalem to be re-tried. Not for the first time, they intended to ambush and kill Paul on the way (Acts 25:3). Festus must have realised he had inherited a 'hot potato' from his predecessor, and refused to fall into their trap.

However, when the case was eventually heard at his headquarters in Caesarea, the outcome was once again inconclusive. The Jews could not prove any crime, and Paul protested his innocence. The Governor suggested yet another trial, but Paul had already decided to use his Roman privilege – "Caesareri apello" he cried – "I appeal to Caesar". This meant only one thing. He would get to Rome- not as he had planned two years ago, as a freelance preacher, but at least with some hope of justice, away from the steamy, violent hatred of the Jews at Jerusalem. Little did he know, but his journey to Rome at the Emperor's expense was to prove more dangerous than any other episode in his eventful life.

The account of Paul's voyage to Rome occupies a whole chapter of Acts (Acts 27), and is one of the most gripping adventure stories in the Bible. Luke, the narrator, was clearly an eyewitness – he writes in the first person 'we'. He must have decided to accompany the prisoner Paul to minister to him during the voyage and to give moral support to him at Rome. He was thus in an ideal position to recount the disaster that overtook the great ship in which they travelled.

All started well. Paul was one of a number of prisoners being transported to Rome, in the custody of a centurion and a band of soldiers as guards. It seems they travelled on private ships, the fare presumably being reimbursed by the State.

The first leg of the voyage, from Caesarea to Lycia near the island of Rhodes, passed without incident. Here the centurion found berths on a grain ship sailing from Alexandria to Italy. Surprisingly, in those days, North Africa, including the area which is now the Sahara Desert, was the main source of food for the teeming population of Rome. 'Bread and circuses' were the key to popularity in Rome, and a steady stream of giant vessels crossed the Mediterranean on two long tacks to reach the capital. The size of the vessel can be judged from the fact that although it was designed mainly for cargo, passengers being incidental to the main purpose of the voyage, Luke counted a total, including the crew, of 276 people on board (Acts 27:37).

It was already late summer when they left Lycia, and the wind was blowing from the northeast, a direction that forced the ship out into the Mediterranean towards Crete. Luke comments on their slow progress; "As the wind did not allow us to go on, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. Coasting along with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens" (Acts 27:7-8). A crisis meeting was held at this point. Autumn was fast approaching with its heavy storms, and they had no hope of reaching Italy in a reasonable time. The

normal procedure for those days was to lay up the ship in a safe anchorage and over-winter on dry land. It would be expensive and frustrating for modern traders or tour operators to be so restricted by the weather, but in the first century it was a fact of life.

The problem was, although Fair Havens sounds a good place to lay up a ship, it was too exposed for the peace of mind of the Captain, who advised risking another short voyage around Crete to Phoenice in the southwest. Paul was against this idea. He was uncomfortably familiar with the Mediterranean, having already been shipwrecked three times. The season was now so advanced that the danger from even a short voyage, in his view outweighed the advantage of a better harbour. As Rome was paying the fares of the soldiers and prisoners, the centurion had the last word. He was more inclined to trust the captain, who was supposed to be the expert. Accordingly, when they woke one morning to a gentle south wind, they set off from Fair Havens, creeping round the shore towards Phoenice. Unfortunately the wind changed. Backing sharply to the northeast and changing in force, it drove them out to sea, away from Crete altogether. They were towing a small boat, which they managed to haul on deck, and while temporarily sheltered by a small island, they prepared for the inevitable storm by dropping loops of rope over the prow and under the keel, tying the ends across the deck to bind the timbers more strongly together. Taking off all sail, they drove southwest under bare poles. The next day the storm blew unabated, and with the ship wallowing heavily, they decided to jettison some of the cargo of wheat to lighten it. The spars and tackle followed over the side. Paul had been right, after all.

How could he have felt as the breakers thudded into the quivering timbers, and icy spray stung the wet bodies of sailors, soldiers and prisoners alike? Did he feel close to death? Was he reminded of Jonah, storm tossed in just the same sea, or the disciples in the boat on Galilee? “Where is your faith?” Jesus had chided his trembling followers. Was Paul afraid? We know for certain that he was. Luke records that an angel stood by him in the boat one night, with four familiar words that run like a refrain through the Bible, bringing comfort to all God’s children in distress. “Do not be afraid, Paul” was his message, “you must stand before Caesar, and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you (Acts 27:24).

Rising to the fore in this time of crisis, Paul the prisoner inspired centurion and sailors alike with his calm faith in his God. “We shall have to run on some island” he insisted; that was how they would be saved.

