

Acts - Commentaries by Thomas Leslie Mather

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 9: The Journey of Saul of Tarsus (9:1-31)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 9:1-31)

If in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word should be established, Jerusalem was the place to leave. Stephen leaves it, being cast out of the city for stoning; the Ethiopian eunuch leaves it, finding nothing there, and is saved in the desert. Now Saul of Tarsus leaves it, thinking to return with believers bound for trial and prison. But he does not return. He goes to Damascus, a converted and penitent man.

Saul of Tarsus—the Man and His Background

The question arises, who is this man, and how did he get to Jerusalem in the first place? He refers to himself as “a Jew of Tarsus, a citizen of no mean city” 21:39 and further proclaims himself a Roman citizen 22:25-29. The Lord Himself called him “Saul of Tarsus.” In the Acts he is known by two names Saul, his Jewish name, and Paul, one of his three Roman names, but the only one given us in Scripture.

He grew up in Tarsus, a city whose roots are sunk in the remote past. Josephus, the Jewish historian, interprets the Tarshish of Gen. 10:4 as Tarsus. “The sons of Javan” in the passage just cited were the earliest of the Greek settlers and traders.¹ Over the centuries the city was also subject to the Oriental influence, and finally to the Roman.

The city had excellent engineers who took full advantage of its topography and general location. About two miles from the city, which is situated on a level plain, the ground rises gently until the hills merge into the mineral rich Taurus mountains. Out of the Taurus range runs the Cygnus river, which divided the city in two, in Saul’s days, as it flowed on to the open sea. The engineers of Tarsus built a harbor to regulate sea commerce, locating it on a natural lake several miles from the city, so it was safe from pirates. At a later date they made a cut through the mountains known as the Cilician Gates, to open up trade with the countries of the East. Employment was afforded, and wealth created, by the mines in the Taurus mountains, whose metals, in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, were exported abroad see Ezek. 27:12, Jer. 10:9. With a sound industrial and trading base Tarsus and its hill country supported a population of 500,000 people in ancient times. This opulence enabled Tarsus to establish a university, which ranked with Athens and Alexandria as a celebrated seat of learning in the Roman Empire. This then was the city Saul grew up in as a boy.

Here he learned to make tents from the hair of the goats in the surrounding plain. Every Jewish boy was taught a trade as insurance against adversity in later life. From his father, a strict Pharisee, he absorbed his Jewish religious education. Then, still a boy, he departed for Jerusalem and the famous Rabbinical schools. Writing of this later he remarks “my manner of life from my youth which was at the first among my own nation² know all the Jews, who knew me from the beginning” 26:4. Other than this all is conjecture. Did he shuttle back and forth between Jerusalem and Tarsus? Did he acquire at the University of Tarsus, or somewhere else, that fluent knowledge of Greek he displayed in his speech at Athens and in his epistles that command of Latin befitting a Roman Citizen? Was his family wealthy since Athenodorus had disenfranchised the citizens without property in Tarsus? He had a sister who later married, and several relatives mentioned by name in Romans 16. He served God from his forefathers, so that a tradition of piety was in the family. What we are sure of beyond a doubt is that the end result of a long education at the feet of Gamaliel, the greatest of all the Rabbis³ was that he became a learned Rabbi himself. He “profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in my own nation, being exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers” Gal. 1:14.

This zeal confirmed his tribal connection, for he was of the tribe of Benjamin, of which it was written “Benjamin shall ravine as a wolf” Gen. 49:27.4 He “gave his voice against them” the Jewish believers when his persecuting zeal brought them to trial. This indicated that he had by this time a vote in the judicial proceedings. His persecuting zeal did not commence at Damascus it ended there. For he says “I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Nazareth which thing I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the Chief Priests, and when they were put to death, I voted against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them as far as foreign cities” —26:9-11.

In the eyes of the Chief Priests here was a man who could truly be trusted as the persecutor of the Church. To his other qualities was added the energy of youth, for he is described as “a young man” at Stephen’s death. This expression had a definite meaning to a Jew in Saul’s position. Under thirty years a man was not considered mature enough to enter into divine service. This was based on the scripture “from thirty years old and upward even until fifty years old, all that enter into the host to do the work in the tent of meeting” —Num 4:3. So it was with the commencement of the Lord’s own ministry “and Jesus Himself began to be about thirty years of age” —Luke 3:23. Thus Saul in age and otherwise was ideally fitted to serve the religion of the Jews. Unknown to them, however, he was burdened by the testimony of the Lord’s ministry in Israel, the witness of Stephen, and that calm in the face of death which the believers displayed. If he could not dismiss his internal conflicts he could at least stamp out the outward expression of the trouble by persecuting the believers whose message he hated.

A Light From Heaven

The life principle of the new body we will receive at the Lord’s coming is spirit —1 Cor. 15:44, but the life principle of our present Adam bodies is breath—Gen. 2:7. So what Saul was as a natural man expresses itself in “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” Polish a man, educate him, refine him ever so much, still the same hatred of God will come out as in Saul’s case. What is inside must come out. Threatenings and slaughter were breathed out by Saul and the Council—Christ shone in Stephen’s face.

As Saul journeyed he came near his destination—Damascus. “And suddenly there shined round about him a light out of heaven. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul why persecutest thou Me? And he said, who art Thou, Lord? And the Lord said I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise up . . . and it shall be told thee what thou must do” —9:3-5. With the spiritual insight of later years Paul looks back on this incident and links it to the fall of the old creation and God coming into it as light. “And the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep.” Well might he fall to the earth, taking his place in death and judgment. The Great Light had exposed him for what he really was in spite of all his religious pretension—not only in a state of ruin, but in darkness—the Scriptural term for ignorance of God. Remembering his ruined state before his conversion he writes to the Corinthians later, comparing it to the fall of the creation in Gen. 1:2 but light from God shining forth to begin a new work in his darkened soul . . . “for God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, for the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” —2 Cor. 4:6. On the face of the deep was darkness—on the face of Jesus Christ light. God had commanded “let there be light” and a heavenly light now shone into his darkened soul on the road to Damascus. His was a lightning conversion. What takes years, sometimes, with other men, was almost instantaneous with Saul. He had seen “the shining forth” on Stephen’s face—the light he now saw must shine forth from his face. His question is “what wilt Thou have me to do?” Paul’s Ephesian epistle, the highest Christian truth, never reached higher than the note on which he started—the will of God. He describes himself at the opening of that epistle as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” Today we cannot ask the Lord to reveal His will as directly as Paul did, so a good prayer for all of us is “teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art My God” —Ps. 143:10.

The will of the Lord in connection with Saul had already been expressed in the sight and words of a glorified Christ. Therefore, the Lord’s words “rise and go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do” should not be viewed as the complete answer to his question. It was direction for the short term, which was needed, not for the larger question of that great ministry for which he was not yet ready. He needed divine instruction in the desert of Arabia before he could be sent forth to represent the Lord as the great apostle of the Gentiles. For the present he was to receive his sight, be filled with the Holy Spirit and be baptized—v. 17, 18. Before the servant had even posed the question the Lord had revealed His will in connection with his entire ministry. This was “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” —the gospel of a Man in the glory—peculiarly Paul’s gospel, and the doctrine of the one body—that is, that Christ and His members below—believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, are all one body. The members are on the earth—the head of the body, Christ, is in heaven. Note how the Lord conveyed this truth to Saul. He did not say “why persecutest thou My disciples?” No. He said “why persecutest thou Me?” Saul did not immediately grasp the import of these words for he replied, “who art Thou Lord?” Again, he gets the answer “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” There could be no mistaking the meaning of these words. Christ and those who believe in Him are united in one mystical body. In persecuting those believers Saul was persecuting Christ, who suffered when His members suffered.

Saul is trembling and astonished at what he saw; his companions speechless at what they heard. They lead him by the hand, for he is now blind, to the house of Judas in Damascus, located on the street significantly called Straight. “And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.” How awful must have been his agony of soul as, sightless, he thought of his path up to the time when he realized the Shekinah glory of the God of Israel had shone round about him.

The Enemy of the Lord

Saul of Tarsus united in his person two characters of the enemies of the Lord given to us in type in the Old Testament—Shimei and Saul. We see from the expression “yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord” what these two characters were. Shimei cursed David; Saul threw a javelin at him. Saul of Tarsus did both to the glorified Man he met on the road to Damascus, in threatening and persecuting the believers who were one with Him. Let us now see how these two types find their fulfillment in the life of Saul of Tarsus.

The second chapter of 1 Kings, verses 35-46 gives us a picture of Solomon on the throne, but Shimei, the man who had cursed his father David, still alive. This exactly corresponds to the Lord’s position when Saul of Tarsus was the persecutor of the Church. Stephen saw Him in the glory. Of this Paul later writes “but now we see not yet all things put under Him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor” Heb. 2:8-9. This interim position of the Lord Jesus Christ—on the throne, crowned with glory and honor, but all things not put under Him, answered to His exalted glory when He encountered Saul of Tarsus going to Damascus. But it is not until Shimei is slain that the kingdom is established in the hand of Solomon—1 Ki. 2:46. Prophetically this is future, when God will deal with rebellious Israel. For the present we will relate it to Saul of Tarsus for “Thy commandment is exceeding broad” —Ps. 119:96.

Shimei is summoned to appear before the King. There he is charged “build yourself an house in Jerusalem and dwell there and do not go out from there to any place. For it shall be, that on the day you go out . . . you shall surely die” —v. 36:37. Now Saul, unknown to himself, was building “an house in Jerusalem.” He thought it was God’s house because he had ignored the Lord’s words “your house is left unto you desolate.” The Ethiopian eunuch had gone up to it and was returning empty, but in grace God met his needs in the desert. Yes, it was well for the Ethiopian eunuch to leave Jerusalem and to spread the glad tidings in his own country. But it was not well for Saul of Tarsus, the real Shimei, to leave Jerusalem to stop the preaching of the glad tidings. God wanted Judaism confined— “build yourself an house in Jerusalem and dwell there, and go not out from there” —but He wanted Christianity to spread. But stop! Saul of Tarsus will resist the Divine will. Like Shimei he leaves Jerusalem and for the same purpose! Two of Shimei’s servants, seeking their freedom, run away to another king. Shimei was content to stay in Jerusalem as Saul was, until his servants obtained their freedom. The Jew was under the bondage of the law until Christianity freed him. The early Christians fled to another King. But Saul of Tarsus, like Shimei, would not hear of that. Both of them went out of Jerusalem to bring back their servants. Damascus was not the only expedition Saul made for this purpose. How well did the words of Solomon to Shimei fit his case “thou knowest all the wickedness of which thy heart is conscious” —1 Ki. 2:44. On the road to Damascus he had been exposed as an enemy of the Lord, and as he wrote later “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” —Heb. 10:31. This is exemplified in the treatment of the beast and false prophet, the last of God’s enemies— “these both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone” —Rev. 19:20. What spared Saul from such a fate then, seeing he was the first great enemy of the glorified Christ? It was the prayer of Stephen “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” uttered in the presence of Saul of Tarsus.

Because of Stephen’s prayer the Lord now treats him as David treated “the household of Saul” —the very one whose name he bears. David says “Is there not any of the house of Saul that I may show the kindness of God to him?” —2 Sam. 9:3. Mephibosheth is found, one of Saul’s

grandsons, who was living in LO-Debar—the place of no pasture. He was lame on both his feet because his nurse took him up at five years old in great haste so that he fell, and became lame—2 Sam. 4:4. So with Saul, nursed in the Jewish system, fleeing from the true David, yet summoned into his presence, not like Shimei before Solomon to be killed, but to be blest— “And David said unto him ‘Fear not . . . thou shalt eat bread at my table continually’” —2 Sam. 9:7. This completes the typical teaching concerning Saul of Tarsus—an enemy of the Lord brought before the Lord for blessing, to eat bread continually at the King’s table.

While Saul’s mind was saturated with the Holy Scriptures to an infinitely greater degree than the reader’s or the writer’s it is doubtful if thoughts such as these entered it during his three-day vigil. But deep repentance, the terrible realization that he was an enemy of the Lord, surely did. “Why persecutest thou Me?” must have echoed and reechoed through his mind, as blind, and without food or drink, he waited on the Lord. At the end of the exercise we find him praying. To whom was he praying, you ask? Ah! not to the Father, I think. It is doubtful that he knew Him yet. His ministry starts where Stephen’s ends. Where did Stephen’s ministry end? By praying to Jesus— “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen cried “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” Does anyone ever pray to the Lord Jesus without being heard? Oh no. Saul’s sin was not charged to him because of Stephen’s prayer. Saul is now on his knees praying. We are not told what he prayed about, but Jesus heard him. He will ready one of His humble servants for the task of laying on his hands that Saul may receive his sight. An apostle could not do this for the character of Saul’s ministry must be established at the beginning—that is that he is not to receive from the other apostles, but from the Lord Himself. And in this act, he receives from the Lord, working through a member of His body—Ananias. This quiet, humble, unobtrusive man of God has been marked out to visit Saul of Tarsus.

The Three Visions

Three visions are given us in connection with Saul’s conversion, which have a common teaching; one vision for Peter in the next chapter with four mentions, but a common teaching. The seven mentions, grouped in the familiar four and three,⁵ give us a perfect insight into the mind of God here. Saul’s first vision is of a glorified Christ. His second vision is of Ananias coming in. What a beautiful vision. It is the emphasizing of the truth of the first vision “why persecutest thou Me?” for Christ and Ananias are one. But the vision doesn’t stop there. Still blind, he sees Ananias putting his hand on him that he may see. So! Christ, Ananias and Saul are to be joined together in one body. Hard as this would be for Saul to see, it would be still harder for Ananias, in view of Saul’s record.

Ananias and Saul are brought together through a third vision. In the Acts there are several visions, but those who have them are connected either with Peter or Paul. Thus Ananias and Paul each have a vision in the ninth chapter; Cornelius and Peter in the tenth chapter. The visions of Ananias and Cornelius both precede those of Paul and Peter, although distinctly linked to them. A vision is given to help you see something which you don’t understand naturally. The purpose of these visions is to link men, who are separated from each other for various reasons—thought, feeling, distance, religious prejudice. Thus Ananias remonstrates with the Lord about seeing Saul of Tarsus, even though a beautiful nearness and intimacy are displayed in his words. In a practical sense Saul needed a vision for he was three days without sight. Peter even said, “not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” He was too full of Jewish prejudice to turn his second key to the kingdom of the heavens without a vision. God gave these visions to His servants to remove their mental blocks.

Ananias obeyed the vision, entered the house and put his hands on him and said “brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, who appeared to you in the way as you came, has sent me, that you might receive your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight, and rose, and was baptized.” This is the first mention of a brother in the Lord in the Acts.⁶ It was what was to constitute Paul’s ministry—not alone as we so often find Peter, but linked with his brethren. His was to be the ministry of the Church—the collective thing—hence “brother Saul.” And what grace on Ananias’ part to call the ravager of the brethren a brother in the Lord—one of them. He well earned the name. This man who ravined like a wolf later writes of himself “but we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children” —1 Thess. 2:7.

Next Ananias tells Saul that he knew about the Lord appearing to him although the record of the vision does not disclose this. Similarly, Ananias does not tell him in the record that he was a chosen vessel unto the Lord, “to bear My Name before the Gentiles, and Kings and the children of Israel.” A chosen vessel he surely was as we have seen in the story of his educational and cultural background, absolutely essential in view of those before whom he would stand in testimony. Some have facetiously remarked that the Acts should be termed ‘the Acts of the Apostle’ (meaning Paul) rather than the Acts of the Apostles. Now it is true that there are more than twice as many references to Paul as to Peter in the Acts and the book is predominantly full of Paul’s doings. But God has assembled the Acts with perfect symmetry between the two apostles. He is careful to assert His impartiality. Peter’s doings are less than Paul’s because the Jews judged themselves unworthy of eternal life forcing God to turn to the Gentiles. Peter is the Apostle to the Jews, Paul to the Gentiles, and God loves all men be they Jew or Gentile.

Does the reader wonder why the Lord deprived Saul of his sight only to restore it? Could it not be that God allows a man to be plunged into darkness when his ways are against Him— “who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness?” —Prov 2:13. But “His eyes are upon the ways of men, and He seeth all his goings” —Job 34:21. Notice how differently the gospel affected the Ethiopian eunuch—he went on his way rejoicing. Not so Paul. He fully recognizes the enormity of his crimes for he describes himself later as “the chief of sinners.” The ploughing of his conscience is a divine work—the furrows are deep indeed—three days without sight, food or drink. But the Lord now returns with restoring mercy after the three-day period. Ananias not only restores Saul’s sight, but by the laying on of his hands causes Saul to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is most remarkable since none could give the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands except the Apostles. The explanation is that Ananias received a direct commission from the Lord Himself to do so—v. 12. Peter and Paul are the only men named by name as “filled with the Holy Spirit” —Peter in 4:8 Paul here.⁷

Saul is baptized. This act cuts him off from Israel. It is a public thing. He is now publicly identified with a dead and risen Christ, cut off from his old associations and brought into the circle of Christian blessing particularly the Lord’s Supper. Baptism marks change of state. It is an admission that the life he had in Adam has ended in death and judgment—our position on immersion—and that all life is in the Son of God—our position on being taken out of the water. It is an acknowledgment of a condition and a change of position.

Confession of Christ and Preparation for Future Ministry

In John 9 the Jews expelled the blind man from the synagogue for confessing that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. It is beautiful to see God's answer to that—He sends a man who was once blind into the synagogue to replace him and preach the same message. Paul's vast knowledge of the Scriptures, dormant until harnessed by light from God, now confounds the Jews at Damascus. He proves that Jesus really is the Christ.

At this point there is a break in the story of Saul's life which is not disclosed in our chapter. The connection is in the epistle to the Galatians—"but when it pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me . . . immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood. Neither went I up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus." Now we pick up the thread of our narrative in the Acts again. His testimony at Damascus is refused and the Jews get ready to kill him, "after many days were fulfilled." "Many days" in this passage means a period of three years⁸ which agrees with the Apostle's own account of the duration of his stay in Arabia. In the Epistle to the Galatians Paul writes "then after three years⁹ I went up to Jerusalem" —Gal. 1:17. His leaving Damascus to go up to Jerusalem was a humbling experience, for the brethren let him down the city wall in a basket. This may be a figure of the still deeper humiliation he was soon to feel from the brethren where he was going for they did not forget his past. Be that as it may, what a real humiliation for a man who had been in the full favor of the Sanhedrin only a few years ago. The method of his deliverance, too, is in contrast with Peter's. Peter is let out of jail by an angel. That is Jewish—7:53—and that kind of deliverance was quite in keeping for the Apostle to the Jews. Paul is the man of faith who walks by faith and not by sight. So his brethren are used to rescue him. He flees to Jerusalem but there his doctrine of the unity of all believers is put to the supreme test. The disciples are afraid of him. Imagine too, his plight at mixing in the society of people whose relatives and friends he had caused to be put to death. Poor Saul! Here is a situation more humbling than being lowered in a basket. It seems he is an outcast in both the world and the church. But Barnabas intervenes, bringing him to the Apostles. His received doctrine of the unity of the body is proved true in practice. God knows who is true and who is false. He goes in and out with the Apostles but does not receive teaching from them. He is "Paul, an Apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead" —Gal. 1:1. No doubt he familiarized them with his meditations in Arabia where his rich mind, stored with the Holy Scriptures, now understood for the first time the types and foreshadowings of Christ locked in them. Then he turns the tables on the Hellenists. They had disputed with Stephen—now he disputes with them. The result is the same though, they go about to slay him. The brethren discover the plot and bring him down to Caesarea, the seat of Roman rule, and from there to Tarsus, his native city. Here he may live in a free city under the protection of his Roman citizenship.

A Summary of Saul's Journey

In the many details of Saul's conversion, the reader may have missed the broad view—that what we have been considering is the Great Journey of Saul of Tarsus, as the Lord terms him in the vision. His journey started at Tarsus and ended at Tarsus, so the wheel came full circle. That is why the record of his conversion starts with the statement "and as he journeyed." But what a journey! It took him from Tarsus to Jerusalem for his theological education. Then from Jerusalem to the road to Damascus for the beginning of his divine education, then to the solitude of the Arabian desert for its completion. Then back to Damascus, where he tasted death from his first entrance there without sight, food or drink for three days—to his departure, when the Jews consulted to kill him. Then like Eliezer of Damascus who sought a bride for the risen man, he preaches Christ as Son of God.¹⁰ Then on to Jerusalem to contend for the truth in the very place Stephen laid down his life—and finally back to his home city state—Tarsus. The Roman Empire was tolerant to Christianity for about a generation, at which time conversions became so numerous as to challenge the state sponsored religion. Then the climate changed. Now, however, Saul is free to witness for Christ in familiar surroundings—family, friends, neighbours. The Lord willed it that way. "And when he comes home he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them rejoice with me" —Luke 15:6. He is thought to have dwelt eight years at Tarsus until Barnabas summoned him to Antioch.¹¹

As for the Jews no fresh persecutor seems to have been raised up to replace Saul. The story of his conversion is rounded out by this beautiful verse "then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied."

Saul too had rest. It might be thought that this great journey which we have just described was but the first of many, since we are all aware of his missionary travels. But Scripture does not use words carelessly. Saul is never again described as journeying after he met Christ on the road to Damascus. That was the end of his journeying for there he found rest for his soul.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 7: Stephen-The Witness of the Holy Spirit to the Council (6:8-15)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 6:8-15; Chapter 7)

The beautiful Christ-like character of Stephen now comes before us. Nearly twenty centuries have rolled by, the generations have come and gone, but this man, unknown to the world, is yet well known to God and to the saints. He being dead yet speaks. The man who serves the world is soon forgotten. Read Hebrews 11 and see how God never forgets those who serve Him—whose names are written in the book of life.

Stephen was one of seven men of God chosen by the people "whom they set before the Apostles, and having prayed, they laid their hands on them" —6:6. He is further singled out by being mentioned first among the seven, and called "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." This faith soon finds a practical outlet—"and Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." It is for doing these good deeds that Stephen is brought before the Council, just as it was for doing a good deed on the lame man that Peter and John were brought before the Council. But there is a difference. The Sanhedrin itself had arrested the Apostles; here the opposition arises at lower levels of society—in the synagogues. Thus all Jewish society unites to show its hatred of the Name of Christ. It is not Stephen they hate but Christ shining out through Stephen. When the Lord was on earth He said to the Jews—"many good works have I showed you from My Father; for which of those works do ye stone Me?" John 10:32. The same Jews are about to stone Stephen for working the works of God. Furthermore they clearly demonstrate that they are of their father the devil for the Lord said "he is a liar and the father of it" —John 8:44. For they hire men to commit perjury, bringing false accusations against Stephen when they find "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by

which he spake.” The Spirit by which he spake was the Holy Spirit.

The Accusations Against Stephen

Two sets of false accusations are levelled against Stephen. The first accusations are designed to stir up the people so he can be seized and brought to the Council. The second accusations are the formal charges laid before the Council.

The first accusations speak for themselves— “we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and God.” Note the order here—Moses first, then God. These are rabble rousing words, not supported by facts. But the accusations serve their purpose— “they stirred up the people, and the elders and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the Council.” The men who do this work are hired to commit perjury. They seem to be distinct from the men who level the accusations before the Council.

The accusations before the Council form the basis of Stephen’s unjust trial. The Holy Spirit describes them thus— “for we have heard him saying that this Jesus the Nazarean shall destroy this place and change the customs which Moses taught us.” What a past master of deceit Satan is. The first accusations are specifically designed to foment unrest amongst the people, and the elders and the scribes. The second accusations are aimed at those who have a vested interest in “this holy place” and are already trembling at the way Christianity is threatening it. Since the High Priest is the president of the Sanhedrin Stephen’s trial opens with the High Priest’s words— “are these things then so?” He is inviting Stephen to plead guilty or defend himself.

Stephen’s Defense

The attention of the Council is fixed on Stephen, whose face is as the face of an angel—the outward expression of Who is within, for he is filled with the Holy Spirit. Unlike the false witnesses who put Moses before God, Stephen starts with God—the God of glory. He asks them to listen to him at the start of his address but at the end they stop their ears so they cannot hear him. Then he prays to the Lord who does hear him. His prayer “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” is answered later when God saves one of his murderers—Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen’s opening thrust is that any blessing they had came from God, not from or through them or their fathers. It was the God of glory who appeared to their father Abraham. And when, and where? When he was in Mesopotamia before he dwelt in Charan. In other words, he was an idolater. God had to call him out of that. As to the land in which they now dwell God gave him no inheritance in it. Not only that but his seed was under bondage to the Egyptians. It took the strong right arm of the Lord to deliver them from this—they could not do it. Then the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt, as they themselves had delivered Christ to the Gentiles. Even Pilate knew that it was for envy the Jews had delivered Jesus to him—see Mat. 27:18. Thus Stephen disposes of the charge that he spake blasphemous words against the law. This is their history he is reciting. They cannot deny it. And this part of it all took place before the law.

Were they any better under law then? Not if their treatment of Moses, the law giver, was any indication. “He supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not” —v. 55. “This Moses whom they refused, saying who made you a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush” —v. 35. Well, after God delivered them out of Egypt, brought them through the Red Sea and into the desert, did they listen to Moses? Not a bit— “to whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt” —v. 39. They worshipped a golden calf, then took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of their god Remphan—v. 43. Thus, it was not Stephen who spoke blasphemous words against Moses, but their fathers. Indeed, the whole thrust of what Stephen is saying is lost if we do not see that he is accusing them of treating Christ as their fathers treated Joseph and Moses. Their fathers had sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver—Gen. 37:28; they had sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver. Christ was willing to lead them out, but the Scriptures we have just quoted concerning their father’s rejection of Moses apply equally to their rejection of Christ. Christ is now glorified and willing to come back to them, but they will not have Him whom they sold.

Only one more charge remains unanswered now—that Stephen spoke blasphemous words against “this holy place” and that “this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place. So Stephen recites the origin of the Temple. This, rather than the teachings of Abraham and Moses, is the real trust of the nation. Stephen connects the Temple with the Tabernacle. The reason for this is that the house of God is one house in Scripture, regardless of the passage of time or the forms it may take, for it is God’s dwelling place. It starts with the Tabernacle in the desert. Then in the land “Solomon built Him an house.” Regardless of the destruction of that Temple and later reconstructions, the Temple of Stephen’s day is still what it was in the beginning. So, if Stephen says that “this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place” had not He done so before, when they magnified the building but defiled it with their sins, forgetting who dwelt in their midst? How conclusive, then, is his final thrust, destroying the last accusation “but the Most High dwells not in (places) made with hands, as says the prophet, the heaven (is) My throne and the earth the footstool of My feet; what house will ye build Me? saith the Lord, or where is the place of My rest? Has not My hand made all these things?”

Stephen has met all the accusations levied against him. So he turns from the defense to the attack if indeed we can call his vigorous, Spirit-spoken words defense at all. He has already reminded them that God had given the covenant of circumcision to Abraham. Now he points out that only the form of things is important to them for they are uncircumcised in heart and ears and are resisting the Holy Spirit like their fathers before them. They are no different from their fathers whose sad history he has just recounted. If their fathers persecuted and killed the prophets they had betrayed and murdered the Just One of whom Moses said, “a prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me Him shall ye hear.” Finally, they had received the law as ordained by the ministry of angels and had not kept it.

Stephen Sees a Glorified Christ

Rage marks the Council blind rage. It is hatred against God that causes them to gnash their teeth, as those in hell will do later. Stephen has more than answered the High Priest’s opening question “are these things then so?” In contrast to them, Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus, standing on the right hand of God.”

The Council steadfastly look on Stephen and see his face as it had been the face of an angel. Would they know why? It is that Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit, looks up steadfastly into heaven, and sees the glory of God and Jesus. Stephen had begun with “the God of glory”; he ends with “the glory of God.” But Jesus is that the “brightness of His glory, and the express image of His Person” Heb. 1:3. Once before God had opened the heavens at the Lord’s baptism in the river Jordan where the Father had said “Thou art My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” That opening of the heavens was in the days of the Lord’s flesh. But just as the heavens were opened on that Man in humiliation even so are they opened on that Man in glory. Now the question arises will the Jews who rejected Jesus in His humiliation add sin to sin by rejecting that Man whom God the Father has glorified?

This question is not posed idly. Weight is given to it by Jesus standing. People would grasp the meaning of this long ago more easily than we do now, because in those days a man sat down at leisure and stood to work. Another instance where Scripture assumes that we know this is found in the tabernacle in the wilderness. There were no seats in the tabernacle. Why? Because the work of the priests was never done, the blood of bulls and goats not being able to purge sins. So because Jesus is still standing the implication is clear. Even now He will come back to the nation from the glory if they will have Him. This was Peter’s promise to them in 3:20 “and He shall send Jesus Christ, who before was preached to you.” When they stoned Stephen Jesus sat down figuratively of course. How do we know He sat down that is that He was through with Israel now? Because Scripture says so. Read Rev. 3:21 and you will see that He is seated today on His Father’s throne not His own for He is not ruling yet. The important point is that He is seated now.

Stephen’s Martyrdom

Christ can be seen in Stephen. If it had been otherwise, he would not have been hated. Listen to the Lord’s own words “but His citizens hated Him, and sent a message after Him saying we will not have this Man to reign over us” Luke 19:14. The message they sent after Him that is after He had ascended to the glory, was delivered by the stoning of Stephen. It was when Stephen spoke of Him at the right hand of God that is, the place of power, rule, and authority, that they delivered the message “we will not have This Man to reign over us.” Truly they would acknowledge no king but Caesar.

Stephen’s death has striking parallels with the Lord’s in some respects. Jesus was crucified outside the city; Stephen was stoned outside it. The Lord had delivered His spirit to His Father; Stephen asks the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. The Lord said, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” at the cross; Stephen says “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” And so “the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed” —22:20. It is recorded that devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him. While godly sorrow is in order when a loved one is taken, it is wrong to lament like that at the funeral of a believer today. But that is because of the greater light we have from the epistles of the man referred to here as Saul, who consented to Stephen’s death. And that in turn is because Stephen prayed for him before he fell asleep in Jesus.

Stephen As the Bridge Between Judaism and Christianity

The death of Stephen took place in the presence of Saul of Tarsus. On the road to Damascus Saul saw the Man in the glory and his ministry began; when Stephen saw the Man in the glory his ministry ended. But Saul’s time is not yet. Before he can come into the picture, as it were, Peter must turn the other key the Lord gave him. He let the Jews into the kingdom of the heavens at Pentecost—next he must let the Gentiles in at the meeting with Cornelius. The kingdom of the heavens must not be confused with the Church—which will be Paul’s ministry at a later date.

Stephen comes in between the two great Apostles, as a bridge or transition point. Peter was the Apostle to the Jews. But since the Jews are guilty of a double rejection of Christ, the Holy Spirit will now go to the Gentiles. Nor does He wait even for Peter to turn his second key. In the very next chapter Philip preaches to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. And that chapter begins with the persecutions of Saul who is soon to be converted and become more prominent than Peter.

Stephen is also a bridge between two centers. Judaism was a worldly religion and had an earthly center—the Temple at Jerusalem. Christianity is heavenly and has a heavenly center—the glory of God and Jesus, whom Stephen saw in the opened heavens. Actually, the Acts is the story of the journey between two earthly centers—Jerusalem and Rome—with the new heavenly center in between largely given up at the end. The Book of Acts commences at Jerusalem which was God’s earthly center at the time. It ends at Rome, which was to become the devil’s earthly center—a masterpiece of counterfeiting.

But it is well to see that the heavens were opened so that Stephen could see the new center—Christ in heavenly glory. This is the great truth that Satan has opposed from the beginning—that the believer has no center in this world at all—be it Jerusalem, Rome, or any other place. We are heavenly men by birth and must not settle down here. May we like Stephen realize our heavenly calling, our heavenly citizenship. Gazing on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face we will then be transformed according to the same image from glory to glory. And one day we shall reach the glory and see His face.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 6: The Council and the Church Again (5:17-42)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 5:17-42; 6:1-7)

The Apostle Paul writes “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; overthrowing reasonings and every high thing that lifts itself up against the knowledge of God” 2 Cor. 10:4. In the record of the Acts so far five thousand “strongholds” have been pulled down but warfare continues against the “high things” in Israel opposed to the knowledge of God. The high priests and rulers of the people are also opposed to the will of God, which the same Apostle connects with the raising of Jesus Christ from among the dead in his Ephesian epistle, and to the exceeding greatness of His power. In mighty energy the Holy Spirit turns to the world, striking at such manifestations of Satan’s power as sickness, unclean spirits, etc. The wrath of the high priest at these workings of God is very

great. It is important to see the meaning of these signs. When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He personally worked such works of God. But He returned to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit down. The signs of power in Acts are the proofs that another divine person is present that is the Holy Spirit for sin, disease, and death are inconsistent with the presence of God see Rev. 21:3,4.

It is the power of God, the will of God, the spread of the knowledge of God that the High Priests, Sadducees, and rulers of the people are resisting. They have authority but no power; the apostles power but no authority that man will recognize. When the Lord was on earth it was the chief priests and elders who persuaded the rabble to free Barabbas and destroy Jesus see Mat. 27:20. The chief priests had set guards over His grave. Now the Sadducees, the avowed enemies of the Pharisees, oppose the doctrine of His resurrection. When Christ is in question, men who are enemies will make common cause against Him. Pilate and Herod did too see Luke 23:12.

What agitates them now is the mounting evidence that the Apostles' work and testimony is of God. If it is of God, why is He not working through them, the official religious leaders of the people? They do not want divine power and authority to pass out of their hands into the hands of others. But they are no longer morally qualified to act for God. Apart from their dreadful blood guilt it is evident that they are instruments not of God, but of Satan. It is not without meaning that Satan took the Lord to the pinnacle of the Temple in the temptation. He knows the seat of his power in the world. On the other hand, God has not disowned the Temple completely even though "their house" will eventually be desolate. But the religious leaders and rulers of the people are only governed by whatever restraint public opinion imposes upon their lusts—see 5:26. Public opinion is now much more favorable to the Apostles than when they had seized them in Chapter 4. Multitudes have been healed in Jerusalem. Not only that but they have streamed into Jerusalem from outlying parts and have been healed and blessed.

The religious leaders do not want to see the Spirit of God working. Having been forced by the evidence to concede that the power with which God is working is faith in the Name of Jesus, fear must have gripped them in the interim between the two councils. This turns to wrath—literally 'jealousy' as 'envy'—against the Apostles. The Council is also infuriated at being charged with the responsibility for Jesus' death and now it is being taught that God has raised Him from the dead. So the Apostles are put in the common prison—whereas previously Peter and John had only been put in ward —4:3.

The Words of This Life

But it is not the will of God that the blessing to man which the gospel affords should be shut off by their actions. The angel of the Lord opens the prison doors and charges them "go, stand and speak in the Temple to the people all the words of this life." This they do, early in the morning. The angel's order told them what to do—the Lord's example told them how to do it. This is by preaching and teaching. Teaching is prominent in the Acts. Now we cannot teach others unless we ourselves have been taught. Divine instruction comes from being in the presence of the Lord, for He is our Teacher—John 20:16. So the Apostles are qualified teachers of the Word from being in the Lord's presence when He was on earth—Paul from being in the Lord's presence in heaven. Their education in divine things came from the supreme source—God Himself. The chief priests, on the other hand, have human instruction but no divine teaching. It was the Lord's teaching that made the chief priests "the more fierce" before Pilate. And it is reference to the Lord's teaching with which the Acts opens up— "all things that Jesus began to do and to teach." The connection between preaching and teaching is often forgotten today. But the Sanhedrin recognized its importance when they commanded the Apostles not to speak at all, nor to teach, in the Name of Jesus. It is rightful disobedience of this edict that brings the Apostles before that body.

The High Priest convenes a meeting of the Council and instructs the Temple police to release the Apostles from prison for trial. But the officers report that "the prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the guards standing outside before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within. Now when the High Priest and the Captain of the Temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. Then came one and told them saying, Behold the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the Temple, and teaching the people" —v. 23-25. What consternation this news brings to the assembly of the wicked!

The Temple and the Prison

Outward beauty characterizes the Temple—its beautiful gate speaks of that—but power characterizes the new life—the prison doors are opened. Yet what a contrast between the Temple, which, even with its limitations is still owned by God, and the prison. The Temple, viewed symbolically, speaks of God's power—the prison of Satan's. The veil of the Temple has been rent but because man will not acknowledge who did it, he is like the man at the beautiful gate powerless to go in. He has no power to go in the Temple or go out of the prison. The Apostles have both.

The observant reader cannot fail to notice the emphasis laid throughout these passages on the Temple. God has not given it up as yet. Though Satan has usurped power in it as he does later in the Church, it is still the Temple of God. The emphasis on this is most marked. Peter and John had gone up together to the Temple at the hour of prayer and healed the lame man. Peter then seized the opportunity to preach in the Temple. These signs are given to show that God the Holy Spirit is present and working, and to testify to Israel that God has raised Jesus from among the dead. At this period the gospel is confined to Israel. Peter even said that God would send Jesus back to them if they would repent 3:20. The angel instructed the Apostles when he released them "go, stand and speak in the Temple to the people, all the words of this life" 5:20. And the final triumph is that the Apostles teach and preach daily in the Temple after the Council has done its worst.

Ever eager to stop the work of the Lord, Satan had sought to imprison the channels of divine power. But the great lesson here is that he can no longer do so. The Lord alluded to that when He said, "how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house" Mat. 12:29. Satan is the strong man, the Lord Jesus the stronger Man. "From heaven did the Lord behold the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to loose those that are appointed to death, to declare the Name of the Lord in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem" Ps. 102:19-21. Some of this may well apply to a future day, but none can deny that it was partially fulfilled in these pristine days of the Assembly of God at Jerusalem.

Peter Before the Sanhedrin

Fearing that if they use force the people will stone them, the Temple police escort the Apostles quietly to the Council. As soon as they are present the High Priest questions them “did we not straitly command you that ye should not teach in this Name? And behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood upon us” v. 25-28. The famed Sanhedrin of the Jews is in no mood to tolerate any questioning of its authority.

The angel had told the Apostles to preach to the people the words of this life. But the words Peter has for the Council are of a different nature. It is his last appearance before the Sanhedrin. That a man like Peter, a fisherman by trade, can address such a learned body in such impressive surroundings, testifies to the power of God which sustains him. His reply to their accusation is terse. Peter does not tell them to repent as he does the people, although he makes it clear that repentance is open to Israel. The moral state of the Council is in marked contrast to the holy calm of the Apostles before them and is described in Ps. 36:1, 2 “the transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquities be found to be hateful.”

Peter starts by reminding them that God “the God of our fathers” has raised up Jesus. This is the same Jesus they have slain and hanged on a tree. Thus, God has reversed their decision and they are exposed as His enemies. But He does more than raise Him from the dead. He exalts Him that is He raises Him as Man to the highest height in heaven so that there is a Man in the glory on the throne of God. He is in exactly the same position as David, whose son and Lord He is, after he smote his enemies and ruled in power. Does David seek to destroy the household of Saul, the man who threw a javelin at him and sought his life? No. He says “is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?” 2 Sam 9:3. So the Lord Jesus Christ, the True David, exalted to power far exceeding David’s, is ready to pardon His enemies.

And these enemies have not only sought His life like Saul but taken it. The form of the pardon is made dear too “to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” Peter concludes with a twofold witness to the things he has just brought before them. The Apostles are not only witnesses, but His witnesses, as the Lord had said they should be before His ascension 1:8. The Holy Spirit is the other witness. Peter’s words summarize the testimony of the Apostles; Stephen’s words, at a somewhat later date, will summarize the testimony of the Holy Spirit, by Whom he spoke.

Conviction is not the same as repentance. Convicted of sin they “were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.” Providentially God intervenes, using Gamaliel to thwart their purpose. His motive is not dear. As a Pharisee he may hesitate to condemn men who stand for the doctrine of resurrection in a Council apparently dominated by Sadducees who oppose it. Or it may be natural prudence. At any rate he brings them back to reason. He reminds them that this is not the first time men have been drawn away after leaders who have fomented trouble. Theudas and Judas of Galilee had done just that and where are they now? “and now I say unto you, refrain from these men, and let them alone, for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.” This natural wisdom prevails. For Gamaliel is suggesting that the trouble may go away if left alone. Decisions on controversial matters are often avoided by men in organized groups for fear of compromising their positions or authority if the decisions prove wrong.

But in practice they vent their hatred on the Apostles by beating them—the first act of violence so far. The Apostles leave them with bleeding backs, but rejoicing as Paul later does at Philippi. The temper of the Sanhedrin is rising, however. They command them not to speak in the Name of Jesus before they let them go. Sometimes it pleases the Lord to deliver His saints; at other times to let them suffer. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego recognized this principle when they refused to worship the golden image. They said to the king— “O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up” —Dan. 3:16-18. In the case of the Apostles there is both deliverance and suffering. The angel of the Lord opens the prison door in the night and brings them out. That is the delivering power of the Lord. On the other hand, the Council has beaten them. They correctly recognize this as identification with their risen Lord. Had He not been scourged? The servant is not above His Master. And so, they leave the Council with backs bleeding no doubt, but “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name” —v. 41. Undeterred they cease not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. This they do in every house and “daily in the Temple.”

The First Office Established in the Church

Defeated in the world, Satan now seeks to sow the seeds of dissension and division in the Church. The murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews can be traced to him. But God merely uses the difficulty to make a new provision for the care of Christ’s sheep.

At first we find all office in the Assembly at Jerusalem vested in the Apostles, who personally perform the duties later entrusted to deacons and elders (note that both Peter and John take the ground of being elders in 1 Pet. 5:1 and 2 John 1:1 respectively). In a broad sense the distinction between the offices of deacon and elder in the early church is simple. The deacon—a word also translated “minister” —is responsible for the material needs of the Church and the elder for the spiritual needs.

The Apostles delegate these offices to others in an orderly and godly fashion, for God is a God of order. The office of deacon is delegated to the Jew first whereas the office of elder is delegated to the Gentile first. This is because the primary needs at Jerusalem are material, not spiritual, whereas the primary needs of the Gentiles are spiritual, not material. To explain this statement, consider the difference in the background of Jew and Gentile. The Apostle Paul writes— “what advantage then hath the Jew—much every way—chiefly because that to them were committed the oracles of God” —Rom. 3:1, 2. The Jews not only know the Holy Scriptures, but they have the Apostles in their midst. The Gentiles, however, will be converted out of pagan darkness . . . not only accustomed to sacrificing to idols but steeped in moral debauchery. This can easily be seen by reading the Corinthian Epistles. Of the Word of God they know nothing. Since the primary needs of the Gentiles are spiritual, elders are chosen first at Lystra and Iconium and Antioch—Gentile cities. True, elders are also mentioned in 11:30—but the official office is an apostolic delegation, and this act is first recorded in Gentile lands.

While God is a God of order, He is also a God of liberty. The offices in the early church are so set up that they neither on the one hand prevent the man holding the office from serving the Lord in other ways, nor on the other hand do they prevent others from doing the work of a deacon where there is no official appointment. Stephen and Philip illustrate this on the one hand—Phoebe on the other. Both Stephen and

Philip are deacons and are directly responsible for financial matters—for ensuring equity in the daily ministration to the widow. Yet Stephen is “full of faith and power.” He does great wonders and miracles among the people. Philip is later called “the evangelist” —21:8—which is a gift from the Lord. On the other hand, Phoebe illustrates the use of office without official appointment. She is deaconess (from Greek ‘Diakonos’—a person who acts or waits in service) of the Church at Cenchrae—Rom. 16:1. Not only from the Greek word chosen but also from Scripture we know that she does not have an official appointment, for Paul writes as to the office— “let the deacons be husbands of one wife, conducting their children and their own houses well” —1 Tim. 3:12. How many believers there are at Cenchrae we do not know. All we know is that Phoebe is a qualified person who takes care of the simple but important practical needs of the Assembly in that seaport town. We may perhaps picture her arranging the room where they meet, purchasing bread and wine, spreading the table, counting the collection, looking after the ‘love feast’ the early Christians enjoyed together, caring for scrolls of Scripture, or collecting food and clothes for the poor. Actually, we cannot be certain what she did but whatever it was the Lord was uppermost in her life. We all owe much to those who have followed her example. If an Apostle commended faithful work, it should not go unnoticed in our day.

The features of the deacon’s moral character are given to us in 1 Tim. 3:8-10— “grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not seeking gain by base means, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these be first proved, then let them minister.” It is written also “he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much” —Luke 16:10. He may desire the office of an elder later, like other godly men —1 Tim. 3:1—but must first prove himself in the office committed to him. This Stephen does. It is noteworthy that it is not an Apostle who first lays down his life for Christ, but Stephen, a lowly deacon. Peter, an Apostle, boasts that he will lay down his life for the Lord’s sake; Stephen, who makes no claims, is the first to do so. Again, the reader’s attention is directed to the beginning of the Book of Acts— “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” Acts is the book of doing. Teaching comes later . . . in the epistles.