Graphically, Luke describes how on the fourteenth night the sailors sensed through the inky darkness the sound of billows crashing against distant cliffs. Depth soundings confirmed the nearness of land. A cowardly attempt by the mariners to escape in the ship’s boat was thwarted by Paul’s vigilance. At dawn the sailors spied what seemed to be a sandy bay, and “hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. But striking a shoal they ran the vessel aground; the bow stuck and remained unmovable, and the stern was broken up by the surf” (Acts 27:40-41). It was a case of every man for himself, but just as Paul had been

promised, even the non-swimmers reached land safely. Even then Paul's adventures were not over. The shipwreck victims were soaked, chilled and exhausted. They badly needed warmth. The natives of the land, flocking to the shore, hastily constructed a great bonfire to dry them out. Paul, ever practical, set about gathering wood. A poisonous snake crawled out of his bundle of sticks and bit deeply into his arm. To the amazement of the barbarians, he shook it off into the fire and suffered absolutely no ill effects. Later he was able to further impress them, and repay their hospitality, by healing the father of the chief man of the island. In fact, by the time spring came, Paul and his company were firm favourites with the islanders, and when the time came to leave, they were despatched with many honours, setting sail in another Alexandrian vessel which had wintered in the island. And so, at last, the apostle came safely to Rome.

There is little doubt that the island Paul's grain ship struck was Malta. It is even possible to identify Ras el Koura, the bay of the shipwreck, with its shelving beach and the tiny island to one side, deceptively invisible from the sea, with a tide race to the rear in which the vessel was twisted and broken. The impact of the story only strikes you when you consult a map. Most Bibles have a diagram showing Paul's journeys in the end papers at the back. Find the point on Crete where the ship set off that sunny autumn morning, and follow the long track west and south along which it was driven by the gale. The distance is around 500 miles, which, in fourteen days, gives an average drift of 1.5 miles per hour. Now check the profile of Malta, the maximum distance north to south over which they might have struck land. It is about 20 miles. Consider those results. If the angle of drift of the vessel had been only 2.5 degrees to the north or south, it would have missed Malta altogether and either foundered, or blown straight into the coast of Tunisia in the area of the Lesser Syrtes, the dreaded quicksands, graveyard of many noble vessels.

Surely the hand of God was protecting Paul during those desperate days and nights. His hour had not yet come. He must witness to the gospel before Caesar in Rome. To the joy of his friends, his work of preaching and teaching would resume.

Many of us have experienced similar perils to Paul, and have felt the same relief and gratitude when we have afterwards found ourselves still alive. How would you like to have the same calm faith, inspiring your companions in a crisis, confident that God will bring you through? You can, of course. The words of the Psalmist apply to all those who have given their lives to God by joining his family; "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam (Psalm 46:1-3) Whether we think of the sea of life or the sea of nations roaring in tumult and distress, God will bring us safely through all danger to the haven and peace of his glorious Kingdom, the Kingdom that Paul laboured so faithfully to preach.

(12) Letters from Prison

Soft winds and spring flowers warmed the heart of the apostle Paul as the little party of prisoners trudged with their guards along the well paved Roman road from Puteoli. It was a relief to feel the breeze and the hot sun after the years he had spent in prison. The respite, unhappily, was to be short-lived. He faced with trepidation the prospect of his impending trial before the emperor at Rome. Each step north was taking him nearer to the headquarters of the giant bureaucratic machine that had crushed his people with jaws of iron and executed his master in spite of his innocence. Paul had no illusions as to his probable fate. Imagine his relief and gratitude therefore, when it turned out that a small band of travellers coming towards them at the Forum of Appii was actually a group of Christian disciples who had heard Paul had landed at Puteoli, and set off from Rome to welcome him. Their thoughtfulness and support cheered his aged heart. So moved was he, reports Luke, that he “thanked God and took courage” (Acts 28:15).

Paul’s first move on reaching the capital was diplomatic. He was permitted by the Department of Justice to hire his own accommodation while waiting for his case to come up, where he was confined with a Roman soldier as a guard. He was free to receive visitors, and he decided to introduce himself to the leaders of the Jewish synagogues in Rome, of which there are thought to have been at least seven. They were curious to meet Paul, and he was anxious to outline his position to them himself, before enemies from the Jerusalem Jewish community had a chance to wag their poisonous tongues. It was a unique opportunity to preach the gospel to a ‘captive’ audience, (although he was truly the prisoner!) and he made the most of it. For a whole day “he expounded the matter to them from morning to evening” writes Luke “testifying to the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus, both from the Law of Moses and from the prophets” (Acts 28:23). He actually made a little headway. Some were convinced by what he said. Others, more prejudiced, would not agree with him. They went home arguing between themselves. Paul’s parting shot was one of reproach “Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28). So the great apostle had done his duty by his master, the Lord Jesus. The good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ had arrived in the capital of the empire. He had preached the gospel in Rome also.

What next, you might ask? What was the outcome of Paul’s appearance before the emperor? Was he set free, to continue his missionary journeys? Strangely the record in Acts is silent. It is as if Luke, having covered the journey to Rome, considered his account complete. All he tells us is that Paul lived on in his hired accommodation for two whole years, and preached the Kingdom of God to all his visitors. Presumably at the end of two years his case would come up for a hearing. Roman justice obviously took as leisurely a course as the equivalent today! But Luke is silent about the verdict.