A beautiful picture of the workings of grace is given to us in the choice of “the seven” as Scripture calls the “seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” Their names are all Grecian. But you say wasn’t it the Grecian Jews who were complaining? The Hebrew Jews will be outvoted! But if you are an honest man, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom you will never even entertain the thought of being unjust in the Church of God. How beautiful are the springs of first love! May the gracious Lord lead us back to drink of them.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 5: The Love of Money (4:32-37)

(Suggested Reading: Joshua 6 & 7; Acts 4:32-37, 5:1-16; 6:1-6; 8:9-24)

Martin Luther, sensing himself under attack, once threw an inkpot at the devil. This was not an act of fanaticism but a keener appreciation of the real opposition of our foe than most believers demonstrate. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” —Eph. 6:12. This Scripture unmasks the real source of the opposition to the early Church. Satan was behind the arrest of the Apostles, and the effort to stop the preaching of the gospel. When he failed he simply shifted his tactics. Unsuccessful in the world his next attempt was to bore within the Church. He cannot reach our new nature, that eternal life we have received from God. But he can reach our old fallen nature if we are not watchful and prayerful. This he did with Ananias and Sapphira. The principle involved here—the love of money—is so important to us spiritually that we must trace it to its source in the book of Joshua and then return to Acts.

Jericho and Achan’s Sin

The last reference to money in the New Testament, summarizing as it does the teaching of the Word on the subject, is full of meaning “for the love of money is the root of every evil” —1 Tim. 6:10. The Scripture does not say that money is the root of every evil. Barnabas used it in the Lord’s work—4:36, 37, as many have done since. But the love of money is the root—the hidden motivator of evil—for the root is underground, suggesting the origin of things and drawing nourishment from the earth. How carefully then the words of Scripture are chosen.

The principles underlying the correct use of money for the believer are given to us on two occasions in the Old Testament. One was when the children of Israel were leaving Egypt; the other when they were entering the promised land. When they left Egypt they “asked of the Egyptians utensils of silver, and utensils of gold, and clothing and they gave to them, and they spoiled the Egyptians” Ex. 12:35, 36. Unquestionably this wealth was used to build the tabernacle in the wilderness. It was not unrighteous to exploit the plagues God had brought on the Egyptians. On the contrary it was payment for the wages out of which they had been defrauded during their time of slavery. Applying this to believers, when we are saved, we also take treasure out of Egypt—always in Scripture a figure of the world. The whole purpose of our education and training in man’s eyes is to build for this world. When we are converted and so leave man’s world, the treasure we represented to man is lost as well as we ourselves. Both should now be used for the Lord.

After the desert journey and the crossing of the Jordan the children of Israel were about to storm Jericho, which guarded the approaches to the land. Spiritually this position was the equivalent of the Church of God before Ananias and Sapphira sinned. New instruction on the use of money was given the children of Israel at this juncture. Jericho and all in it was accursed but, and this is important, all the silver and gold and the vessels of copper and iron were holy to the Lord. They were to come in to the treasury of the Lord. In the case of the early Church contributions were voluntary here all belonged to the treasury of the Lord. This shows that all that we acquire down here belongs to the Lord. The Christian is to manage things that don’t really belong to him. So Jericho fell. The people brought everything into the treasury of the Lord as instructed, except Achan. The parallel now with Ananias and Sapphira becomes striking. Achan hid in his tent a goodly Babylonish garment a figure of the cloak of corrupt worldly respectability and a wedge of gold money divides. He hid them in the earth in his tent that is he kept them out of the treasury of the Lord hoping to dig them out later and appropriate them for his own use. He was discovered and put to death as Ananias and Sapphira also were. These judgments cleared the way for later triumphs in Israel and the Church.

First Love

In the beginning the believers were of one heart and one soul. This unity found expression in seeing that none among them lacked in temporal things. Later on, when decline set in, Paul wrote to Timothy “charge those who are rich in this world that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy. That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come” 1 Tim. 6:17-19. The need for such exhortations shows how quickly man departed from the freshness of the early conditions, when none said that anything he possessed was his own, but they had all things common. Significantly it was real estate lands and houses the real source of wealth that was sold. The Spirit marks out Barnabas especially in this connection. Disposing of his interests in this world was the start of his spiritual career in the Church, if we may use such an expression. He is in contrast to the rich young man who went away from the Lord when told to sell what he had and give it to the poor. The Lord also told him “and you shall have treasure in heaven and come and follow Me” Mat. 19:16-22. Well, that was too much for the rich young man, and he went away from Jesus. Mark how he went away sorrowful. But Barnabas “having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” This is easier to read than to do, but it marked his entrance into the path of following Christ. This is the apex of the “first love” period the zenith of the primitive Church’s devotedness to Christ. Up to this point failure has not come in. Only the energy of the Spirit has been demonstrated.

Ananias and Sapphira

Ananias and Sapphira were real believers. We shall meet them in heaven. But what they did was the beginning of the declension of the Church. Ananias, with the full knowledge of his wife, sold a possession and brought part of the sale price to the Apostles, retaining part for himself. Here he duplicated the sin of Achan who hid the goodly Babylonish garment and wedge of gold in his tent instead of bringing them into the treasury of the Lord. But under grace there were no such stringent requirements. Those who sold their possessions did so voluntarily. Peter charges him with that. He could have retained the land and the sale price, but in keeping back part of the sale price he had lied not to men but to God. The secret mover behind all this was Satan. He is only mentioned twice in the Acts—here and in 26:18. Thus he is shown to be the great hidden adversary of the two men whose work, in broad outline, comprises the Acts—Peter and Paul. So Peter says “why has Satan filled your heart?” —the first direct mention of the unseen foe in the Acts. The answer to this question— “Why?” was lack of self-judgment—permitting Satan’s root—the love of money—to find a lodging place in his heart. The love of money displaced the love of Christ and Ananias’ root was, over the centuries, to become a full-grown plant in the professing church. Every evil was to come out of it too—and all in Christ’s name. But of this more later. Certain evils, later to become full blown, can readily be detected in Ananias’ Act. He lied, not to men, but to God. As to lying, the Lord Jesus called Satan a liar and the father of it. But the very division of the sale price, which he denied, spoke more eloquently than his words. The part which he retained spoke of distrust of God. Ananias was really saying that he couldn’t trust God to take care of him through life if he surrendered that part. It spoke of love of self, for he coveted it for the advantages he thought it would confer on him. It spoke of lack of love for his brethren, for if they needed it why was he withholding it? But we could go on. The part which he thought to give to God, had as its basic motive building his reputation in the Church. The fear of God was not before him. How the Lord’s words to the Pharisees, who also were covetous, applied to Ananias— “ye are they who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.”

We have already remarked, however, that Satan is mentioned for the first time in Acts in connection with Ananias and Sapphira. Did he not come in to corrupt God’s first work in the garden in Eden? The Church of the living God is the garden of God—that is, God’s enclosure—where His people are to be kept in suited circumstances away from the world. Well, Satan entered both gardens and brought death in to a scene of life. He corrupted Adam and Eve in Eden; Ananias and Sapphira here. And in both cases he brought death to the man and the woman. It was death by God’s sentence in Eden; by Christ’s Apostle here. The severity of the sentence corresponded with the greatness of the work corrupted at its very beginning in both cases. The Lord had said to Peter “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” —Mat. 16:19. Peter’s action of binding Ananias and Sapphira on earth was ratified in heaven. They died for their sins, like Achan and his family. But then there were those whom Peter loosed on earth and so were loosed in heaven. These are the multitudes who believe and are added to the Lord—v. 14.

This blessing did not flow out until the sin of Ananias and Sapphira had been dealt with. Just so Israel could not take Ai until Achan’s sin had been dealt with. Israel could not advance into the promised land, nor the Church make progress in heavenly things, with sin in the midst. Satan’s attempt to overthrow the Assembly at Jerusalem had been thwarted but he had, nevertheless, planted a root that was to spring up in succeeding centuries.

The Widows of the Greek Jews

Writing to the Corinthians Paul says “neither murmur ye, as some of these murmured, and perished by the destroyer” —1 Cor. 10:10. Thus the murmuring of the Greek Jews against the Hebrews can be traced to its real origin—Satan. Money again is the tool he is seeking to use to foment trouble, though the form of the temptation is varied. Money is a necessity to the very poor. In those days, life expectancy was low by modern standards. In Imperial Rome and ancient Greece, for example, life expectancy was a mere median span of 25-30 years. This left many widows. The Jews provided for them through their synagogues, which served as social centers. In Jerusalem there were many synagogues and returning Jews who had lived abroad had their own. Rightly or wrongly these Grecian Jews felt that their own widows were not being equitably treated in the daily ministrations.

The matter of Ananias and Sapphira was a sin against God and was dealt with by an Apostle; the matter of the widows of the Greek Jews solely concerned men and could be delegated. So the twelve apostles called the many disciples together and said— “it is not reasonable that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch, whom they set before the Apostles, and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.” So the difficulty was resolved and the efforts of the enemy once more frustrated. Of the seven men appointed by the Apostles the Holy Spirit draws attention to Stephen. But for the moment we must pass on to another attempt by Satan to overthrow the public testimony by the use of money.

Simon Magus

The temptation Satan used in the case of Ananias and Sapphira and the widows of the Greek Jews was inside the Church. In the case of Simon Magus it was outside, in the world. The believer must move in both circles as he passes through this life and Satan will lose no opportunity to beguile him both inside and outside. This is important. We are not merely reading, in Acts, the history of the early Church, but living lessons for our path through this world. Satan hasn't changed, and he knows that our fallen flesh hasn't changed either. But thank God "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" 1 John 4:4.

Simon Magus was not a real believer. He believed with his mind i.e. his intelligence convinced him that the miracles of the apostles couldn't be explained away they were the power of God. But these miracles were done to draw men's attention to the love of God in sending His Son into the world to save sinners. To be saved one must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ with the heart see Rom. 10:9. Simon Magus had not done this. Consequently he had to say "pray to the Lord for me" because, not being born again, he couldn't pray himself.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 4: Before the Council and Before the Church (4:1-31)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 4:1-31)

When the Lord Jesus was on earth His chief opposition came from the Pharisees; when He returned to glory and became the Head of the Church the chief opposition came from the Sadducees. The Pharisees are ritualists, jealous of the Scriptures, the Temple, the traditions of the fathers; the Sadducees are rationalists and deny the resurrection of the dead. This basic split originates in the natural mind departing from God in opposite directions. It is not therefore, simply something that happened in the past and confined to the Jews. It has left its mark on the Church from the Day of Pentecost to the present.

In the early centuries of Christianity the ritualists held sway. After the Reformation the rationalists took over—the "higher critics" "liberals" or "modernists" —the class of people who deny the inspiration of Scripture. The wind up of this is the "Post Christian world" in which we are living. This is only a phrase for describing the days just before the rapture and God's judgments on the world. Consequently, these observations will soon become historical. Even so, what is left of the public profession of Christianity is largely rationalist in character.¹

~~~

And so that evening the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, seize the Apostles and put them in custody until the morning. They must have taken the former lame man away at the same time, judging from verses 10 and 14. After all, his crime was that he was healed! On the morrow they set them all—the Apostles and the lame man—in the midst of a great assembly—Annas the High Priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the high priestly family. The flower of Israel was represented in this body, and no doubt they thought they would overawe the Apostles, who were, in their eyes, merely "unlettered and uninstructed men" —v. 13. Their opening question was "by what power, or by what Name, have you done this?" They were to receive a full answer.

They had questioned the power by which the lame man had been healed. Peter answers the question. He is filled with the Holy Spirit, whose power was in question. This was the power the Lord Jesus used in His life when He went about doing good, for God was with Him. This power had been used for good, not for evil. What man would question the power which could cure a man born lame.

And if they wished to know by what name the man stood before them whole, it was the Name of Jesus of Nazareth—again the title on the cross—for Peter would press home their guilt. God had raised Him from the dead. Then Peter says, "This is the stone which was set at nought by you builders which is become the corner stone." In this statement Peter introduces a thought he unfolds later in his epistles the thought of the Church as a building under construction—an holy temple unto the Lord. This view of the Church as a building is special to Peter, as the body is to Paul and the bride to John. He had heard the Lord's words "on this rock I will build My Church." Peter's conclusion, then, is "neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

## Taking Counsel

To Peter's words there is no answer. They see the man who was healed. He was well known in Jerusalem for he was carried and laid down daily at the beautiful gate of the Temple. Here he is, standing erect before the Sanhedrin—a beggar no more but a son with God's Son. The accused are told to leave the council chamber so the Sanhedrin can deliberate in secrecy. They have a problem. Many of them are Sadducees. How can they deny the sign which has come to pass through the Apostles' means. Their decision, given in abbreviated form, is to threaten them. They command them not to speak at all, nor teach, in the Name of Jesus, so that Christianity should spread no further among the people. It is not the people they are concerned with—it is the possible loss of their official positions, which are being challenged. Peter and John remonstrate "whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." This is an unqualified rejection of their demands. The Sanhedrin threaten them again, but fearing public opinion release them. Under the circumstances perhaps a stand-off is the best they can hope for, because the people glorify God for what was done.

## Settling an Important Principle

When they are free they come "to their own company" and tell them what happened in the Sanhedrin. They want their stand to be known and approved by the Church. As Apostles they remember the Lord's words— "render therefore to Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and to God the things which are God's" —Mat. 22:21. The powers that be are ordained by God but cannot abrogate to themselves the power to set aside the commission the Lord gave to the Apostles to preach the gospel. With this the Assembly is in unanimous agreement. The decision is an important one, for neither prohibition to preach the gospel nor persecution for disobeying secular authorities in this regard has

deterred the faithful in the Church since this time. God Himself confirms the decision for “the place was shaken where they were assembled together, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the Word of God with boldness” —4:31.

## Our Fiery Trial

There is a tendency for believers to expect justice in the affairs of this life and to be puzzled when they do not receive it. But this is a world of injustice which does not recognize or act on Christian principles. Peter’s ministry guards us from expecting anything from this world but persecution. What he writes is from his own experience— “beloved think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you, but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings, that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy” —1 Pet. 4:12, 13.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 3: The Lame Man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple (2:42-47)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 2:42-47; Chapter 3:1-26)

About three thousand souls were added to the original company of “about an hundred and twenty brethren” —1:5—following Peter’s first sermon. They were baptized—a dread step for a Jew. To this day when an Orthodox Jew is baptized his family considers him dead which of course is truly the case as to everything we walk in before. But all life is in the Son of God and this was soon manifested in their walk. “They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” At this early date “breaking of bread” included not only the Lord’s Supper but the “agape” or love feast—Jude 12—which preceded it. The misconduct of the Corinthians caused Paul to separate the two later. “Prayers” were those which preceded and followed the Lord’s Supper—not prayer meetings.<sup>1</sup> They shared their possessions, praised God and were in favor with all the people. Additional conversions took place. Yet these early Christians are definitely Jewish in their outlook. While they embrace Christianity they retain a link with Judaism, worshipping and offering sacrifices in the Temple.

Appendix “A” following will familiarize the reader with the enormous buildings of the Temple at Jerusalem.

## The Hour of Prayer

The ninth hour—the hour of prayer to a Jew, finds Peter and John going up together to the Temple. Now the Christian prayer meeting was characterized by power for “when they had prayed the place was shaken where they were assembled together” —4:31. Here at the very entrance to the Temple, at its beautiful gate we find powerlessness. The lame man there was a fitting picture of the Jewish system. This man, lame from birth, was carried and laid every day at the gold covered “Beautiful” gate of the Temple to beg from those who were going into the Temple.

Peter and John, as true followers of their rejected Master, who once said ‘show Me a penny’—for He had none—had neither silver nor gold for the lame man. Silver and gold are intimately connected with the temples and cathedrals of man. But the recipients of silver and gold are lame from their mother’s womb, and need the new birth if they are to enter in and worship God. Such must listen to Peter and John and will truly receive something from them. Then Peter said “such as I have I give you.” Oh to have Christ to give to others! Perhaps Peter was thinking of this incident when he wrote later “ye were not redeemed with corruptible things as silver and gold, from your vain lifestyle received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot” —1 Pet. 1:18, 19. And so Peter said “in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth” that was the Name above His cross—‘Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews’— “rise up and walk” —3:6 “And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God” —vs 8, 9.

The man was well known because everyone entering this main gate had to pass by him. Unknown to those who did, their condition was just as bad as his. They are attracted to the man on whom the sign was performed and so open the way for Peter’s testimony to the source of the power. There he preaches in the temple, this Galilean fisherman, scorned by the doctors of the law but strengthened by God to stand for Him in the lofty grandeur of those colossal buildings towering above him. “Ye denied the Holy One and the Just” he says. Is there no finger pointed at Peter to say “why Peter that is what you did yourself.” Not when a man is truly restored to the service of God. “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God who justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?” —Rom. 8:33, 34.

Peter begins his preaching with the remark that the God of their fathers had glorified His Servant Jesus although they had delivered Him to a Gentile Governor who was reluctant to crucify Him. But they insisted, choosing Barabbas a murderer. They had killed the Prince of life, but the Apostles were witnesses that God raised Him from the dead. It was His Name, through faith in his name, that the lame man had been healed.

After demonstrating their guilt Peter attributes it to a sin of ignorance, as the Lord did on the cross— “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” —Luke 23:34. There was forgiveness for a sin of ignorance under the law, as they well knew. Besides, the death of Christ was determined beforehand by God—v. 18. Caiaphas, who was high priest when the Lord raised Lazarus, had said “ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” —John 11:49, 50. They are told to repent therefore and be converted that their sins may be blotted out.

From this point on the message takes on a peculiarly Jewish flavor—not that what was already said was not Jewish—but the appeal is an unique one. They are told that if they repent etc. God “shall send Jesus Christ, who before was preached to you.” Now while God knew they would not repent, this was a genuine offer to the nation—to send the Lord back to them. The offer was good until they stoned Stephen. God did not break with the nation until they broke with Him. True they had said to His Son “Away with this Man—crucify Him.” But would they still reject Him after God had reversed their judgment by glorifying Him in heaven? Yes, they would. “His citizens hated Him, and sent a message

after Him, saying we will not have this Man to reign over us.” They delivered this message by stoning Stephen.

Peter closes by telling them that “to you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.” This was the purpose of the sign. A sign is a special miracle to convince man that God is behind the act and to make him investigate it to find out what God wants to teach him. For example in John’s gospel there are no “miracles” —if we read the original carefully—only signs.<sup>1</sup> That is because John is the Gospel of the Son of God, and the signs in that gospel are witnesses to that truth. So in John 5 the Lord heals an impotent man—here at the beautiful gate of the Temple His apostles heal a man born lame. The link is a common witness to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and it is He alone who can heal—and the power of His Name. So in 4:30— “and that signs and wonders take place through the Name of Thy holy servant Jesus.”

The important thing is that the message is understood and believed. Peter’s preaching is cut short at eventide, but not before it has served its purpose. Unknown to his persecutors it is really eventide for them. God will not permit man to stop the blessing of his fellows. Notice how the work of grace flourishes in spite of opposition. The work begins with prayer in an upper room where one hundred and twenty are assembled. To these are added three thousand souls following Peter’s first sermon. In Chapter 4 the total has grown to about five thousand—see 4:4.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 2: The Holy Spirit and the Church of God (2:1-41)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 2:1-41)

The next scene is in a house. This is not without its meaning. Paul writes to Timothy “that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” —1 Tim. 3:15. Now notice the expression “the church of the living God” in the verse just cited. “The Church of God” is found eight times in the New Testament, and always in connection with Paul. God witnesses that there is a Church of God on the earth —1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1; that Paul persecuted it—1 Cor. 15:9, Gal. 1:13—that no one is to offend or despise it—1 Cor. 10:32, 1 Cor. 11:22—and that it is to be shepherded and ruled according to Paul’s instructions—20:28, 1 Ti. 3:5. But at this point in time it had not yet been established. It is “the mystery of Christ which in other generations has not been made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in (the power of the) Spirit” —Eph. 3:4,5. It was not hidden in the Scriptures, although they contain many beautiful types of Christ and the Church. No, it was hidden in God Himself, so that only He could reveal it. The Lord told Peter that “on this rock I will build My church” —Mat. 16:18. The time has now come to begin the building.

The Day of Pentecost

The day of Pentecost is one of the feasts of the Lord which are given to us in Leviticus 23. A brief outline of these feasts follows this chapter for general reference. The feast of Pentecost was the foreshadowing of the events which took place in the second chapter of Acts. The Jews were told to “count from the morning after the Sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave-offering, seven weeks; they shall be complete; even unto the morning after the seventh Sabbath shall ye count fifty days” —Lev. 23:15, 16. Fifty days? Yes, fifty days exactly, for the name Pentecost means “fiftieth.”

Now when we see the reason for the count and the exact period our hearts are filled with delight at the beauty of His Word. The count started “from the morning after the Sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering.” The wave sheaf is Christ risen and accepted before God for us, for it was “at the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week” that the Lord rose from among the dead. For forty days after that He was on this earth before His ascension and for ten days after the Apostles waited at Jerusalem until the promised Spirit came, making up the full fifty days needed for the Day of Pentecost.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

So “when the Day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.” The feasts of the Lord, of which Pentecost was one, had become “feasts of the Jews” —see John 5:1. After all the Lord had meant nothing to the guilty nation. Unquestionably they had by this time restored the veil of the temple which God had rent at the death of Jesus. Everything was to go on here as though He had never visited this earth. Or so they thought.

But God’s thought now was to go on without them. True, He bore with their system—their temple, priesthood, etc. for some time. But He revealed His real thought in the beginning—a people outside the pretensions of religion suited to the flesh. His own meet in a house, entirely apart from fellowship with those who had crucified and slain His Son with wicked hands. The Jews had placed themselves under the law—not God—Ex. 24:7—and had only proved that man, left to himself, can give nothing to God. That being the case God will put His Spirit into man that he may have power with God.

So it is that the coming of the Holy Spirit is announced with a sound out of heaven—v. 2. The house is filled as it must be when a Divine Person is present. In the next verse “there appeared unto them tongues as of fire.” Here was a twofold testimony that God was present—presented to their ears— “he that hath ears to hear let him hear” —and their sight—tongues of fire. The reason that the sound came out of heaven is that when the Lord Jesus went to heaven as a Man He took the Holy Spirit with Him—the Spirit who had descended in a bodily form as a dove upon Him at the river Jordan. That is why the Lord said “but the Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name” etc.—John 14:26. The Father would not have needed to send the Holy Spirit, so to speak, if He had remained here. And so there was “a sound out of heaven” accompanied by a demonstration of power.

The Unity of the Body of Christ

At the Jordan the Holy Spirit had descended on Christ in bodily form as a dove—at Pentecost on men in the form of parted tongues of fire. Apart from any other teaching the central thought is this—that the Holy Spirit, in descending, united the risen, ascended Head of the body, Christ, to His members here below. In so doing He formed the Church of God, which until that moment did not exist. Ephesians 1 teaches us the divine order—Christ must first be glorified before this could happen—“and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from among the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who filleth all in all” —Eph. 1:19-23. From this it will be seen that the Holy Spirit could not come down to form the Church until Jesus was at the right hand of God—that is until God had demonstrated His satisfaction of His work of accomplished redemption, not only by raising Him from among the dead but by bringing that Man into the glory of God. The unity of Christ and the Church found visible expression in the Holy Spirit alighting on that Blessed Man who was to be the Head at the Jordan, then on His members at Jerusalem.

Redeemed by the blood of Jesus, men are now fitted to be the habitation of God in the Spirit—Eph. 2:22. This is a twofold thing, the Church as a universal assembly being the temple of God—1 Cor. 3:16—and the individual believers, indwelt by the Spirit also, whose bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit—see 1 Cor. 6:19. And so “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

#### The New Center

The old center had been Jerusalem. This alone was the place where men ought to worship. It was the divine center on earth, the place where the Lord had set His Name and where alone His presence was to be found. But when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven God morally set aside the old center by establishing a new one. We say “morally set aside” because historically He still recognized the old center until the Jews stoned Stephen—of which more later. In setting up a new center God knew full well that they would treat this “ambassador for Christ” as they had treated His beloved Son.

At this point the question might be asked, what is the new center? We know that, when the Lord’s rejection by the Jews pressed upon Him He announced “for where two or three are gathered together unto My Name there am I in the midst of them” —Mat. 18:20. This is, in a sense, the new center on earth—the Lord Jesus in the midst of His own, as we see in John 20. There the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews and Jesus came and stood in the midst and said unto them “Peace be unto you!” Having said this, He showed them His hands and His side. This made the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Now this is exceedingly blessed unless we start Judaizing it into an earthly center to replace the old earthly center—Jerusalem. That was the sin of the Church after the first century and led to the establishment of the devil’s earthly center—Rome. Let us then be clear on this cardinal truth that the new center is heaven where Jesus is. No present enjoyment of the Lord’s presence with us during the Church’s stay on earth in any way sets aside the parallel truth that we worship in heaven, although on the earth, for we are a heavenly people. We worship inside the veil—the holiest of all—Heb. 10:19-22. As well, we are blessed “with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” —Eph. 1:3.

#### Two Views of the Holy Spirit’s Presence on Earth

With the day of Pentecost fully come the Holy Spirit descends from heaven since Jesus has gone on high. Before the cross Jesus had said that He would come—John 14—and again before His ascension—1:8. Our second chapter gives us two views of the Holy Spirit’s presence down here.

. . . The Holy Spirit in Relation to the World—Three signs are given us to signify the character of the Holy Spirit’s work in the world. First there is a mighty rushing wind which filled all the house. This signifies the Spirit as the Agent of the new birth under Christianity as formerly in all God’s previous ways with man—read John 3. When the Lord revealed this truth to Nicodemus His people were under the law. Now under grace the Spirit’s work in this connection abides the same. But if a man is to be born again now he must hear the gospel. So the next two signs reveal its content. The parted tongues as of fire speak of one characteristic of the gospel—judgment on all men who refuse to believe. The tongues are as of fire because God is intolerant of evil; they are parted because He will make no distinction between the sins of Jew or Gentile—“tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile” —Rom. 2:9. “For our God is a consuming fire” —Heb. 11:29. The other characteristic of the gospel is the blessing on all men who will believe. They began to speak “with other tongues.” Every man heard them speak in his own language the wonderful works of God. This opened the door for Peter’s first sermon and the salvation of “about three thousand souls” in one day. What a contrast to what the law did for Israel—“and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men” —Ex. 32:28. But the wonderful message of the gospel could not be confined to Israel—which explains the many tongues—a foreshadowing of the moment when the gospel would be universally proclaimed. How could it be otherwise, coming as it does from the heart of a God who so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son?

. . . The Holy Spirit in Relation to the Church—The Church was formed on the day of Pentecost by the corporate action of the Holy Spirit in uniting Christ, the Head of His body the Church—Eph. 1:22, 23—to His members below—Eph. 5:30. We must not confuse the Church in its present divided state with the Church as God sees it, in which only born again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have any part. In God’s viewpoint every believer has a part to play in the workings of that one body—1 Cor. 12:12-27—just as our hands, feet, etc. play a part in the workings of our natural bodies, which provide the Apostle’s figure. The Holy Spirit is the link we have with Christ, our glorified Head in heaven. His descent at Pentecost fulfilled the Lord’s words—“ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence” —1:5. This happened only once—on the day of Pentecost. The baptism of the Spirit refers to His descent to earth to unite Christ in glory to His members in this world. Since the Holy Spirit is still in this world—in our bodies—1 Cor. 6:19—and in the Church—Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 23 etc. how could there be more than one baptism of the Spirit? But perhaps you say what is meant then by the Scripture “for by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” —1 Cor. 12:13. Well, suppose that two hundred years ago a great soldier founded a famous regiment and gave it a name. It was formed in a certain place and at a certain time. As it moved about in peace time it might enlarge its enlistment in different towns. As time passed its ranks would be thinned by battle, retirements etc. but new recruits would replace those lost. Each officer or man in the regiment, say one hundred years after its founding, would remain a living link with the dead soldiers of the past, and be as much a member of the regiment as they. So is it with the baptism of the Spirit.

This is the doctrine which Paul unfolded later. But the action came first, the understanding of it later. This is typically the pattern followed in Acts— “all that Jesus began both to do and teach” —1:1—given to us at the beginning.

#### “To the Jew First”

Observe that they spoke “with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” —verse 4—in the house first. Afterwards, when this became general knowledge, “the multitude came together, and were confounded, because every man heard them speak in his own language” —v6. The multitude would indeed be a great one, the temple area itself being able to accommodate vast numbers of people at feast times—Jews from the parts mentioned in verses 9-11. This produced amazement, doubt and skepticism in the hearers and is the background to Peter’s sermon. Note that Peter is addressing Jews, for the gospel is to the Jew first. The first converts are Jews.

#### Peter’s Role as an Apostle

The Lord had said to the Apostles “ye shall be witnesses unto Me” 1:8. Peter becomes the first and the foremost of these witnesses, commencing with his preaching to the Jews—2:14—to the end. In the Acts his ministry runs a set course after which Paul takes over. Indeed the Book of Acts can roughly be divided into Peter from 2:14 on, to Paul Chapter 13 to the end. Partly this is because the Adam race is comprised of Jew and Gentile, to both of whom the gospel is addressed Peter being the Apostle to the Jews and Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Both men were vessels broken by God like Gideon’s pitchers so the light could shine through. Peter was broken by denying Christ after He knew Him; Paul by persecuting Him before he knew Him. Peter received his commission from the Lord on earth; Paul from the same Lord in glory. Granting all this there is still another reason for the early prominence of Peter and the subsequent rise of Paul.

The Lord gave Peter the keys of the Kingdom of the heavens see Mat. 16 and also that power of binding and loosing which was later entrusted to the Church, but which was initially vested in Peter. This was grounded on Peter’s confession of Christ as the Son of the living God. The Lord then affirmed that he was Peter a stone, a bit of a rock and on this rock Peter’s confession of Christ as Son of God He would build that Church against which the gates of hades should not prevail. The building of the Church started at Pentecost and is still going on, in spite of Satan’s opposition. We must not, however, confuse the Church and the kingdom of heaven. Men generally do this, picturing Peter as the first Pope on cathedral murals, with keys dangling from his girdle. No, the thought is the delegation of the Lord’s authority to Peter so that both Jews and Gentiles might enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The Lord did not entrust anything vital to Peter or any other man, for He retained the keys of death and hades. The Lord Himself will turn these keys at the end of the kingdom when death and hades are cast into the lake of fire Rev. 20:14 as Peter turned his at the beginning of the kingdom. So it is that Paul’s work could not begin until Peter’s was finished. Peter’s work was administrative in character. It gave practical effect to the breaking down of “the middle wall of partition” Eph. 2:14 which had separated Jew and Gentile. Peter turned the first key to let the Jews in at Pentecost; the second key to admit Cornelius and the other Gentiles. Pentecost was in “the house” Joppa by “the sea side” well known figures of Israel and the nations respectively.

Peter and John seem associated at the beginning as later Paul and Barnabas. But the two apostles who tower above the others so that they virtually divide the book are Peter and Paul, with Stephen the bridge between them.

#### Peter Preaches With Power

Peter rises and refutes the baseless charge that those who spoke by the Holy Spirit are drunk. He refers them to their own prophet Joel just as Paul later refers the Greeks to their own poet Aratus when he is called a babbler 17:18. Peter is associated with the eleven in his preaching; he does not stand alone v. 14. Although Peter is first to confess Christ as Son of God it is left to Paul to “preach Jesus in the synagogues that He is the Son of God” 9:20. Peter, being the Apostle to the Jews, presents Him as the Messiah they have rejected and slain, and whom God has raised up. Thus their controversy is with God. Peter’s preaching is a continuation of the Lord’s closing words in Luke’s gospel “thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things” Luke 24:46-48.

Peter does not claim that Joel’s prophecy is fulfilled, but rather “this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.” It is simply the character of things, for the Jews and Jerusalem are prominent in Joel’s prophecy, which has yet to be fulfilled.

Peter next branches out from the narrow ground of the Jews and Jerusalem to the much broader one of “men of Israel” v. 22. He demonstrates their common guilt by their treatment of their Messiah. He quotes Ps. 16 as proof of the Messiah’s confidence in God in life, death and resurrection, for these things applied to Him and not to the Psalmist. To prove this he points to David’s sepulcher, for he is dead and buried. David didn’t rise from the dead but their Messiah did, of whom David wrote. Peter says “He... spake of the resurrection of Christ” etc. v. 31. So the history of what happened to Jesus agreed with David’s prophecy. Peter makes his case iron clad by quoting yet another Psalm “the LORD said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” Ps. 110:1. David never ascended to heaven but Christ did, so here is further proof that David was prophesying of Christ and not writing of himself. Notice the dual proof as to Christ resurrection (Ps. 16) and ascension (Ps. 110).

The proof is so perfect that the godly Jews break down. Think of it their God has reversed their decision by making that same Jesus whom they crucified, both Lord and Christ. So the Messiah they were looking for is gone and with Him the hope of Israel. No wonder they are pricked in their hearts and exclaim “what shall we do?” Peter tells them and about three thousand souls are saved.

My wife’s grandfather, who was a preacher in the pioneer days of Canada, had a pungent comment on Peter’s preaching at Pentecost. He used to say that at the beginning one sermon saved three thousand souls because the Holy Spirit was in it, but that now it takes three thousand sermons to save one soul. This is ever true, for “it is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing” John 6:63.

#### No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 28: The Ruin and Restoration of All Things (28:17-31)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 28:17-31)

As Paul's travelling companion, Luke was well qualified to record the events of Acts. Even so his history is an inspired one, for he was the penman of the Holy Spirit. Losing sight of this leads men to speculate that Luke may possibly have written another book to record Paul's trial and other matters which interest us naturally but are not found in Acts. As it is, what remains of the historical narrative carries on to the end of Acts 28:16, which would have made a better chapter division. These verses narrate the aftermath of Paul's shipwreck—the healing of the sick in Malta, sailing away from the island and Paul's arrival in Rome. Verses 17-31 are really the last chapter in Acts. These verses summarize God's dealings with Israel and the Church—the two great themes in Acts.

Acts opens with the Apostles departing from the Sanhedrin 5:41, it closes with the Jews departing from the Apostle Paul—28:29. Thus God gives the Jews full apostolic testimony—Power and miracles at the center of Judaism; the preaching of the law and the prophets in weakness and chains at Rome. The complete range of testimony to the Jews in the Acts is brought to a climax in the verses we are about to consider. Although the testimony is totally rejected, Paul assures the Jews that the Gentiles will hear it. The Jews depart. Paul is seen in chains at Rome, but dwelling in his own hired house, still able to preach and teach, for, as he told the Jews, the Gentiles will hear the message. This is also a veiled foreshadowing of the continuing influence of Paul's doctrine in the Church after he left it. His doctrine would be bound by the power of Rome in the world, but proclaimed in his own hired house, of which we shall write later.

With these introductory remarks over we will consider the text in detail. Our sixteenth verse ends the fifth and last "we" section of the Acts. The next subject in the inspired record opens with the introductory phrase "and it came to pass."

#### The Setting Aside of Israel During the Church Period

Paul loses no time in calling together the leading Jews at Rome. He addresses them apologetically at first, for he is a prisoner, chained to a soldier as he talks. He points out that he has done no wrong yet was delivered from Jerusalem to the Romans. They examined him and found no wrong in him, yet "the Jews spake against it." He had no recourse, then, but to lodge an appeal to Caesar. But he hastens to add— "not that I had ought to accuse my nation of." He was not going to accuse them to Caesar. Here we find the last reference to Caesar and Israel in the Acts. It is for the hope of Israel that he wears Caesar's chains. Besides vindicating himself before the Jewish leaders, Paul longs for an opportunity to preach Christ to a larger audience as the hope of Israel. The leaders can arrange this. He awaits their reply.

Choosing their words carefully they state that they have received no written communications concerning him, and none of the visiting Jewish brethren have commented adversely on him. So he will be given an opportunity to address the people more largely. But as for this sect—the Jews at Rome apparently think of Christianity as a sect of Judaism unlike those in other cities—they know that everywhere it is spoken against. So Paul is granted an audience. The time they set; the place is the only one Paul can now preach from—his prison house. From the number who assemble there this would seem commodious enough.

#### The Judicial Blinding of Israel

To his audience Paul now "expounded and testified the Kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets." Paul's testimony to them brings before us the last of the prophets mentioned in Acts, and for a good reason. Four Old Testament prophets are cited in Acts—with an equal number of references to the "Peter" and "Paul" parts—and all related to the kingdom. First there is Joel to whom Peter refers at Pentecost 2:16. Joel gives us the day of the Lord—that is, the day when the Lord comes forth for earthly judgment—without which the kingdom cannot be ushered in. Peter also calls David a prophet at the same time—2:30. David gives us the King not yet on the throne—but the sure mercies of David—the royal seed in resurrection. Then in the "Paul" part of the Acts Paul refers to the prophet Samuel—13:20. Samuel gives us the King anointed, but a usurper—Saul—on the throne ("we have no king but Caesar"). Finally, here, Paul cites Esaias the prophet. Esaias had been told at the time he was specially commissioned—Isa. 6:8-12—that the end result of his prophetic testimony would be that judicial deafness and blindness would descend upon Israel. This condition was progressive as we see from our Lord's own words in the gospels—Mat. 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10—touching on His teaching concerning the "mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens"—Mat. 13:11. They were deaf to all remonstrances and blind to what constituted their blessings. So the Kingdom of God at Jerusalem was brought to an end—for the time—in the "carrying away to Babylon." A remnant returned to the land and their history went on there until the Christ of God came to them. Again, they shut their ears and eyes and this time slew their Messiah. Then followed the final effort to reach them which we have considered in the Book of Acts—the preaching to the Jews at Jerusalem and in the dispersed lands of the nations. God raised a warning of their final fate in the blinding of Elymas the sorcerer. This figure came to pass when the Apostle Paul's closing testimony to the Jews at Rome was rejected—28:27. But Elymas was to be blinded only for "a season" for God has not cast away His people—see Romans, Chapters 9-11. A day is coming when they shall look on Him whom they pierced and shall mourn for Him as one mourns for an only son—see Zech. 12:10. Then the Sun of Righteousness will gladden their opened eyes.

It should be noted that immediately after Paul made his declaration of judicial blindness on the Jews he went on to say "be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent to the Gentiles and that they will hear it." This should be connected with Peter's words "and it shall come to pass that every soul" (that is both Jew and Gentile) "which will not hear that prophet" (the Lord Jesus) "shall be destroyed from among the people"—3:23. Peter of course had in mind primarily the Jew but the sentence is true for Gentiles also.

How great is the long suffering of our God! Eight hundred years had elapsed from the death of King Uzziah—Isa. 6:1—to Paul's sentence on the Jews in Acts 28. Peter made the first apostolic appeal to the guilty nation in Jerusalem—Acts 3; Paul the last appeal in Rome Acts 28.

#### Paul's Life After the Acts

Paul cannot be tried until his accusers arrive to face him. Two years pass this way—28:30. He had spent two years in confinement previously under Felix until Festus came—24:27—years without any fruit as far as the record tells us. But the two years at Rome in his own hired house are productive ones. He not only spends the time evangelizing but writes the Epistles to the Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians, and the communication to Philemon in which he describes himself as "Paul the aged."



With minor exceptions, scholars are agreed that Paul's appeal to Caesar was successful. Clement, who labored with Paul in the gospel—Phil 4:3—wrote a letter in which he says that Paul instructed the whole world in righteousness and went 'to the extremity of the West.' To the ancients 'the whole world' was the Roman Empire and 'the extremity of the West' was Spain. He is considered to have arrived in Spain, stayed there a short time, and returned to Macedonia. From various Scriptures we know he also travelled to Ephesus, Crete, Miletus, and Nicopolis, where he is thought to have been arrested and sent to Rome for trial. During the period of his freedom he wrote the first epistle to Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews. In his final imprisonment he wrote the second epistle to Timothy. Now seventy or so years old, his body worn out with toil, privation, imprisonment, and beatings, he is even more Paul the aged, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, than when he wrote to Philemon. A lesser court than the Emperor's tried him on unknown charges, but certainly connected with the proclamation of the gospel. He was sentenced to death. A guard of soldiers escorted him along the Ostian way in case his prominence should attract public attention. Because he was a Roman citizen he was beheaded in the military way with the Roman short sword.

~~~

The Acts closes with the ruin of all things overshadowed by the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God, for it is this Paul preaches at the end. Full apostolic testimony accompanied by signs and miracles was rejected. Peter, the other Apostle who shares with Paul the great events in Acts, suffered martyrdom as well as Paul. Neither lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. With this the old system of Judaism effectively ended, since the dispersed Jews were cut off from their center in the land. It took a little longer for the Church to give up the truth Paul revealed to it and to go back to the world out of which it was called by the gospel. The Acts gives us the foreshadowing of this in the figure of Paul's shipwreck. But the final note is one of triumph. Though a prisoner, Paul preached the Kingdom of God, a sure indication that God would overcome evil with good. Paul would not preach the Kingdom of God unless it were truly to come—one thousand years in which Christ will rule the world—the golden age of the future.

Two sub-chapters follow in which we will consider how man ruined God's work in Israel and the Church. It is not an irremediable ruin—that is, it does not alter God's purposes with respect to either. Rather it demonstrates what is in the heart of man after the goodness of God's heart has been fully told out. The world is a wilderness in which we must learn our hearts and God's heart. But God will never be turned aside from His purpose—which is to bless Israel and the Church in spite of themselves. Consequently, a third sub-chapter follows which covers the restoration of all things when the kingdom Paul preached becomes a reality on the earth. Surely like the man who sat at table with the Lord we can say "blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God" —Luke 14:15.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 26: The Gentile Account of Saul's Conversion (25:23-27)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 25:23-27; Chapter 26)

The expression "on the morrow" is a favorite one with Luke and here he uses it for the last time—25:23. The world's "tomorrow" is now, for it has no future. This is clearly the message here. Paul had once written to the Corinthians "but for me it is the very smallest matter that I be examined of you or of man's day" —1 Cor. 4:3. "Examined" here does not mean judged, but the preliminary examination at which the accused has to answer and give an account of himself. So it is here. Though Paul is not technically answerable to Festus or Agrippa because of his appeal to Caesar, he is in another sense. For Festus is consulting Agrippa on the substance of that appeal. But this is all "man's day." Paul looks beyond the glittering assembly to eternal realities. Well does he know how hollow it all is. The Herod of Acts 12, who was the father of Agrippa and Bernice, had arranged just such a public display as this in the same city—Caesarea—and God had smitten him with worms so he died. Agrippa might have learned from this and seen Paul privately. But this is man's day, when he displays his hollow glory. The occasion is one of great pomp, in an audience hall, with the Chiliarchs and important men of the city. Paul is discharging that peculiar ministry the Lord gave him—to testify before kings—9:15. Each time he does this more courage is required than the previous time. First, he appears before Felix and Festus, a difficult enough matter. Here he is brought before an enormous audience of Gentiles of distinction, presided over by a Roman Governor and a Jewish King. Finally, he appears before the Emperor himself—an ordeal that calls for the heart of a lion. His defense here before Festus and Agrippa reminds us of Luther's position at the Diet of Worms. Behind all these events is God, who as another has remarked, is behind the scenes, moving all the scenes He is behind.

Festus opens the proceedings by addressing King Agrippa and the assembled military and civilian dignitaries. "Ye see this person" he says—language used to describe the Apostle of Jesus Christ— "this person" —truth in chains before the world. And the world it is, with a

huge assemblage of the elite of society. What is bringing them there to hear Paul? Couldn't Festus have just as easily consulted Agrippa in private? Certainly, he could. But God would not have it that way. The activities of the Holy Spirit are troubling the world, and men flocked together to see and hear Paul, the storm center of it all. Festus goes on to relate how the Jews sought Paul's life, but he has done nothing worthy of death. However, Paul has appealed to Augustus. Therefore Festus has summoned Paul before this assembly, and in particular before King Agrippa, so Festus can relay to his Lord (Caesar) the results of the examination— "for it seems to me senseless, sending a prisoner, not also to signify the charges against him."

Paul's Opening Remarks Before Agrippa

Paul addresses Agrippa throughout his speech, although a huge crowd hears his words. He opens his speech with the customary laudatory remarks, as Tertullus did before Felix. With Paul however, such an opening, although used to conform to the social customs of the day, is always tempered with the preserving salt of truth. He finds little to say to Felix of a complimentary character, knowing the man well. Here he can go a little further. Agrippa has a knowledge of divine things. This in itself will not save a man—it needs faith which is in Christ Jesus. But it is a base on which the evangelist can build—2 Tim. 3:15. At the close of his address Paul will revert to this theme in a personal appeal to the king.