To find out more about those two ‘hidden’ years, we need to turn to Paul’s epistles His stay

in prison, though irksome, was productive in letter writing, and with a little research we can uncover some fascinating stories. Like noted that Paul received a stream of visitors. One of the more unusual of these was a runaway slave. This man, Onesimus, has a whole book devoted to him, named after his master, Philemon. Philemon came from Colosse, a city not actually listed in Paul's journeys, but the home of a group of disciples well known to him, for he wrote them a letter from prison. Philemon was probably one of the most influential members of the church, or ecclesia, at Colosse, because Paul mentions the church met in his house (Philemon 2).

As a man of substance, Philemon would own a number of slaves, who would be likely to attend upon him during services, as well as for everyday tasks. In this way it is not hard to imagine Onesimus travelling with his master to Ephesus to meet the apostle Paul, and overhearing the long and earnest conversations they would have had before Philemon was baptised as a Christian. Now the young slave had run away, heading northwest for Rome. A runaway was liable to be executed if caught, but in the metropolis he would be swallowed up in the seething crowds, just as criminals today lie up in London to escape from justice. What strange circumstance brought him to the apostle's lodgings we cannot guess. Perhaps he was desperately lonely, remembered his master speaking of the imprisonment of the saintly apostle, and deliberately sought him out. He came to the right man. Paul took to Onesimus as a father to a son, and before long Onesimus, like his master, had become a disciple of Jesus. The problem was, what to do next. Paul enjoyed having Onesimus to run errands, but felt obliged to send him back to Philemon now the two men were brothers in Christ. If Onesimus simply turned up on his doorstep at Colosse, Philemon would jump angrily on him. So Paul wrote a short introductory letter for Onesimus to take back, a model of tact and diplomacy, that would melt Philemon's heart. We can imagine the astonishment on his face, as Philemon eventually looked from the piece of paper to Onesimus and back, and at last stepped down to give his slave the Christian kiss of peace.

Paul had other visitors to his house of detention. We know that his good friends at Philippi sent him gifts on at least two occasions, brought by the hand of a messenger, Epaphroditus, for our epistle to the Philippians was Paul's thank you letter. To his dismay Epaphroditus fell gravely ill while at Rome, but recovered sufficiently to be sent back with the letter (Philippians 4:25-27). Timothy too, Paul's son in the faith, was with him (Colossians 1:1), as was Luke, his constant companion. Most interesting is the fact that Paul sends greetings from Rome on behalf of an unknown number of disciples "of Caesar's household". Paul writes in Philippians that "it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Philippians 1:13). It sounds as though some of the Roman soldiers chained to Paul on duty, and therefore bound to hear his persuasive arguments for belief in God, had themselves become disciples. Paul never lost a chance to preach the Word of Life.

There are hints in Philippians, Philemon and Colossians that Paul, at the time of writing, expected soon to be released. There is little doubt that he was, in fact, set free. In three letters written after the Acts (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus) we find Paul referring to a journey he had recently made to Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3), Crete (Titus 1:5), Nicopolis (Titus 3:12), and Troas (2 Timothy 4:13). None of these visits fit into the record of Acts; Paul does not travel to Crete at all in his three earlier preaching tours. These journeys must therefore have been made after he was set free. It looks as if he had to abandon his earlier plan to go to Spain, and instead made another short Mediterranean voyage. But time was running out. We know from history that around AD 64 the emperor Nero turned hostile to the Christians. As a ringleader of the movement, it would not be long before Paul was re-arrested and imprisoned. This time he had no hope of acquittal. It was no use appealing to Caesar when Caesar himself was the enemy. As he writes his last letter to Timothy, we sense that the apostle knows his end is near. He had already had a first hearing, at which he records sorrowfully not one of his friends was prepared to give evidence on his behalf (2 Timothy 4:16). He begs Timothy to come to him quickly, for only the faithful Luke was left with him, and he knew it was time to say goodbye. In spite of his dismal prospects, his faith was firm and his courage undimmed.

“The time of my departure has come” he declares “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that a Day” (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Nero, the unrighteous judge, would condemn him to die, but Jesus, Paul’s master, had “abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

One morning, the sun hot on his face and the wind rustling in the trees at the roadside, the aged apostle would be led from his dark prison cell into the green countryside outside the walls of Rome. His Roman citizenship ensured a swift death by the sword.

At last those weary feet, that ready pen, the tongue that had lifted thousands from a life of sin and death to the hope of the gospel, were stilled in the sleep of death. But Paul’s work went on. His indomitable spirit had laid the foundation on which others would build. In time the gospel preachers would press westward and north into Europe. By the power of the printing press, his words would bring light to a circle far wider than his original readership, and through translation men and women “from all tribes and peoples and tongues” would embrace the truth for which he lived and died.

We come at the end of the queue. The time of which Paul wrote, that Day when the Judge will come to give him his reward is drawing very near. Let us make sure we grasp the gift of the gospel, brought to us at such cost, with both hands, now, while we still have the chance. The crown which Jesus brings will be given, Paul promised “not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). This is the challenge we leave with you as our study draws to its close.

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