Paul starts by describing his life as a Jew before his conversion. Unlike those who claimed he profaned the temple and have no witnesses, there are abundant witnesses to his claim that “after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.” Why does he introduce this piece of background information here? Is it not because he believes in resurrection? His claim before the Sanhedrin that he is a Pharisee divided the Council because the Sadducees denied the resurrection. He appeals to Agrippa— “why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?” Incredible it might be to a pagan Roman. But to a Jew, versed in the Holy Scriptures? The fathers had the hope of the promise which God made to them. “Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God night and day, hope to come.” This means that the remnant of Israel, the fragment of the whole nation who have accepted Christ, is viewed by God as the twelve tribes themselves, even though the whereabouts of ten of these tribes is unknown then as now. It is for that hope Paul is accused by the Jews. This puts matters in perspective. Paul is not preaching a deviation from the orthodox religion. He is the real exponent of it. It is the Jews who have disbelieved the Scriptures. But if this be so how does Paul reconcile his present position with the beliefs of his youth? He explains this difficulty with the story of his conversion.

The Gentile Account of Saul’s Conversion

His voice ringing through the vast audience hall, Paul testifies that “I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Nazareth.” And what were these things? Why “many of the saints did I shut up in prison.” This name “saints” means holy ones. It is the way God views all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is found only four times in Acts—twice in connection with Peter, doing good to them, and twice in connection with Paul—doing evil to them—cf. 9:13, 32,41, and 26:10. Paul had them put to death, voting on their punishment. He punished them in every city— “and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even as far away as foreign cities.” An enemy of the Lord, surely.

Then Christ arrests him, appearing to him in glory—the radiant effulgence of the glory of God. He hears a voice saying to him in Hebrew— “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?” In persecuting those feeble believers he has been persecuting the God of the universe—the exalted Man in the glory—the Head of the Church which is His body, the fullness of Him who filleth all in all. Astonished, Saul exclaims ‘who art Thou, Lord?’ The Lord replies ‘I am Jesus whom thou persecutest!’ In this way Paul receives the truth which he gives to us in two of his epistles. “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?” —revealed the truth that Christ is the Head in heaven of His body the Church on earth. In persecuting believers, he is persecuting their Head in heaven. This truth he unfolds in his Ephesian epistle— “and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” —Eph. 1:22, 23. The complementary truth— “Christ in you (that is in the Gentiles) the hope of glory” —unfolded in his Colossian epistle—see Col. 1:27—is implied in the Lord’s words “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” This latter doctrine—Christ in them sustained many a dear early Christian when facing death for Christ’s sake.¹

Three times during this discourse Paul gives Agrippa, whom he is addressing, his full title “King Agrippa.” But when he speaks of Christ, he drops Agrippa’s name and merely says, “O king.” “At midday, on the way, I saw, O king, a light above the brightness of the sun.” Here the Great King is in question. It is Jesus, who is not only great but the Son of the Highest, to whom the Lord God shall give the throne of His father David. It is Jesus in Solomon character meeting Shimei who cursed David. Like Solomon this Great King is on the throne, for Jesus is now upon His Father’s throne—Rev. 3:21. But He is not yet sitting on His own throne. If He were, His ambassador would not be in chains before King Agrippa. How vividly Paul makes this great event shine out in its true character.

Acting in sovereign grace, the Lord does not destroy His enemy but saves him. More than that He entrusts him with a mission which explains his presence before King Agrippa. He has appeared to him to make him a minister and a witness “both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee.” To discharge this mission, he must be a heavenly man, separated from the earth, transformed to the Christ in glory he has just seen. No other man can be entrusted with such a mission. That is the meaning of v. 17 “delivering thee from the people (that is God’s people, the Jews) and from the Gentiles.” That is, God cut Paul off from all earthly ties. For there are only two classes of men in the world—Jews and Gentiles and God severed his links with both on the road to Damascus. Now made a heavenly man, the ambassador for Christ, he is to be sent to the Gentiles— “to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith that is in Me.”

How Paul Carried Out His Mission

Paul informs King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. He went forth preaching, and he preached repentance. Peter called for repentance first—2:38; Paul here last. While Paul’s preaching began with the Jew the gospel is to the Jew first he went on to the Gentiles. Because he did this the envious Jews caught him in the Temple and went about to kill him. The Jews hate him because he is doing what their Messiah told him to do. If he had been disobedient to the heavenly vision, they would have left him alone. But God was with him in spite of the opposition of the Jews. He witnesses to all both small and great. Since his witness is founded on Holy Scripture, he has not repudiated the faith of his fathers.

The audience by this time, a pagan audience, is growing restive. Still his discourse is uninterrupted until he says, “that Christ should suffer, and that He should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should announce light to the people and to the Gentiles.” Note the language “announcing” light and the order, first the Jews the people then the Gentiles. This is too much for the pagan Festus. He has never read the Scriptures, and to him the possibility of a man rising from the dead is the purest fantasy. He is probably doing no more than expressing the feelings of the crowd when he interrupts Paul in a loud voice “Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.” If Paul had not confessed Christ, he would not have been considered mad. Festus’ remark illustrates an important principle that if you confess Christ both Jews and Gentiles will be against you and try to explain away your testimony. If you are an ordinary man, they will say you are intoxicated 2:13; if you are an educated man, they will say that too much learning has made you insane. Paul’s reply to Festus’ uncalled for interruption is a model of courtesy, tact, and faithfulness “I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but utter words of truth and soberness.” “Most excellent” is the correct mode of address for a Roman official of Festus’ standing, which Luke also accords to the Roman official Theophilus to whom he addressed his gospel. Paul’s comment restores Festus to the dignity of the office he has disgraced by his interruption. Paul says that he speaks the words of truth and soberness. “For the king knows about these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him” (Agrippa knew what God did to his father in this same city and how

God had delivered Peter out of his father's hand). "For this thing was not done in a corner" that is, it is widespread there are many witnesses to the resurrection of Christ.

Paul Challenges King Agrippa

Paul now makes the most of Festus' interruption. He has just pointed out the king's knowledge of these things, which was why Festus consulted him in the first place. Now he hurls him a personal challenge one which Agrippa has not bargained for. "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." Agrippa dares not answer negatively or he will prejudice his position with the Jews. But if he says he believes the prophets he knows he cannot refute Paul's testimony. He tries to avoid the dilemma with sarcasm. To paraphrase him he is saying "you are very persuasive if you keep on trying you might even convert me." Well the crux of Paul's testimony is the twenty-third verse where he is interrupted. Here he rises to his noblest, no doubt beckoning to Agrippa with his chained hand "I would to God, that not only you, but also all who hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds."

Agrippa has had enough of such virile testimony. He concludes the interview by rising. The Governor follows him, then Bernice, then the audience, all in an orderly fashion. It is hard to conceive of an audience hearing such words without some decisions for Christ. But Paul's message has no apparent effect on the king and governor. They agree that Paul has done nothing worthy of death and bonds. Agrippa says to Festus "this man might have been set at liberty if he had not appealed to Caesar." A dubious conclusion. But in their eyes Paul's defense has served its purpose. They can now set in motion the formal procedure of an appeal to Caesar. They can send the Apostle, who witnessed for the Lord at the Temple, on to Rome. And so, the word "Temple" disappears from the text in v. 21.

~~~

While Agrippa helps Festus prepare his report to Caesar, let us reflect on what Paul told them the account of his conversion. This was delivered to a Gentile audience. Let us compare it briefly with the other two accounts of his conversion in Acts.

It is evident that the Holy Spirit considers the conversion of Saul of Tarsus an extremely important event, for He gives us three versions of it in Acts. The first is the general account, looked at from God's standpoint. This is in the ninth chapter. Then in chapter 22 we have the account of it from the Jewish viewpoint; here in chapter 26 from the Gentile viewpoint. Saul was an enemy of the Lord like Pharaoh, who said "who is the Lord that I should obey His voice to let Israel go; I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go" —Ex. 5:2. But when Saul heard the Lord's voice he obeyed it. He cried out "who art Thou Lord" and let His equally persecuted people go.

In the general account of his conversion "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven." Then in the Jewish version the light grows brighter— "there shone from heaven a great light round about me." Finally, in the Gentile version he sees in the way a light from heaven— "above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and those who journeyed with me." The light is at its brightest in the Gentile version of his conversion because he is the Apostle to the Gentiles.

#### The Testimony of Peter and Paul to Christ the Rejected King

In Peter and Paul, the two great Apostles who divide the Acts, we have fulness of testimony to Christ by each Apostle in the same cities Jerusalem and Caesarea. Peter knew Christ on earth; Paul only from the glory. On the day of Pentecost Peter let the Jews into the kingdom of the heavens at Jerusalem; at Caesarea he let the Gentiles in. Now these are just the cities where Paul testifies of his conversion to the Jew and the Gentile. He gives the Jewish account at Jerusalem on the steps of the fortress of Antonia overlooking the temple; the Gentile account in the assembly presided over by Festus and Agrippa at Caesarea. In both instances Paul has large audiences but no recorded fruit; Peter has blessing in both cases. Now just what is meant by this amazing symmetry?

Well, Christ the True King has been rejected. A king always rules from an official residence. Where is Christ today? Why in heaven you say. Quite true—and that is why His kingdom is now called the kingdom of the heavens. Didn't the inscription over His cross testify that He is the King of the Jews? Didn't Pilate say, "shall I crucify your King?" At the beginning of Acts the disciples don't understand this. They ask Him "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" They want an earthly king and an earthly kingdom. But the Lord shows by His ascension that this is not to be now. Not only that but before He left this world for heaven, He entrusted Peter with the keys of the kingdom of the heavens. From Acts we know that Paul's great subject is the kingdom of God. Paul's testimony to his conversion at Jerusalem and Caesarea complements Peter's action in those two cities in turning his two keys. Peter lets man into the kingdom of the heavens at these two cities for the King is no longer on earth but in heaven. Then Paul testifies in the same two cities that the King met him on the way to Damascus—He came from heaven to earth to arrest Saul in his madness.

Peter's ministry is the kingdom of the heavens; Paul's the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is moral. It consists of righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit—Rom. 14:17. We find righteousness displayed when Paul "reasoned of righteousness temperance and judgment to come" —24:25—causing Felix to tremble; peace in the story of Saul's conversion; joy in his chains—26:29.

Paul's bearing as a man throughout all this is exemplary. He lived Christ and endured persecutions which would crush other men. He lived to see men beginning to tear down his work and he was alone with few caring for him in his old age and last imprisonment. Here he is carried away by the power of Rome—the last of the Gentile kingdoms—the iron legs of Daniel's image. Can we doubt for a minute that man contests the kingdoms of this world with Christ? Look at Paul who is an ambassador for Christ. He is seized by Roman soldiers, carried away captive to Caesarea, tried before Felix and Festus, paraded before Agrippa. To whom do the kingdoms of this world belong then—to Christ or to Caesar? The Jews answer, "we have no king but Caesar." The Gentiles crucified the rightful King who said, "My kingdom is not of this world." His kingdom, then, is the kingdom of the heavens—a kingdom in mystery—not of present worldly rule.

The Jews stoned Stephen, thus really sending a message after Christ who was then in glory—that they would not have that Man to reign over them. Then the Gentile powers imprisoned Paul, the man whose ministry started where Stephen's left off. In doing so they merely pointed up Paul's unique likeness to his Master, something we view in Stephen also. This is the next subject we will consider.

## Thoughts Concerning the Closing Testimony of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Apostle Paul

The principle underlying human education is to set before the student a goal he can attain with effort and to reward him with a degree. In divine education the soul is given an unattainable object Christ in glory. We always come short of this object but are never to cease striving for Him. The believer's education will never be ended because the goal set before him is infinite, being God Himself. This education will continue for all eternity, although it starts in time. This can be seen in Paul—perhaps the greatest man in the New Testament. Yet when his life and work are compared to Christ he is as the light of a candle compared to the light of the sun. At this point, though, we might anticipate the reader's question as to the connection of these remarks with the text. It is a good question, and we will consider it.

Many have been puzzled by Luke's lengthy description of Paul's trials, imprisonments, and shipwreck—and not without reason. For example, Paul barely mentions his other shipwrecks in his writings, whereas Luke goes into the last one at great length. Again, the period is marked by no conversions or evidence of blessing. A suggestion has already been made that when there is any degree of departure from the Lord in our lives, they cease to be simple, as God intended, and become complicated. But this only partially accounts for the problem. We are greatly helped toward an answer once we realize that the period under review is one in which the great Apostle's life is gradually drawing to its close. While there is everything to indicate that his appeal to Caesar was successful and that he enjoyed a subsequent period of liberty, still the greatest part of his life's work is now past. Therefore, it is at this juncture that the Holy Spirit draws the line and affords us a picture of what Paul's life really was. For in this apparently barren period a series of striking similarities between the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and the life of His great Apostle take place. This should not surprise us for Paul wrote— "so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" Phil 1:20, 21.

Paul was in all respects a model Christian—a man who alone of men could say— "be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ" 1 Cor. 11:1. And if, in imitating Christ, Paul seems in some respects to fall short of his goal, let us not in any way disparage the great Apostle. Rather let us magnify the Lord. May the soul of the reader rejoice like Paul who wrote— "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" —Phil 3:13.

A final caution is that our comparison is not drawn up to stimulate the mind or imagination of the reader, but to reach his heart's affections—to spur him on in the same pathway as Paul's—pursuing Christ in glory until that Object is attained.

### A Comparison of the Closing Events in the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Great Apostle Paul

When the Lord's public ministry ended, He was completely rejected by His own nation. The synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—narrate this as a gradual thing culminating in total rejection.<sup>2</sup> This also was true of Paul as bit by bit the door of the synagogue was closed on his preaching, and his own nation rejected his appeal as he spoke to them over the Temple area.

Both the Lord and Paul concluded their public ministry at Jerusalem. The Lord went there to die, in obedience to His Father's will and in the power of the Spirit; Paul was willing to die for the Lord at Jerusalem—21:13 but went there in spite of warnings from the Spirit. The Lord rebuked Peter when he tried to turn Him away from suffering and death—Mark 8:31-33; Paul chided the saints at Caesarea when they sought to turn him aside from suffering and death. The Lord entered Jerusalem on beasts provided for Him—Luke 19:28-38; Paul left Jerusalem on beasts provided for him—23:24. The Lord's entrance to Jerusalem is in triumph—His colt is tied by the door without "in a place where two ways met" —Mark 11:4. Paul's exit from Jerusalem is in captivity and his ship runs aground "in a place where two seas met."

The events connected with our Lord's betrayal and their counterpart in Paul's life will next be considered. First, we find that Judas Iscariot, a Jew, bargained with the chief priests for money to deliver the Lord to them; Felix, a Roman, bargained with Paul for money in exchange for his freedom. Next we find the Lord instituting His Supper in the large upper room; Paul too as his ministry was drawing to a close broke bread with the disciples at Troas "in the upper chamber where they were gathered together."<sup>3</sup> When we come to the last partings other similarities show up. The Lord had said "the things concerning Me have an end." In the upper room He gathered His own together before instituting the Supper and communicated His most intimate thoughts to them. So with Paul. He summoned the Ephesian elders and told them that he had not shunned to declare to them all the counsels of God.

After the Lord's Supper at Jerusalem Peter fell from not listening to Christ; after the Lord's Supper at Troas Eutychus fell from not listening to Paul. Peter is a figure of the confidence of the flesh; Eutychus of the weakness of the flesh. Finally, it was night when Judas left the upper room to betray the Lord to the Jews and hence to the Romans: it was night when Paul was taken away from the treachery of the Jews at Jerusalem to the Romans at Caesarea. In both cases it was their hour and the power of darkness. In rejecting both Paul and the One who sent him, Jerusalem, the lighthouse of the world, was plunged into darkness.

This darkness next manifests itself in the events connected with the imprisonment and judgment of the Lord and His Apostle. We find that both the Lord and Paul were seized by armed men the Lord in the garden of Gethsemane with artificial light provided by torches Paul in the Temple area in daylight by Roman soldiers. The real darkness emerges in the treatment of the Lord and Paul before the Sanhedrin. Of the Lord we read "now the chief priests and elders and all the Council, sought false witnesses against Jesus... but found none... at the last came two false witnesses and said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the Temple of God, and to build it in three days" Mat. 26:59-61. Paul, on the other hand, was charged with profaning the Temple, but no witnesses can be found to support the charge. The Lord was then smitten Mat. 26:67 as Paul also was 23:2. The language used against them is strikingly similar "answerest Thou the high priest so?" —John 18:22 and "revilest thou God's high priest?" 23:4.

Such treatment is too much for nature. Mark tells us that they all forsook Jesus and fled. Even the young man with the linen cloth around his body ran away naked in his eagerness to escape see Mark 14:50-52. So, with Paul in his imprisonment left alone as far as the record shows, by James, the elders, and all at Jerusalem. A young man, Paul's nephew, visits him, and is the means of his deliverance from the Jews. So, Paul shares Christ's reproach "despised and left alone by men" Isa. 53:3. Yet the Lord said, "I am not alone because the Father is with Me" John 16:32. So with Paul. In the very moment when he seemed to be abandoned by all the Lord stood by him in the fortress 23:11.

Next, we find that both the Lord and Paul were delivered by their own nation, the Jews, to the Gentiles. Pilate said “am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered Thee unto me” John 18:35. Even so Paul’s imprisonment and trial by the Romans was directly traceable to the Jews. Both the Lord and Paul heard their cry of rejection. With the Lord it was “away with This Man and release unto us Barabbas” Luke 23:18; with Paul it was “away with such a fellow from the earth, for it is not fit that he should live” 22:22.

How did the Gentiles, then, treat the Lord and His Apostle? Pilate has the Lord appear before Herod; Festus has Paul appear before another Herod (Agrippa). Herod with his men of war set the Lord at naught; Paul’s position before Festus, Agrippa and the Chiliarchs and dignitaries is similar— “ye see this person” Festus cries—25:24. The Gentile power, though, finds nothing chargeable against the Lord or Paul. Pilate washed his hands to show this. He also said “ye have brought This Man unto me, as One that perverteth the people, and behold I, having examined Him before you, have found no fault in This Man, touching those things whereof ye accuse Him, no nor yet Herod” Luke 23:14, 15. Even so Agrippa tells Festus “this man might have been set at liberty if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

Completely guiltless, the Scriptures must yet be fulfilled concerning Christ. The prophet Isaiah had written “He was taken from prison and from judgment and who shall declare His generation? for He was cut off out of the land of the living” Isa. 53:8. The first act in crucifixion was scourging. The Romans did this to the Lord; Paul escaped it only by declaring his Roman citizenship. Written over the Lord’s cross was His accusation “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” John 19:19 in letters of Greek and Latin and Hebrew. This was just Paul’s testimony to his own nation when addressing them over the Temple. He confesses that this Jesus of Nazareth is alive, not dead, and in the glory of God, not on earth, and that this Jesus is Lord, a title given to Him over and over again in this address. In his delivery, and in the events preceding it and following it, Paul uses the three languages over the cross which proclaimed Jesus to be the King of the Jews 21:37; 22:2; 22:27-29.

We have now compared the close of the Lord’s life and testimony with that of His Apostle Paul. Small wonder then that Paul writes “for the rest let no man trouble me, for I bear in my body the brands of the Lord Jesus” Gal. 6:17. His great desire was “that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death” Phil 3:10.

The Lord’s own sufferings are a thing apart. But Paul’s sufferings are the supplementary sufferings of Christ continued in His body down here—the Church. At his conversion Paul learned the truth of union with Christ—that Christ and His members here below are one. “If one member suffer all members suffer with it” —1 Cor. 12:26. It was his privilege to suffer here for Christ— “who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh, for His body’s sake, which is the Church” —Col. 1:24.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 25: Paul Appeals to Caesar (25:1-22)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 25:1-22)

The Governor who replaces Felix is Festus. He leaves Caesarea, the seat of Roman rule, and makes a State visit to Jerusalem. The Jews seize the opportunity to brief him on that pest—Paul. Having done this, they ask him to send Paul to Jerusalem. The underlying reason for this, that they plan to ambush and assassinate him, is not, of course, revealed to Festus. The request is on fairer representations—a trial for Paul by the Sanhedrin. Here the justice for which the Romans are noted shines through. Festus knows nothing of Paul and has been unfavorably informed of him by the Jews. Furthermore, he has come to Jerusalem to ingratiate himself with his new subjects if possible. But he refuses to compromise Roman principles, that a man should have a fair trial. “Let them therefore” said he “which among you are able, go down with me, and accuse this man, if there be any wickedness in him.” What a testimony against the Jews when a pagan governor displays more practical righteousness than they. Truly if “the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness” —Mat. 6:23. This saying of the Lord’s means that if men (or nations), favored with the light of God, turn away from that light, the ensuing darkness is greater than if the light had never shone on them. So it is here, and throughout the Acts, with the Jews.

The Jews lose no time. Festus stays ten days at Jerusalem. Then on the day following his return to Caesarea he commands Paul to be brought before him and we find the Jews swarming around him like bees with “many and grievous complaints,” which they cannot prove. As for Paul he affirms that “neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the Temple, nor against Caesar<sup>1</sup> have I offended in anything.”

At this point Festus is guilty of a miscarriage of justice, although he is a nobler man than his predecessor Felix. Willing to do the Jews a favour, he asks Paul if he will consent to renounce the protection of his Roman citizenship and go up to Jerusalem, and be tried by the Sanhedrin in his presence. Festus knows Paul is innocent of civil crimes and the charges against him are theological in nature, which he cannot resolve. He has nothing against Paul personally but will not scruple about turning him over to his enemies for political expediency. It must not be thought that Festus is more guilty than other Roman governors. The fatal flaw in Roman justice is the willingness to sacrifice a guiltless individual if exonerating him will have political consequences. Their human reasoning is that the end justifies the means—see what the Bible says about this in Rom. 3:8. They are striving for peace. If an individual disturbs the peace it seems of less account in their eyes that he should suffer, guilty or not, than that the army should be called out to quell a riot and occasion great bloodshed. Pilate, another Roman governor, had similarly found Christ guiltless and washed his hands. But he finally released Him to the mob to appease them and end the tumult, as he thought.

Paul sees Festus’ motives clearly, and in a courteous but firm way virtually censures him. He knows too that apart from what Festus is suggesting, he cannot travel to Jerusalem in safety. Only a large escort of Roman soldiers had saved him for assassination on the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea. He suspects what we are told in verse 3, and Festus has not volunteered to provide a military escort for the return trip. So Paul replies “I am standing before the judgment seat of Caesar, where I ought to be judged.” What Paul means by this is that at this very moment he stands before Caesar’s judgment seat which Festus occupies as Caesar’s official representative. Paul, as a Roman citizen, ought to be judged there now. He has been imprisoned long enough on trumped up charges.

His rights as a Roman citizen should not be abrogated by releasing him to the Jews who have no jurisdiction over him. He has done no wrong to the Jews as Festus very well knows, a stinging but truthful statement. If he has committed a crime worthy of death, he will accept death

without complaint, “but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me to them.” With such words he reminds Festus of the rights of a Roman citizen to freedom from being tried other than in Roman courts. Since Festus has not defended his rights, he will remove himself from his jurisdiction by appealing to the Emperor. This he does by the words “I appeal to Caesar.” This is the most jealously guarded privilege of a Roman citizen. An appeal to Caesar, the Roman Emperor, sets aside the judgments of provincial magistrates, if successful. And Caesar is the Supreme Court. On hearing these words Festus retires, and confers with his counsellors to make sure Paul has the right of appeal. Men caught red-handed in criminal acts, for example, cannot appeal. His counsellors assure him that Paul’s appeal is valid. So Festus reappears and says to Paul “have you appealed to Caesar? To Caesar shall you go.” Festus must breathe a sigh of relief at the prospect of losing a prisoner whose case takes him into uncharted waters, and is involving him in controversy with his new subjects. Only one matter remains, however. He has to prepare a brief for Caesar, stating the charges against Paul. He sees clearly that these charges are theological in nature, yet he knows nothing of the religion of the Jews. But God sees to it that he shall be adequately informed by arranging a visit to him at Caesarea of King Agrippa and Bernice.

#### King Agrippa and Bernice

Just as Scripture commands believers to respect dignitaries and pay honor to whom honor is due, so it applies these principles to the men and women whose lives it records. Candace, for example, is given the title of respect “Queen of the Ethiopians.” But Bernice is only mentioned by name. She is living in sin with her natural brother Agrippa. She first married her uncle and, on his death, established her incestuous relationship with her brother Agrippa. To avoid public indignation, she persuaded Polemon the king of Cilicia to marry her. When he abandoned her, she returned to her brother. Then at Rome she became the mistress of two Roman Emperors—Vespasian and Titus, who were father and son. Titus wanted to marry her, but the Roman people frowned on the proposed union. Juvenal, one of their poets, linked her behavior with the profession of Judaism as being typical of the moral standards of that religion, thus verifying the Apostle Paul’s words “for the Name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you” —Rom. 2:24. By thus linking Scripture to the history of the times we obtain a clearer picture of the corruption in high places. This helps us better understand what Paul faced in his public ministry. In his testimony to kings he witnesses to those who not only ruled over corruption, but in corruption.

#### The Visit of King Agrippa

King Agrippa and Bernice tarry “many days” in Caesarea, and as we might expect Agrippa visits the Roman governor socially. On one such occasion Festus confides in Agrippa. He recounts the story of Paul, whose case has not been disposed of by his predecessor. He relates how the Jews want Paul to die but to his astonishment they accuse him of nothing of consequence, in Roman eyes. He is charged only with matters concerning their own superstition and of one Jesus, who was dead, whom Paul claimed was alive.<sup>2</sup> Their hearts, if any, are harder than when they were grieved “that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead” —4:2. As for Festus, “he doubted of such manner of questions”. Perhaps the Jewish Sanhedrin can resolve them better, he suggests to Agrippa, but then Paul insists instead on appealing to Augustus, so that he is still in custody.

An explanation would be helpful here on Festus’ reference to the reigning Emperor or Caesar as Augustus. “Caesar” is the household name of the Emperor which Luke invariably uses to describe him. “Augustus” however, is a title with a pagan connotation. The Roman Senate gave this title to Octavian Caesar the first Emperor, who was long since dead, Nero being the Emperor in Paul’s day. The term Augustus speaks of majesty and by implication the divine honors due to the Emperor with such a title. This title “Augustus” was passed down from Emperor to Emperor after the first one with one exception, just as British kings did with the title “Defender of the Faith” after Henry VIII. This then is the sense in which Festus uses the term—not merely that Paul has appealed to the Emperor as the Supreme Court but to the man who is the god-Emperor. Festus uses still another term with an idolatrous connotation to describe the Emperor in Verse 26— “my lord.” This is connected with paying divine worship to the Emperor. These two titles give us a vivid insight into the times. The custom of paying divine honors to the Emperor was about this time fairly prevalent throughout the Roman world. Not full blown yet, but fast developing, it was this degrading practice which brought Christianity into open conflict with the Empire and precipitated frightful persecutions later.

Paul’s case poses a real problem to Festus. How is he to prepare a report to Caesar on matters he does not understand? Agrippa’s curiosity is aroused, however, and he expresses a wish to hear Paul. This is what Festus has been hoping for. He knows that Agrippa is intimately versed in the religion of the Jews and so can weigh the problem for him.<sup>3</sup> Festus tells Agrippa that he will hear Paul tomorrow.

Before we go further it would be well to get our whole subject in perspective. We need to know why Luke writes about Paul’s captivity in such detail when it is generally agreed that this period is spiritually barren. The reason is that it is an aftermath to the spirit filled ministry of Peter and Paul in the beginning. As such it stands all by itself as a separate division of the Book of Acts. This statement can be verified by a glance at the “many days” chart in this book. Clearly, the Holy Spirit has divided Acts into the ministry of Peter, the ministry of Paul, and the captivity.

The ministry of Peter and Paul is the original witness of the Holy Spirit in primitive Christianity. “The Captivity” is the wreckage man made of that work once it was put into his hands for administration that is, after the Apostles. The Peter and Paul “many days” then, speak of the work of the Spirit; the captivity “many days” of the work of the flesh.

In “the captivity” section of Acts Christianity is personalized in Paul. The story of his trials and captivity by all men is the story of the turning away from Paul’s life and example in the beginning of things. This actually occurred during his lifetime as the Scriptures testify. The story of his shipwreck is the story of what happened to his work the Church from ignoring his doctrine after he was gone. Paul’s life and work were disregarded, and wrecked, respectively, by all classes of men the Jew, the Gentile, and the Church of God. The ruin of the Church’s testimony in the world produced what man likes to call “the dark ages” a term coined by Baronius, the great historian of the Church of Rome.<sup>4</sup>

When Israel sinned, God punished them with a bodily captivity because the Jews are an earthly people; when the Church sinned God punished it with a spiritual captivity because Christians are a heavenly people. The children of Israel were carried away captive to Babylon; the Church to Babylon the Great, in whom is found “the souls of men” Rev. 17:13.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 19: The Third Mission Starts; the Riot at Ephesus (18:23-28)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 18:23-28; Chapter 19)

Each of the three missions starts with Paul departing from Antioch. On the first mission he travels with Barnabas. It starts with fasting and prayer and a commendation from the Holy Spirit. On the second mission Paul travels with Silas. It begins with Paul saying, "let us go again and visit our brethren." On the third mission Paul is alone. It begins uneventfully. Paul leaves Antioch again—18:22, 23.

On the third mission Paul's work reaches its pinnacle at Ephesus and its valley at Jerusalem. Just as his public ministry reaches its summit at Ephesus, so does his written ministry in the Epistle to the Ephesians. Paul warns the elders of this assembly of the coming declension of the church. They were especially selected to receive this message because the highest truth of Christianity was given to "the saints who are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus" —Eph. 1:1. Similarly the Lord Himself addresses "the angel of the Church of Ephesus" first in Rev. 2 and tells them to "remember therefore from whence thou art fallen." Ephesus fell from the mountain peak.

In this remarkable assembly three broad groups are eventually gathered together by the Holy Spirit's action—Jews, Gentiles, and John's disciples. Strictly speaking the latter are Jews of the dispersion, who accepted John's call to repentance and were baptized by him. They are not yet on Christian ground.

#### Apollos Arrives at Ephesus

Paul has a good reception in the synagogue at Ephesus and promises to return there after his visit to Jerusalem. Before he can do this, Apollos, an eloquent Alexandrian Jew mighty in the Scriptures that is in the Old Testament Scriptures arrives. Imperfect in knowledge, he is faithful to the light he has. He readily accepts instruction in the truth from the lowly tentmakers Aquilla and Priscilla. A natural man would not listen to them. Educated and eloquent as he is, he is content to be taught by those whom God has taught. This shows the workings of grace in his soul. Such men can be greatly used by God. Paul is not the only one at Ephesus who knows only the baptism of John. When Paul arrives there, he finds "about twelve" 19:7. In these transitional days these disciples believe that Jesus is the Messiah. But of the meaning of His death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit they know nothing.

#### The Baptism of the Twelve Disciples

Paul's question to the twelve disciples of John the Baptist, their reply, and their receiving the Holy Spirit after their Christian baptism presents us with certain difficulties not easily resolved. Paul writes to these same Ephesians "in whom ye also trusted, after ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom, after ye believed ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise" Eph. 1:13. From this passage it is clear that the Holy Spirit seals the believer who has heard and believed the gospel. However, until Paul spoke to the twelve disciples they had not heard and believed the gospel so there is no difficulty there as to their not having received the Holy Spirit. These twelve had been baptized to John's baptism only. John's baptism was a limited one of repentance, and pointed forward to Jesus, the Lamb of God who could take away their sins. Also, his call was to the godly in Israel, not to Gentiles. John was dead long before Jesus went to the cross. These twelve disciples need Christian baptism. So they are baptized to the Name of the Lord Jesus.<sup>1</sup> As soon as this takes place Paul lays his hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit. Acts of power follow they speak with tongues and prophesy. What happened is clear, but it raises a question why did not these twelve disciples receive the Holy Spirit before their baptism, rather than after?

One explanation of the difficulty is that they were Jews. In this view the Jew has attached to him a national sin the murder of the Son of God. They cried "His blood be on us and on our children" Mat. 27:25. When a Jew is baptized he does much more than acknowledge his lost condition by nature. By his baptism he publicly repudiates and dissociates himself from the special sin of his nation in crucifying their Messiah. Orthodox Jews understand this better than Christians. If an orthodox Jew is baptized he is stricken from the genealogy rolls, funeral service is held for him, and he is buried in effigy. If seen on the streets he is ignored as a dead person. In support of this interpretation two incidents involving Jews are cited from Acts. First there is Peter at the day of Pentecost. He says "repent" that is of their national sin of crucifying their Messiah which he has just told them of "and be baptized, every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" 2:38. No, Peter is not teaching that baptism gives life. He has presented Christ to them. Only belief in the finished work of Christ gives life. But Peter is showing the divine order for the Jew because of his national sin repent, be baptized, receive the remission of sins and the Holy Spirit. That is not the order for the Gentile. The same Apostle Peter speaks to the Gentiles at Caesarea and what happens? "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word" 10:44 "and he commanded them to be baptized" v. 48. Then there is Paul at Ephesus. The twelve disciples are Jews dispersed abroad. Yet we find the same sequence of events as with the Jews at Jerusalem and Peter. They received the Holy Spirit after their baptism. With Peter at Pentecost baptism is to the Name of Jesus Christ because the emphasis there is that they have slain the Christ of God: at Ephesus it is to the Name of the Lord Jesus because the twelve acknowledge Jesus as the Christ but must go a step further and acknowledge His claims on them as their Lord, which is true Christian ground.

The various groups who have received the Holy Spirit should now be reviewed. In the beginning those who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost were all Jews. Next the Samaritans believed the gospel, Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Then Peter preached to Cornelius and his house and the Holy Spirit fell on them. Finally, Paul preaches to these twelve dispersed Jews and they receive the Holy Spirit. In each case it is the same Holy Spirit who came down from heaven but given to successive groups Jews at Jerusalem Samaritans Gentiles and Jews in dispersion so that God could fulfill His promise to pour out His Spirit on all flesh.

#### From the Synagogue to the School of Tyrannus

Chapter 19 gives us the last time Paul enters into a synagogue in Acts. God pleads mightily with the Jews there. At first, they give Paul a good reception. Then, obedient man that he is, he says "I will return again to you, if God will." Note the two "wills" characteristic of the true Christian. His will is subject to God's will. God's will is that Apollos prepare the way for Paul pleading with the synagogue before Paul re-enters it with the full truth of the gospel. Apollos is an eloquent man and mighty in their Old Testament Scriptures. Surely, they will listen to him!

Apollos leaves for Corinth and Paul re-enters the synagogue. He gives them a full testimony for three months “disputing and persuading the things concerning the Kingdom of God.” In the Acts Peter’s ministry is to fulfill his Master’s committal to him of the keys of the Kingdom of the heavens; Paul’s ministry concerns the Kingdom of God which, unlike the Jewish kingdoms of old, is not meat and drink but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. His testimony is not only disbelieved but reviled. So Paul departs from them. He rents the school of Tyrannus, a local philosopher. Here the Ephesian Christians meet. Here too Paul disputes daily, for the place is well known to the public. “And this continued by the space of two years; so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” The Greeks come to Ephesus to worship at the temple of Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus. That is how the entire Roman province of Asia comes to hear the Word of the Lord. Ephesus is a center for pilgrimages to the shrine of Artemis. The wide diffusion of the Word of God and then its power and great influence are the subjects the Spirit would bring before us here.

#### The “Ecclesia”

We must not pass by Paul’s step of separating the disciples from the synagogue to the school of Tyrannus lightly. He is giving formal expression to what was ever in the mind of God for His Church or Assembly that is that they should be called out from their old associations, whatever they may be, to proper Christian ground. In this connection let us consider the origin of the Greek word “ecclesia” translated “Assembly”, and interchangeably “Church” in the English language.<sup>2</sup>

The word first appears among Athenian writers, and so seems to have originated there. In early days the town crier went through the city calling out or summoning the citizens from their homes to the ordinary legislative assemblies. All were not called because all were not citizens, and only citizens could be summoned to a meeting of the Assembly. Citizens were mainly landed proprietors. At Athens their numbers are estimated at 43,000 in the fifth century before Christ, the classical age, out of a total population of perhaps 315,000. Thus, the origin of the word suggests the origin of the Church a people called out of the world to consider matters pertaining to themselves and their interests. Paul frequently uses the word “called” to describe us e.g. “called to be saints” Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2 etc.

In time the word “ecclesia” lost its original meaning and conveyed to the Greek mind merely an assembly of people.

#### Peter’s Shadow and Paul’s Workclothes

The next subject coming to our attention is the special miracles God wrought by the hands of Paul. His tent-making work-clothes are the means of blessing. The “handkerchiefs” are really rags tentmakers use to wipe the sweat from their brows; the aprons are a type used by these artisans in their work. These articles were not holy or consecrated in themselves as a literal interpretation of the miracles led men to believe. Indeed, such an interpretation was the forerunner of the superstition of collecting and adoring supposed relics of the saints.<sup>3</sup> God certainly could have performed these miracles in some other way. But He chose to do it this way to teach us, in figure, the blessing which flowed out to others as a result of Paul’s labors. Blessing flowed out to others too from Peter, the other great Apostle whose labors divide the Acts with Paul, but in his case, it was from his shadow. What these great Apostles did in the body to heal others is the great teaching in these incidents. They occur as their respective ministries are rising to their zenith. We will consider Peter’s shadow first, and afterward Paul’s work clothes.

Peter’s shadow—Chapter 5—is the story of Peter’s life his failures, his restoration, his might as a restored servant of the Lord. His life exemplifies the Scripture “when I fall I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light to me” Micah 7:8. After the Lord restored Peter, he stood up to exhort in the Assembly and to preach the gospel in the world. When the Lord restores a man, he restores him perfectly. Peter’s epistles are full of the government of God as only he could write who had experienced it. These epistles, and the written record of his life in the gospels are his shadow. Peter’s shadow is his restorative influence on us if we have gotten away from the Lord as we read how Peter tasted that the Lord is gracious. If Peter was restored, we can be too, for Peter’s God is ours.

A man’s shadow can only be cast if he is in the light. Peter obeyed the Lord’s command “follow thou Me” and so abode in the light. A shadow is the projection of a man who is himself in the light. So we read in 5:15 that they brought the sick (figuratively backsliders) into the streets (where men walk) and laid them in beds and couches (the bed confines—it speaks of unjudged things—the couch, where the lazy man reclines, speaks of slothfulness in the things of God). And so it is today. Peter’s shadow has passed by all of us. He was a man like us who once walked for God on the streets of this world. And this encourages us to walk in the light ourselves.

If Peter’s shadow teaches us the need to abide in the light, Paul’s hands tell us of the works of love which were never compromised by unfaithfulness. God’s nature is light and love and we find the fruits of this nature in the lives of these two great apostles. Indeed, it is in the very next chapter to the one we are considering that Paul brings his hands to the attention of the Ephesian elders. And what he says about those hands is another of the special miracles God wrought by the hands of Paul. His hands wrought works contrary to man’s nature “yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, it is more blessed to give than to receive” —20:34, 35. But why should the great Apostle labor when he himself laid down the principle that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel?—1 Cor. 9:14. He writes to these same Corinthians “and when I was present with you and wanted, I was chargeable to no man . . . in all things I have kept myself from being burdensome to you, and so will I keep myself” —2 Cor. 11:9. It was his deep love for the Corinthians that made him work with his own hands. Did he love them less, receiving nothing from them? No, he loved them more. By being self-supporting he could reprove them in his epistles, assured that they could not raise a finger against him due to his upright conduct. The guiding principle that kept Paul working was to be independent of man but dependent on God. It flowed out of deep love for Christ and the Church. Many a servant of the Lord has since followed Paul’s example, laboring with his hands to feed himself naturally and to feed the Lord’s sheep spiritually when they are too poor to support him. Paul’s actions displayed uncompromising righteousness. No wonder that work clothes from Paul’s body healed the sick. Who could write like him “be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ” —1 Cor. 11:1.

In the case of Peter’s shadow persons with unclean spirits were healed; in the case of Paul’s work clothes wicked spirits went out. The result was the same with Peter and Paul. Official worldly religion, influenced by these spirits, rose up against the Apostles. The High Priest was filled with indignation at this healing—5:17; in Acts 19 the Ephesians too were filled with indignation at the alleged threats to their goddess. So much for the world. When we turn to the Church we find those who believed Peter’s preaching, daily in the temple, and in every house,



ceasing not to teach and preach Jesus Christ—see 5:42. In Paul’s case all those who dwell in Asia hear the Word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. Thus the Word of God spreads and its influence grows, from devoted men who display God’s nature in their lives and walk. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” —2 Cor. 4:7.

## Idolatry and the Occult

The mighty miracles God wrought through the Apostle were to direct attention to the gospel and to overthrow the power of unclean and wicked spirits over men. This Satanic influence polluted the lives of the people in those days. Only “doctrines of demons” can explain the general practice of exposing unwanted babies, especially females, to the elements so they would die. Or the heinous sin of the Romans pitting man against man in battles to the death to entertain the populace in the public games.

People as intelligent as the Greeks and Romans simply did not construct their vast temples on the principle of blind faith on myths and legends handed down to them. They were in actual contact with demons and this was what confirmed them in their delusions. The temples seemed really to be temples of the gods to them for they had actual intercourse with wicked spirits. So Paul’s work with the Gentiles was “to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” —26:18. Paul’s night visions, in connection with these pagans, were meant to illustrate their true state—under the power of Satan.

Demons are a separate class of being from the fallen angels. They are spirits who have an intense desire to become incarnate. When the Lord cast the legion out, they rushed into a herd of swine—Mat. 8:30, 32—as the next best thing to indwelling a man. Speculative theology has attempted to unravel the mystery of their origin, but in the writer’s judgment unsuccessfully. The best book on the subject is Pember’s “Earth’s earliest ages”<sup>4</sup> but the reader is cautioned on pursuing the subject too far in view of the warning given in Col. 2:18. In Acts we find two classes of these beings—unclean spirits—probably those indwelling a man’s body and defiling it—and wicked spirits generally though not always connected with propagating wicked doctrine and hence more often connected with the temples of the gods. Thus, they attacked man inside and outside.<sup>5</sup>

This interconnection is indicated in Acts 19. First, we have the seven sons of Sceva attempting to exorcise a wicked spirit by calling on Jesus whom Paul preached. Recognizing the forgery, the wicked spirit overcomes them, which illustrates the supernatural power of a demon. The seven sons of Sceva flee, naked and wounded from one man possessed by a demon. This becomes public knowledge. The Ephesians’ formerly valuable magic books worth fifty thousand pieces of silver, are burned. Here the connection with the temple of Artemis is exposed. Ephesus was noted throughout the ancient world for the Ephesian inscriptions—charms, amulets etc. which were linked to the worship of the goddess Artemis. On her image mystic, unintelligible words were inscribed and transferred to these magic books or Ephesian letters as they were called. This overthrow of the power of demons over man would enrage the powers of darkness. Wicked spirits undoubtedly were the unseen force behind the riot over “Artemis of the Ephesians” which followed. Idolatry is putting an object between the soul and God. This is always Satan’s purpose for he knows God is the source of all man’s blessing and he wants to keep him away from that.

Before the riot Paul purposes in his spirit to go to Jerusalem and from there to Rome. He has no idea yet that bonds and imprisonment await him if he should undertake such a journey. Later he will receive warnings to this effect but ignore them. His purpose of spirit here stated intervenes between the overthrow of Satan’s power in the burning of the magic books and the riot over Artemis. When he arrives at another temple—the one at Jerusalem—he will again be confronted with a riot—not as here over his doctrine but over himself. For the present he sends Timothy and Erastus away but remains in Asia for a season. Before reviewing the riot, we will briefly describe Ephesus, its temple and religion, so we may better understand the root of the uproar.

## Great Artemis of the Ephesians

Man is the same everywhere, be he Jew or Gentile. The first reference to “the gods” in Acts is Stephen’s—referring to Israel’s idolatry “make us gods to go before us”; the last reference is to the Gentiles—“they are no gods which are made with hands” —19:26. These gods, though called by different names, often incorporate the same thought. But what god is there, worthy of the name, who would be unaccompanied by a goddess? The folly of man’s wisdom is shown to us by the divided references to the word “goddess” in Scripture. In the Old Testament Solomon, a Jew, and the wisest man, worshipped a goddess, Ashtoreth<sup>6</sup> —1 Kings 11:5, 33. In the New Testament the Greeks, the wisest of Gentiles, worshipped the goddess Artemis 19:27, 37. The Romans called her Diana and pictured her as a huntress whereas Artemis was sculptured with many breasts. Her image “came down from heaven” and it has been suggested that it may have been a meteorite whose distorted form suggested many breasts to their lively imaginations.

## The Temple and the City

The worship of Artemis was ancient in the city. Pliny tells us that the shrine had been sacked seven times before it was burned down in 356 BC by a lunatic on the night that Alexander the Great was born. The temple was rebuilt more magnificently than ever. Its huge foundations were sunk deep in marshy ground since earthquakes were prevalent there, and close to the harbour. It was the biggest temple the Greeks ever built. It was four times the size of the Parthenon and considered one of the seven wonders of the world. Pausanias said that it surpassed every structure raised by human hands. It was 425 feet long and 220 feet broad. It had 127 Ionic columns, sixty feet high, each the gift of a king. In Paul’s day it dominated the landscape, a symbol of Satan’s power in the earth.

In process of time Ephesus’ harbour silted up and could not be dredged. The city was beginning its decline as a seaport and commercial center in Paul’s time, and capitalizing on its religious importance to make up for lost revenue. Pilgrimages to Ephesus to see the great shrine and sales of miniature shrines to tourists helped. Paul imperiled this when he entered with the gospel—which explains Demetrius’ success in stirring up the people. The theatre at Ephesus could hold 25,000 people and is the largest known to us from antiquity. But this ancient glory has passed away. Over the centuries the city and temple were sacked, and malaria-laden marshes took over. In Victorian times the British archaeologist Wood spent fruitless years looking for its site until he unearthed an inscription leading him to it. The marshes in which it still rests are no longer malarial. As to the temple, those treasures which have been recovered are dispersed around the world—principally the British Museum and the Museum of Istanbul. The ancient city has been restored as a tourist center. There is a local museum and tourists may inspect the great library of Celsus with its lecture room and bookshelves, or the ruins of the theatre.

## Demetrius Incites the People to Riot

Paul's work at Ephesus is drawing to a close and the devil whom God has restrained until an Assembly was gathered out and taught, is now allowed to show his hand. His puppet is Demetrius the silversmith. Much more is at stake than the sale of his silver shrines which pilgrims buy and take away for household gods. The temple of Artemis is the banking center of Asia. The wealth generated by idolatry or commerce is deposited there and loaned out, increasing the importance of Ephesus. Hence the cry of the senseless mob "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Satan knows how to touch two elements to inflame them—money and pride. Ephesus had had great blessing in the gospel. We must not think of the work here in terms of a few thousand converts. That would not be enough to influence the sale of Demetrius' shrines, for as he said, "this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people." Now the Ephesians are put to the test. What will it be for them, God or the devil? God had offered them the salvation of their souls. The devil gave nothing but played upon their base passions. The ruins of their temple today, seated in marshes where birds breed, are striking testimony of the folly of serving Satan. For those Ephesians who rejected the gospel shall one day rise for judgment. Their works will be exposed by God more surely than their city was by the spade of the archaeologist.

The mob riots under Demetrius' inflaming words. They cannot find Paul but seize Gaius and Aristarchus, his travelling companions, and rush into the theatre. Paul is wisely restrained from going there but his magnificent courage can be seen at its best in the attempt. That the Asiarchs should befriend Paul under the circumstances shows the esteem in which he is held by men in high office.<sup>7</sup>

The Jews now put Alexander forward to address the unruly Assembly, most of whom do not know why they are there—v. 32. Luke tells us that he beckoned with his hand and would have made his defense to the people. But finding out that he is a Jew they drown him out with a senseless cry "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" for nearly two hours. The Jews here are as much under attack as the Christians, for neither acknowledge Artemis. Alexander may have been hoping to disassociate the Jews from the Christians in the theatre as Paul has disassociated the Christians from the Jews in the synagogue. But the Jews, having rejected the Lord, had turned to the devil's power in our chapter—v. 13—and he does not need them here.

Finally, the most important official in Ephesus intervenes. Whatever way we render his title he is the liaison officer between the civic administration and the power of Rome which explains what he says in Verse 40. His wisdom is displayed in allowing the mob to shout itself out without any object on which to vent its fury. Only then does he appeal to their reason. He lauds their goddess and tells them to do nothing rashly—that is to act only according to the law. For the men they have brought into the Assembly—Gaius and Aristarchus—have neither robbed the temple's bank nor spoken injuriously of their goddess. If Demetrius wants to prosecute them there are law courts to settle disputes. The Romans disapprove of people taking the law into their own hands and may call them to answer for this uproar. It is a masterly speech, beautifully timed, so that when he dismisses the Assembly officially, they go away obediently.

In closing we would remark that the beautiful symmetry we find in Acts—for example where Peter has a vision, then Paul has a vision, where Peter has a journey and Paul has a journey, once more is starting to show up. The Spirit is teaching us that the greater space devoted to Paul's activities in the Acts must not be allowed to detract from Peter's important role. God would have us understand that the Apostle to the Jews, Peter, must not be slighted in any way because of the greater emphasis on Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The purpose of the symmetry is to give balance to events.

However, it takes a different form here, to draw our attention to important events in Paul's life and work. The riot at Ephesus has its counterpart later on in the riot at Jerusalem. Paul is saved from the Ephesian mob by his friends, from the Jerusalem mob by Roman soldiers. The symmetry in the two riots is probably to draw our attention to the peak and valley of Paul's work on his third mission Ephesus and Jerusalem. We have crested the peak at Ephesus—now, alas, we must start our journey into the valley—Jerusalem.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 18: Corinth and the End of the Second Mission (18:1-22)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 18:1-22)

"After these things" we are told, Paul departed from Athens and came to Corinth. The expression "after these things" is a signal of the end of one phase of things and the beginning of another. Athens wasn't really in Paul's plans. He had hoped that conditions in Thessalonica might have settled down enough to let him return there. A change of magistrates would have accomplished this. But he receives no news to encourage him along these lines and so leaves for Corinth.

## The Strategic Position of Corinth

In Roman times Greece was divided into two provinces Macedonia, to which Paul had come in response to the vision, and in which an assembly had been established at Philippi and Achaia<sup>1</sup> The capital of which was Corinth. Could he evangelize Corinth and establish a Christian testimony there he would have a center in each province of Greece from which the gospel could radiate. Both centers lent themselves to this end. Philippi, as a garrison town, would see much coming and going of soldiers; Corinth of travelers, since it was a seaport and commercial center. Paul's object was the diffusion of the gospel throughout the world. His broad strategy was to secure a beachhead in key cities. His settled policy was to aim for the larger centers of influence in the Roman world. Persecution sometimes made him turn aside for a time to lesser towns, but invariably he returned to the large centers, which could spread the glad tidings to those passing through them. He laid the foundations, others could carry the Word to the more remote parts.<sup>2</sup>

Corinth was one of the greatest centers of trade and navigation in the Roman Empire due to its strategic location. It was situated on a narrow land bridge connecting Achaia and Macedonia and separating the Adriatic from the Aegean. Ships were hauled between the seas on rollers or wagons along a roadway. For larger vessels Corinth built excellent harbors with facilities for ships sailing on both seas. We are familiar with one of these seaports—Cenchrea—from Scripture for Phoebe was deaconess there—Rom. 16:1. In 66 A.D. the Emperor Nero broke ground for the Corinthian canal, which was restarted and completed before the close of the 19th Century. Corinth itself was situated on level ground

dominated by a huge hill known as the Acrocorinthus. This towered eighteen hundred feet over the city and on it stood the Corinthian Acropolis. The rites of the Corinthian goddess of love there contributed to the moral debauchery that characterized the city, even in the pagan world. Another factor was its seaports, which never attract the best characters. Commerce bred wealth and luxury and fed the flames which made Corinth what it was. Then too the Isthmian games were celebrated ten miles out of the city and attracted many travelers. These people provided a captive market for the wandering tentmakers who sold their wares here. For the games were held in the springtime, when the air is chilly, accompanied by frequent showers and violent gusts of wind.

#### The Decree of the Emperor Claudius

An interesting sidelight on the conditions of the Jews in the Roman Empire about this time is recorded here. Paul finds fellow tent workers, Aquila and Priscilla, at Corinth “because Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome.” Claudius had found them too numerous to expel outright. Instead he banned them from meeting in accordance with their ancestral customs, which to a Jew was intolerable. Claudius was angry at the Jews because of their incessant riots “at the instigation of Chrestus.” Like many Romans, even Tacitus, he was ill-informed about the Jewish religion. Chrestus was a common name with them— “Christus” —(Christ) was not. It seems more than probable that the riots in the Jewish community at Rome were caused by the introduction of Christianity into the synagogues. This most likely was the work of the Roman Jews who visited Jerusalem 2:10—and returned to Rome converted after the day of Pentecost. We shall see in Gallio’s actions later how disinterested the Romans were in the Jews’ religion, and how Claudius would think Chrestus was fomenting the riots that disturbed the peace. This picture agrees perfectly with the historical record of Acts, where uprisings arose, and charges were laid from faulty information, distorted views of Christian teaching, etc.

In the meantime, Claudius ruled the Empire; Paul was his subject. Both were men of letters, but Paul has little leisure to indulge in such things. Together with the expelled Aquila and Priscilla he works as a tentmaker to pay his expenses. He wanted to visit the Thessalonians but knew this was impossible as long as the present magistrates were still in office. Instead he writes them. His epistles to the Thessalonians were the first he wrote.

#### Events in the Synagogue and the Adjoining House

With their trading instincts, Jews seem to gravitate toward commercial cities like Corinth, and their numbers are swollen here by the enforced exodus from Rome. Paul spends his Sabbaths reasoning with them in the synagogue. When Silas and Timothy join him in Corinth they find him engaged in this testimony, the climax of which is that Jesus is the Christ— “but as they opposed and spoke injuriously, he shook his clothes, and said to them, Your blood be upon your head—I am pure; from henceforth I will go to the nations.” Thus Paul left the synagogue, not feeling compelled to endure any longer their blasphemy against their own Messiah. He would turn to the Gentiles, who were receptive to the good news.

So a Gentile opens his house to him. This man is Justus, whose house was beside the synagogue. Accepting this offer and making it too was an act of great personal courage. The separated company could expect reprisals from the synagogue next door, insults on the streets as they congregated and departed, etc. The location of the new assembly must have been an intense irritation to the Jews, especially when Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house. To these few believers meeting in Justus’ house were added many of the Corinthians who believed and were baptized. Out of these humble beginnings grew “the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” —1 Cor. 1:2—for whom Paul thanked his God always on their behalf.

At this time Paul has the second of the two night visions the Lord gave him in connection with the darkened pagans of Greece. The visions in Acts connected with the Jews were day visions, because the Jews had the light of God. But the Greeks were in darkness. Paul’s first vision was to come and help Macedonia, one of the two provinces of Greece; his second vision was in the capital of the other province Corinth—to encourage him to stay there in the face of opposition which might well discourage any man. The Lord had many people in that city. Paul obeyed both visions. His stay at Corinth was unusually long—a year and a half. It was a teaching rather than a preaching ministry, very vital in such a wicked city, where even the most elementary principles of right conduct were unknown. Even then it had to be supplemented later by two epistles to correct the loose moral state the new converts brought with them from their profligate surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

#### Gallio Sets a Legal Precedent

The Jews now bring Paul to the judgment seat of the newly appointed Roman proconsul, Gallio. This man was highly esteemed in Roman life, being of amiable disposition and personal charm. He was a brother of the younger Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, and a son of the elder Seneca, the rhetorician. He bore the name of his adoptive father. Before his tribunal the Jews charge Paul, saying “this (base man is implied) persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” This accusation may have been phrased to raise a doubt in Gallio’s mind that more than Moses’ law was involved—Caesar’s was too. This because the Emperor Augustus had left a tradition that the religious “status quo” should be observed throughout the Empire. To this end only existing religions were lawful, and interfaith conversions banned. Judaism was a recognized religion, and the Jews wanted a ruling from Gallio that Christianity was not a sect within Judaism, but a separate religion altogether, and so illegal. But Gallio thought otherwise, regarding the whole matter as an internal squabble within the broad framework of the religion of the Jews, and unworthy of his attention. This can be seen from his words and actions— “if indeed it was some wrong or wicked criminality, O Jews, of reason I should have borne with you; but if it be questions about words, and names, and the law that ye have, see to it yourselves; for I do not intend to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the judgment seat.” The judgment seat was in the open air as customary in those days,<sup>4</sup> which explains why the Greeks were present to give Sosthenes a beating. The Greeks did not love the Jews any more than the Romans.

Gallio’s ruling, coming as it did not from a magistrate in a city, but from the governor of a Roman province, established a precedent which was followed by the governors of other provinces in the treatment of Christianity. Indeed Paul argued before Agrippa that the gospel he preached was the true faith of Israel, and even at the end maintained that it was for the hope of Israel he was bound with his chain—28:20. While true, in practice the Jews’ refusal of that faith made a break with Judaism inevitable. Like oil and water, Judaism and Christianity cannot mix. For the present, though, Gallio’s judgment provided an umbrella under which Christianity was providentially sheltered from the storms of persecution that were to burst on it later. This temporary official policy afforded, in the providence of God, an opportunity for the

establishment and nurturing of the fledgling assemblies without official Roman interference.

Later on Christianity was recognized for what it is—Christ. Its protection as an official religion—that is, as part of the recognized Jewish religion—was withdrawn, and fierce persecution followed.

#### The Close of the Second Mission

Paul stayed in Corinth “many days.” Then in Cenchrea, the Eastern port of Corinth, he shears his head, for he had a vow. Commentators differ as to whether this was the beginning or ending of his vow, and whether or not it was a Nazarite or general vow. We will be content to glean the general lesson that Paul was very much a Jew and loved his national customs and religious practices. So he sails from Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila until he reaches Ephesus, where Priscilla and Aquila stay for some time, probably to make and sell tents there. Tent makers like Aquila and Priscilla moved from town to town selling their wares to travelers and soldiers. When the market in one town dried up, they moved on to another. Paul himself goes into the synagogue, where he meets a good reception. And well he might, with the marks of a good Jew about him—his head shorn because of his vow and his stated purpose to go up to Jerusalem to keep the feast. The Jews press him to stay but the approaching close of the navigation season dictates otherwise. So he sails from Ephesus to the land of Israel. He lands at Caesarea and goes up—that is, to Jerusalem. He greets the Church there. We are not told whether his ship arrived in time for the feast. Perhaps the Holy Spirit noted all this so we would understand the human side of Paul better. He dearly loved “my own nation according to the flesh.”

From Jerusalem he goes down to Antioch. Antioch, of course, was the mission center, not Jerusalem. So his long second mission comes to a close. Yet it is important to note that he salutes the assembly at Jerusalem, not the one at Antioch. He seems only to have arrived back at Antioch incidentally, his main purpose being the keeping of a Jewish feast. This and the vow show us things which, while not wrong in the transitional days of Acts, would have better been discarded. Certainly, they formed no part of Christianity. The dear Apostle’s love for the Jews was not reciprocated, and his adherence to their customs was soon to bring him into deep waters—chains and imprisonment. Nor do we find Silas with him at the end of the second mission as he had Barnabas at the end of the first. He is alone.

No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 12: Peter's Deliverance From Prison and His Departure (12:1-24)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 12:1-24)

The twelfth chapter opens on an ominous note. Herod the King “laid his hands on some of those of the Assembly to harm them, and slew James, the brother of John with the sword. And seeing that it was pleasing to the Jews, he went on to take Peter also.” This is a new phase of persecution and should be examined in the light of what has already transpired.

#### The Attacks of Satan

We are perhaps slow to identify our persecutors as not men merely but tools of Satan. Yet the Scripture clearly teaches that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” Eph. 6:12. In some countries in the world today evil spirits are unchecked publicly; in others man is manipulated unseen by Satan to accomplish his ends. Sometimes he proceeds with guile as in the case of the orator Tertullus Acts 24... but more often by open violence. Prison, chains, the lash, the soldier, the sword these are the symbols we encounter in Acts Satan’s tools of trade. What is characteristic of his method is the use of ever-increasing pressure against those who stand for the truth.

At the beginning the Apostles were only jailed and warned. Then they were beaten when they refused to stop preaching. Stephen was stoned and the Church so persecuted that it had to disperse. But at this time it had reformed, either through conversions, the return of those who had left, or both. Now for the first time an apostle is slain and another imprisoned. This was an especially ominous event because it linked the secular and religious powers against Christianity. This union is the secret of Satan’s success as a persecutor in the world. When the American nation was founded the God-fearing men who framed the Constitution adopted the principle of separating Church from State. This was based less on knowledge of Scripture than on historical experience of the tyranny of Protestant state churches—a tyranny which caused the pilgrim fathers to flee England for the new land of America. But Scripture clearly shows the two-fold way in which Satan exercises power in the Lord’s temptation. Satan took the Lord to the pinnacle of the temple—religious power—and showed Him the kingdoms of the earth in a moment of time—political power. Satan distinctly said, and the Lord did not refute him, that the power and the glory of these kingdoms belonged to him. As to the world’s religions there is no doubt that he manipulates their leaders.

So it is here. As long as the believers carried on with the law, the temple, the synagogue, they could be tolerated up to a point. Their testimony accusing the religious leaders of the nation of the death of Christ evoked great bitterness. But in the eyes of the Jews they were merely another Jewish sect, the synagogue of the Nazarenes, one more added to the many prevalent in Jerusalem at this time. But when Peter in effect broke with the Jewish system of things by receiving Gentiles and eating with them, and his actions were ratified, alarm bells rang throughout the capital. It must be remembered that by this time Christians were numerous and their actions watched. Satan well knew how useful the law was in chaining man to useless works, and the strength of that union of Jew and Gentile which was now emerging. So his religious puppets are manipulated to lobby with the political power for the first time. In the later stages of the Church’s history the political power becomes the instrument of persecuting cruelty. Satan then has gone to the limit of his powers. Sad as such conditions became, the Lord envisaged them in His first declaration of the Church to Peter with the assurance that the gates of hades should not prevail against it. They have often pressed hard against it, but greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world.

The direct attempt of Satan here was to strike hard at the leadership of the Church. In the inscrutable ways of God, James the brother of John suffers death—the only death of an apostle in the New Testament—and Peter is delivered. When reason fails us—when things happen in life we can’t understand—faith helps us overcome. Having experienced this in his own life Peter writes of it to encourage others “that the trial of

your faith, being much more Precious than of gold which perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” —1 Pet. 1:7.

#### Peter's Deliverance From Prison

Peter's position appears hopeless. Not only put in prison, but guarded by soldiers on continuous relief through the four watches the meaning of “four quaternions of soldiers” —he is under continuous surveillance. Furthermore, he is bound with two chains. Two soldiers guard him in his cell and two are posted in front of the door. These details are given to us in an interrupted fashion—the break being the comment “but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church to God for him.” This conditions our thinking for what takes place—his deliverance from an apparently hopeless situation.

What happens demonstrates the superiority of the power of God over Satan's power “and lo, an angel of the Lord came there, and a light shone in the prison.” Peter's deliverance is typically Jewish as befits the Apostle to the Jews, unlike Paul's deliverance later at Philippi. The Jews believed they were under the protection of angels. An angel disturbed the pool of Bethesda. Stephen said they had received the law as ordained by the ministry of angels and had not kept it. The light that shines in the prison also is in contrast to the earthquake at Philippi. Israel was a light in a dark world, but the gospel Paul preached in the Philippian jail shook the whole world and disturbed it. The world is Satan's prison.

And now we come to a beautiful touch. The light does not wake Peter. He is sleeping too soundly for that. The angel has to hit him on his side. Even then he isn't sure about this and thinks he has seen a vision. This incident has to be considered in the light of Peter's past. Luke tells us that on the Mount of transfiguration “Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, and when they were awake, they saw His glory and the two men that stood with Him” —Luke 9:32. Luke also tells us that the disciples—which would include Peter—were sleeping for sorrow before the Lord's betrayal so that He had to reprove them— “why sleep ye?” In Mark's gospel Peter is singled out— “Simon, sleepest thou? Could you not watch one hour?” Thus Peter slept during the Lord's sufferings and the manifestation of His glory. But Christ has suffered these things and entered into His glory. Peter's sleep now is an undisturbed repose in the knowledge of what Christ has done for Him and where he now is. He is fulfilling the first part of his words to the Lord— “I am ready to go with Thee, both into prison, and to death.” This shows how the Lord leads us gradually in the experience of Christian life. Peter certainly wasn't ready when he spoke these words, but he was ready when he slept between the soldiers. Full trust in the Lord is seen here. Picture yourself in Peter's position in the prison awaiting execution. Would you be sleeping so soundly that an angel would have to hit you hard to wake you? This picture is given us as we come to the close of Peter's ministry so we may see the way the Lord led Peter.

The deliverance by the angel was miraculous. The soldiers in Peter's cell were probably asleep, secure in the knowledge that Peter was chained to them by his hands. But the angel says to Peter “rise up quickly!” And his chains fall off his hands. Peter is told to dress and dutifully follows the angel. The prison guards do not see them for “as soon as it was day there was no small stir among the soldiers what was become of Peter.” In accordance with cruel Roman customs that accepted no excuses for failure to guard prisoners they are later put to death. As for Peter the iron gate of the prison simply opens. The angel escorts him through one street, then leaves him. The miraculous now gives way to everyday life.

#### The Prayer Meeting in Mary's House

Peter attributes his deliverance to the Lord. He thinks over what has happened and decides that the best thing to do is to go to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. Unknown to him a prayer meeting is being held for him. It tells us much about our own limited faith in prayer. Peter had already been freed while prayer was still going on. This of course was unknown when Peter stood outside knocking. But when Rhoda answers she instantly recognizes Peter's voice. Instead of opening the door she is overjoyed and runs to tell everybody Peter is here. It is a very human scene in contrast to the angelic deliverance. Nobody can believe their prayers have been answered! Surely this is a picture of us of little faith. Poor Peter! He keeps knocking outside in the night air and darkness. Finally, they open the door and are astonished. So the Lord really answered our prayers! The prayer meeting does not continue, however, to thank the Lord for deliverance. These reminders of our weakness bring before us the truth that we are the Lord's sheep. Sheep are not particularly intelligent naturally; neither were these believers in their conduct. But sheep have a shepherd who looks after them and so have we. The Lord loves us not because of what we are but because of what He is. How blessed to know that the Lord is our Shepherd and we shall not want.

Peter tells the story of his deliverance and says, “go show these things to James and to the brethren.” This admonition, coming as it does at the close of Peter's recorded public ministry in the Acts, is not without meaning. James by this time has become the most important man in the Church at Jerusalem. We will see this later on in the Acts, but it is well to note it now.

#### Peter Goes to Another Place

And now we have to say goodbye to Peter, that faithful servant of the Lord Jesus, in whose affections we may be assured he occupied a most deserved place. The divine record of his ministry closes with the statement that “he departed, and went to another place.” The other place is not specified because such knowledge would not contribute to life and godliness—2 Pet. 1:3—otherwise it would have been given to us. But we may be sure it was not Rome.<sup>2</sup> He is thought to have written his first epistle about A.D. 64 and his second the following year. The considerations involved in these approximations, like the date of his martyrdom, are too involved to discuss here. But it is generally conceded that neither Peter nor Paul lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Both suffered martyrdom—John 21:18, 19; 2 Ti. 4:6. The departure of Peter is full of pathos. Paul too at the end of his life said that the time of his departure was at hand. We dearly miss all the Lord's people who are taken from us if our hearts are right with God.

Some believers mistakenly make much of Peter's failure, forgetting that the Lord turned and looked on Peter. That was enough. So he writes later “if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious” —1 Pet. 2:3. He is numbered with the twelve, of whom the Lord said “ye are they who have persevered with Me in My temptations. And I appoint unto you, as My Father has appointed unto Me, a kingdom, that ye may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” With such a reward, promised by the Lord Himself, we do well to refrain from talking too much of whatever failure came into Peter's life. God has a way of looking at His servants apart from

their failures. He looks at them from the tops of the mountains. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in His way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholds Him with His hand" Ps. 37:23, 24.

### The Death of Herod and Its Dispensational Teaching

Some commentators<sup>3</sup> have been astute enough to read into the account of Herod's death more than the mere history of it. Others, while aware of it, have not expounded it. There is in the story an interplay of history and prophecy. Let us examine it in this connection.

Historically the famine which was prophesied by Agabus is a picture of the state of the Jew during the Church period. Agabus, whose name means "grasshopper" appears twice in the Acts. (the locust, which devours crops, is of the grasshopper family). Agabus' appearance coincides with the end of both Peter and Paul's public ministry. Gloomy tidings are associated with his messages in both cases. What followed Peter's ministry to the Jews was the introduction of a spiritual famine a famine of the Word of God. The only relief that the Jews can get, as in the case of the actual famine, is through the ministry of Paul 11:30. Paul's doctrine characterizes the Church period when the Jews, spiritually, are starving to death. If they come to Christ they will not hunger, for God has not cast away His people. But they must submit to Paul's ministry "believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved." Then the time comes when Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem 12:25. Paul's ministry ceases when the second coming of Christ takes place. Famine conditions end, and God raises up a godly Jewish remnant in the land of Israel.

Now let us consider the same account as a prophesy of conditions that will be found in Israel when antichrist rules over them. Like Herod he will persecute the godly Jews. Some he will put to death like James, and others he will imprison like Peter. In some cases, the Lord will allow His servants to seal their testimony with their lives; in other cases, He delivers them. Again, the unexplained ways of God. But those who serve the antichrist, like Herod's soldiers, will face certain death "as soon as it is day" that is when the present darkness is over and Christ's kingdom is established in the world.

Just as his followers perish so does he. He will exceed Herod's sin of accepting and basking in the adoration of the people. He will sit in the temple of God Thess. 2:4 showing himself that he is God. The Temple of God mentioned here is the Third Temple the Name of the State of Israel today.<sup>4</sup> So what manner of men ought we to be as we see the end approaching. The Spirit of God is restraining the full development of this evil until the Church is raptured. But how awful the end of the ungodly! Like Herod who was eaten alive by worms he will be thrown alive into the lake of fire Rev. 19:20 "where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched" Mark 9:44. The reason is that both Herod and Antichrist claim divine worship, and the Lord has said "My glory will I not give to another."

### Peter's Three Sleeps

The Jew always thought of the Messiah as the conquering King, ignoring His sufferings foretold in the Old Testament. This explains the Lord's rebuke to the two on the way to Emmaus "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken, ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" Peter's first two sleeps correspond to these two sleep periods of the Jewish nation. Like Peter they fell asleep concerning Christ's sufferings and like Peter (on the mount of transfiguration) they fell asleep as to His glory. But at the end of Israel's history, awaiting death in prison at the hand of the Antichrist, they fall asleep in complete confidence as to their Messiah's will for them. He does not fail the sealed remnant but delivers them "as soon as it is day." The end of Jacob's history is beautiful. He worships, leaning on the top of his staff, as Israel will in the millennium.

### No King But Caesar: Commentary on Acts, Chapter 10: Peter Turns the Second Key (10)

(Suggested Reading: Chapter 9:32-43; Chapter 10)

Up to this point we have used certain terms such as "the kingdom of God" "the kingdom of the heavens" "the church of God" without attempting to explain them. But as we near the close of Peter's ministry in the Acts it becomes important that we bring their meaning more clearly into focus. As we all know, the Church of Rome promoted Peter. They made him the first Pope although he was not consulted. The reason they were able to do this is that people never clearly understood the difference between the kingdom and the Church. Rome preyed on this ignorance. Just before the triple crown is placed on the Pope's head at his Coronation a member of the Curia admonishes him that he is the Prince of the Kings of the earth and that he is being crowned on that basis. It is blasphemy to assert that any man except Christ is entitled to unite in his person worldwide civil and ecclesiastical rule. A watered-down form of Romish doctrine is that the kingdom will be ushered in by the worldwide acceptance of the gospel—which is at variance with what is happening in the world today as well as Scripture. Scripture teaches that the world will be purified by judgment after which Christ's earthly kingdom will be established. An appendix follows this chapter outlining the difference between the kingdom and the church, which is fundamental to the understanding of much that is written in this book. But now let us return to Peter.

Peter tends to lag behind the Holy Spirit's action. Aware of Peter's reservations against Gentiles the Spirit has already admitted Gentiles to the kingdom of the heavens—the Eunuch and the Samaritans. It is a lesson that even an apostle can be slow to discern the Lord's mind and to act on it. And if this is true how much more does this apply to us. The real thrust of the lesson is that the Lord often chooses to leave us in suspense in some matters to force us into exercise before Him. He does not want us to rush ahead blindly in the energy of the flesh.

The scene now shifts to the close of Peter's ministry. His act of officially admitting the Gentiles to the kingdom of heaven<sup>1</sup> takes place in three stages, each of which is introduced by the expression "and it came to pass." This expression, like "and the Lord spake unto Moses saying" in the Pentateuch, seems to introduce a new subject.<sup>2</sup> There are three events here—the healing of Aeneas, the raising of Dorcas from the dead, and the departure from Simon's house at Joppa to go to Cornelius. What we have is an accelerated transition from Jewish to Gentile ground, and the way opened up for Paul to take over from Peter.

This is signaled by another remarkable fact—namely a change in the language used to describe the believers. The Jewish believers are generally called disciples in the early part of Acts—a carryover from the days of the Lord on earth when His followers bore this name.<sup>3</sup> But now new words start to emerge— “saints” and “brethren” —words found so frequently in Paul’s writings. Indeed, the first mention of “saints” in the Acts is in connection with Saul of Tarsus— “Lord, I have heard from many concerning this man, how much evil he hath done to Thy saints at Jerusalem.” Now the term “saints” is found only four times in the Acts—twice in connection with Peter’s ministry—9:32, 41 and twice in connection with Paul’s—9:13 and 26:10. But what is striking about the references in connection with Peter’s ministry is that they are centered on the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas from the dead. These are the incidents which preceded his leaving Joppa to turn his second key. In other words, the time is now ripe to move on to truly Christian ground. All believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are saints, and God looks for holiness in their life. It was for this purpose He chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” —Eph. 1:4. With this in mind we will now consider what Peter did to Aeneas and Dorcas.

#### Peter at Lydda and Joppa

Aeneas and Dorcas are a study in contrast. It is suggested that they are respectively figures of the Gentile and the Jew, for in fact Aeneas was a Gentile, Dorcas a Jewess. Aeneas was paralyzed, Dorcas “full of good works and alms deeds which she did.” The Gentile could not work for God, being powerless, like Aeneas. The Jew could, and did, and God took note of it in the figure. Indeed, the whole principle of the law was works. But then Dorcas turned sick and died—precisely what was occurring in Acts because of the Jews’ rejection of Christ. So, Peter turns to the Gentile first. He is not only to be healed, but to have power— “Get up and make your bed.” It was the bed which held Aeneas captive those eight years. The Gentiles receiving Christ will be given power over the things that once had power over them. At a later date the Jews will open their eyes like Dorcas and be presented living before the saints. The way in which this will take place is suggested by Dorcas’ name—a gazelle—an animal capable of a sudden leap. The Scripture itself agrees with this— “shall a nation be born at once?” —Isa. 66:8. Most assuredly it shall. Israel shall leap like a gazelle out of death into life—from the valley of dry bones—Ezekiel 37—to the blessing of the kingdom. The character of this sudden action is given to us in Zech. 12:10-14 and 13:1. But it is Israel before Christ which we have in Acts, figuratively. In view of the near approach of the Gentiles in the next chapter there may be a suggestion here of what is developed as doctrine in Rom. 4:4, 5 “now to him who works the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but of debt.” So it was that the widows wept, displaying the garments Dorcas had wrought. “But to him who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.” If this interpretation is correct, it would explain why Peter says to Aeneas, the Gentile who did not work “Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you” but to Dorcas, the Jewess, who did work, merely, “Tabitha, arise.”

And now another change is signaled, for again we find the expression “and it came to pass.” But as we read on nothing noteworthy seems to be coming to pass. Peter merely remains many days in Joppa with Simon the tanner. Things must have been pleasant at Joppa at Simon’s house by the sea. Peter, as an Ex. fisherman would enjoy the vista of the sea yet be lodged in a comfortable home. Naturally speaking he might be reluctant to move. The word Joppa means “fair to him.” Just how fair it was to Peter can be seen in his staying there “many days.”<sup>4</sup> Of course it is not until we come to 10:6 that we learn these details and that is because God is there starting to act on what the figures mean. The house is a figure of Israel and the sea of the Gentile nations.<sup>5</sup> The “sea side” speaks of nearness to the Gentiles. But at this point in time nearness is not good enough for God, and so the Gentile Cornelius is now introduced in the narrative.

#### The Gentile Cornelius

Cornelius completes the chain of gospel blessing to the three sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The gospel must first be preached to the Jew—Shem’s descendants—13:46. This was done at Jerusalem. The Gentiles consist of the black man, the descendants of Ham, and all the other Gentile races, the descendants of Japheth. No curse that Noah placed on any of his descendants because of his own sin could override God’s purpose to bless all Noah’s sons. In anticipation of this the ark rested on Mount Ararat, whose name means ‘the curse reversed.’ The ark is a figure of Christ; Mt. Ararat of resurrection ground. Based on Christ having passed through the storm of God’s judgment and being raised from the dead, God is able to reverse the curse righteously. Of the Gentile races the Ethiopian eunuch—a black man—first receives the blessing of the gospel, followed by Cornelius, the representative of the other Gentile races descended from Japheth. With Cornelius’ acceptance of the gospel God’s original purpose is fulfilled for “God blessed all the sons of Noah.” Wondrous message— “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” —John 3:16.

It is instructive that we never find God the Father mentioned in the Book of Acts.<sup>6</sup> In this respect it is like the Book of Revelation, but for different reasons. We pray to God as our Father because we are His children. He loves us. But as Father He does not love those outside His family. This is made clear from Scripture— “if any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him.” But as God He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. This is what we have in Acts and the reason that the title “God the Father” is not found. In Acts it is “how that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not reckoning to them their offences and putting in us the word of that reconciliation. We are ambassadors therefore for Christ, God as it were beseeching by us, we entreat for Christ, be reconciled to God” —2 Cor. 2:19, 20. The Book of Revelation which also omits God the Father, speaks of God’s judgments on the unreconciled—those who refused Christ’s ambassadors.

Cornelius was a soldier—a centurion in the Roman army—a man who commanded one hundred men. Stationed in the land of Israel he had befriended the Jews. He was like another centurion Luke wrote about who loved the nation and had built them a synagogue, and who had heard of Jesus—Luke 7:2-5. His servants call him “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one who fears God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews.” Better still he had the Lord’s commendation, for Luke writes that he was “a devout man, and one who feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.” This is the man who is about to receive a vision from the Lord. Ananias received a vision to prepare him to go to see Saul of Tarsus; Cornelius received a vision to prepare him to send for Peter. The symmetry of Scripture is beautiful.

#### The Vision of Cornelius

Cornelius saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and calling him by name before he delivered his message. When Cornelius looked at the angel he was afraid. This speaks volumes, for a Roman centurion was afraid of nothing, naturally speaking. When the angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone from the door of the Lord’s sepulcher the

guards shook for fear and became as dead men—Mat. 28:1-4. But for the Lord's people the angel in that incident had a message "fear not." So with Cornelius. Before delivering his message, the angel reassured him "thy prayers and thy alms are come up for a memorial before God."

Next the angel gives Cornelius definite instructions. He is to send men to Joppa and call for Simon Peter who is lodging at Simon the tanner's house by the sea side. Peter will tell him what he ought to do; in the case of Saul, Ananias was to tell him what to do. The same God who knew what his servants were doing—giving alms and praying like Cornelius, and where they lived—like Peter—is our God too. He is observing our actions with much interest. What are we doing and where are we living? "Thou God seest me." Does His all-seeing eye observe Christ in us, or something else?

Cornelius tells the vision to two of his household servants and a devout soldier who serves him. Then he sends them to Joppa.

#### Peter's Vision

About the sixth hour of the next day, Cornelius' servants are approaching Joppa just as Peter goes upstairs to the housetop to pray. Peter becomes hungry and asks for something to eat. As the meal is being prepared "an ecstasy came upon him." It is remarkable that Peter is hungry before his vision, but Paul neither ate nor drank until three days after his vision.

Like Stephen before him Peter saw heaven opened. Stephen had seen the glory of God and Jesus when that took place. Peter instead sees "a certain vessel descending to him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth, wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and birds of the air." The great sheet, and those in it, has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted as the Church. Regarding this an able commentator writes "Peter's vision did not reveal the Assembly as the body of Christ, neither did the admission of Cornelius. They only showed that in every nation he who feared God was acceptable to Him—in a word, that the favor of God was not limited to the Jews, and that there was no need of becoming a Jew in order to share the salvation that is in Christ."<sup>7</sup> We should not look for the doctrine of the Church from the Apostle to the Jews. What we find in the great sheet is man looked at in many ways, clean and unclean things all included with "wild beasts" etc. and God determined to bless man—bring him up to heaven—in spite of the condition in which he may be found.

Next, we have the Lord's voice to Peter— "Rise Peter, kill and eat." And Peter's reply "Not so Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." Here again we find a certain similarity to Ananias' vision. Ananias mentioned the character of Saul of Tarsus to the Lord and his mandate to bind all those who called on His Name. But Peter went further— "Not so, Lord." Still, he did not go as far as Jonah, who refused the Lord's commission to preach to a Gentile city and fled from the Lord's presence to Joppa. One by his actions, and another by his words, maintained the Jewish separation from the unclean Gentile at the same city—Joppa. It should be remembered that a Gentile, as such, was not unclean to the Jew. Rather it was the food the Gentile ate, and this is the point of the vision. The Mosaic laws laid down strict commandments as to what food was clean and what was unclean. Since the Gentiles had no such prohibitions the Jew had to face an impossible situation if he sat at table with a Gentile. Besides, the land belonged to the Jew—what was the Gentile doing in it? Their fathers had driven the Gentile out—showed them no mercy—and were not even to marry them—see Deut. 7:1-6. Peter summarizes the situation when he says "ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation." It is no wonder then that he doubts in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean.

#### The Trip to Caesarea

Now the three men from Cornelius stand before the gate of Simon's house. They call out and enquire if Simon Peter is staying there. Peter either does not hear them or is oblivious to them for he is thinking of the vision. At this point the Spirit says to him "behold three men seek thee. Arise therefore." We will stop there briefly. Apparently, he was still on his knees, not having moved when told "Rise Peter, kill and eat!" Picking up the communication again we read "and go downstairs and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them." Notice how, just as the angel re-assured Cornelius, the Spirit reassured Peter. The sight of a Roman soldier, and two men, would instill fear in Peter's mind, and doubts whether he was being marched away to face trial. Now he questions the men, asking why they had come. On hearing their message, he calls them in and puts them up for the night.

The next day Peter goes away with them. But he has the foresight to take certain brethren from Joppa with him. These would prove valuable later as witnesses. They arrive at Caesarea, the seat of Roman rule in Judea. Cornelius awaits the arrival of the party, having called together his relatives and near friends. Cornelius meets Peter coming in, falls down at his feet and worships him. Peter rejects this. He walks into the house talking to Cornelius on the way in until he comes to a large room where numerous people are assembled. Peter apologizes for being there, pointing out that he was a Jew and they were Gentiles. However, he tells them God had showed him that he should not call any man common or unclean.

This is interesting. God hadn't showed him that when the three men from Cornelius came to his house at Joppa, for he still doubted what his vision meant at that time—v. 17. God must have showed it to him in the way, just as He had opened Saul's eyes to Christ on the way to Damascus. So now Peter is present, and very simply he enquires why they have sent for him. Cornelius acts as spokesman for the assembled group, recounting how the angel had visited him and instructed him to send for Peter. He adds something we are not given in the first communication of the angel—that Peter is to speak to him. He closes with "now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded you of God."

#### Peter's Message

The preface to Peter's sermon is a most delightful one, compressing as it does his own personal experience, and leading into fresh truth. He says, "of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him." This is the first of four mentions of righteousness in the Acts, and the location of the word here is significant. Righteousness to the Jew was by the works of the law. The lawyer who tempted the Lord in Luke 10:25 expressed the thought "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" But Peter raised the question of righteousness with a Gentile. The Jew—in 13:10 is shown to be "the enemy of all



righteousness.” In Acts, righteousness brings in the thought of judgment—17:31 and 24:25, if the righteousness which is by faith—God’s righteousness—be refused. Again, the Scripture teaches that he who is born of God practices righteousness. Cornelius, then, was a man born of God, whose alms and prayers showed it, but without light from God as to who Jesus was, although it is likely he had heard of Him, and without the Spirit as yet. God is now about to supply what Cornelius lacks.

Peter begins with the word which God sent to the children of Israel, since salvation is of the Jews. Our Bible comes from them—we must admit it. But God will not confine Himself to them— “preaching peace by Jesus Christ, He is Lord of all.” Then Peter traces the publication of that Word beginning with the baptism of John. He retraces for his hearers the pathway of the Lord, His death, and resurrection, of which the Apostles were witnesses. That Man is to be the judge of the living and the dead. He commanded that they should testify this truth. Furthermore, the prophets witnessed that through His Name whosoever (Jew or Gentile) believes in Him should receive remission of sins. Now it is a remarkable fact that the word “sin” is only mentioned once in the Acts— “Lord lay not this sin to their charge” —7:60—and “sinners” not at all. Peter told Israel to repent for the blotting out of their sins—a strong expression for they were guilty of the Lord’s blood. Saul of Tarsus too, who continued the persecution when Christ was ascended, and represented the High Priest of Israel, was told to have his sins washed away. But here as elsewhere in the Acts man is offered “remission of sins” —2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18.

#### The Holy Spirit Given to the Gentiles

While Peter was yet speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were hearing the word. There are manifestations of this similar to Pentecost, so that the Jewish believers who accompany Peter are astonished. It is fear of them that makes Peter ask— “can any one forbid water that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as we also did?” Apparently, there is no answer to this rhetorical question for Peter commands them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. It is beautiful to see that the marks of the indwelling Spirit manifest themselves in these Gentile believers after the outward signs of power have passed. They ask him to stay a few days. Peter too, is no longer afraid of dwelling with a Gentile. When the three Gentiles came from Cornelius, he had lodged them; now the Gentiles lodge him. In Christ Jesus there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision. We can praise the Lord for that.

At the time I was writing this chapter I invited a number of young Christians to dinner one Sunday afternoon. We were discussing the breakdown of communications in the modern world when one of my guests, Miss Dena Ferguson, beautifully outlined her thoughts on the breakdown and restoration of communication between God and man. In the garden in Eden communication between God and man broke down because of sin and the man was driven out. At the tower of Babel communication between man and man broke down, man was scattered, and language fragmented. Now at Pentecost God starts the work of restoration. There they began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. God is restoring the broken communication between man and man that occurred at Babel—only a token restoration in practice, but the power has been demonstrated. Finally, in heaven we will have complete restoration of communications not only between man and man but between man and God. This is confessed in the new song we will sing “Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof, for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” —Rev. 5:9.

#### The Historical Imagery of Peter’s Actions

The Book of Acts is history—Divine history, of course, but still history. And in it, like the gospels, we find imagery, something almost entirely lacking in the epistles which are devoted to teaching. But because the Book of Acts is history the imagery is historical. This is the key to much of the underlying spiritual teaching in Acts.

So of the three men sent to Peter one was “a devout soldier.” Soldiers, and especially centurions, represented Rome’s power, so it is not surprising that a centurion appears at the end of Peter’s ministry, and Paul’s. But what different treatment they receive! Paul is a prisoner in Rome, with a chain. Peter on the other hand is sent for—and by “a devout soldier!” This is precisely the way Rome has treated the two great Apostles. Paul they imprisoned, although Martin Luther rattled his chains a bit. Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house—a picture of the church period—and a prisoner all the time. The grand doctrine of the remembrance of the Lord in death—the Lord’s supper—which Paul received by revelation from Christ in glory—1 Cor. 11:23—was corrupted into the mass. Thus the people were kept in ignorance of the one sacrifice of Christ for sins. As for Peter he is escorted by “a devout soldier” to Cornelius—the Power of Rome—where he is worshipped. This is truly what has happened. Peter has become the first pope in Rome’s eyes and his keys are shown in pictures dangling from his girdle. The military power of Rome in the person of the Emperor Constantine made the Church a great thing in the world. The Roman Church borrowed the Jewish idea of works which Peter had given up and turned them into penance. Then the Reformation came. But sad experience has shown its effects not to have been permanent. Since the dawn of the twentieth century a landslide has taken place. Rome’s chains were not removed from Paul by the Reformation they were only disturbed for a time. Men today are less concerned with justification by faith than with the convenient notion of telling their sins to a priest and then committing them over again. This fuels the ecumenical movement and the one world church. But it is not Christ’s church for He has said that on this rock—Peter’s confession of Him as Son of God—He would build His church and hades’ gates would not prevail against it.

Now while what we have been considering is only an illustration, it is a good illustration. From an historical viewpoint the Book of the Acts is the journey of the Church from Jerusalem to Rome. It started at Jerusalem in the day of Pentecost and ended, in the person of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, as a prisoner at Rome.

Before we close this chapter, a warning is in order. Throughout this book we will draw attention to the erroneous claims of the Church of Rome in pictures such as we have just been considering. The true Christian must, however, balance righteous indignation of such pretensions against that love for all men which Scripture strictly demands. A preacher who influenced the writer in youth used to say— “never go to bed at night with a single unkind thought against anyone in the world be they saved or lost.” Not only are there many believers still in the Romish Church but there are in it “the souls of men” —souls we can only win by the gospel presented in a spirit of love to the individual. Bitterness toward others is always a sign of the working of the flesh. “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” While holding the form of sound words let us never forget that.