

## **Commentary on Acts**

By Ed Hurst

Print on Demand Edition (revised)

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## ***Introduction to Acts***

We could easily call this book 2nd Luke. He is the author, dedicated it to the same fellow who sponsored his Gospel, and continues directly from the end of it. Everything we could say about him still applies. The author is well educated, has an analytical mind, and gives a great deal of emphasis to what can be known legitimately of the subject matter on a human level. However, the obvious intent is to justify believing in a higher plane. The writings are dedicated to some sponsor named Theophilus. There are two primary possibilities. First, the sponsor is an investigating magistrate trying to understand the defense claims in Paul's trial before Caesar. The second is a commission from a wealthy new believer who seeks to know more details of this whole story of Jesus and His Apostles, and the message they all taught. It's possible there may be something of both scenarios, as the writing could easily serve both purposes equally.

The research Luke did for this narrative was conducted and the material compiled during the same period he worked on his Gospel. Acts simply carries the story forward into the immediate period following the Ascension. We could also call it the Acts of Peter and Paul, since they are the prime movers in the narrative. Peter fulfilled his call as the leader of the Apostles until it was simply too dangerous for him to be the front man. The danger is the transition to a man who struggled hard to make it even more dangerous, until a miracle leads him to change sides. Luke's narrative relates how these men passed the baton from Christ to the Christians at large across the Empire.

However, we find at 16:10 Luke suddenly includes himself by shifting from the third person plural ("they") to the first person plural ("we"). Thus, when Paul had his vision of the Macedonian call from Troas, we safely assume it was at Troas that Luke joined the mission. Naturally, there is no explanation for this, but the most obvious assumption is Luke responded to Paul's message much the same as the first apostles who left their fishing boats for Jesus' message.

The substance of the book can be summed up thus: This is how the gospel of Jesus Christ went from a tiny sect of Judaism to a global faith embracing all mankind. From a handful of Jewish men, mostly with rather poor education, this faith was adopted by a very politically powerful and well-educated Pharisee who was the perfect man for carrying such an oddball minor Eastern sect across the Empire to become the religion that shook Rome to its core.

## **Chapter 1**

Luke mentions that Jesus in His resurrected form remained for some 40 days on earth. During that time, He met with His disciples extensively in Galilee, after which they returned to Jerusalem. What Luke and John seem to emphasize was the critical importance of their understanding of how the Old Testament prophesied of His death, burial for three days, and His resurrection. They were taught quite a bit during this time based on their changed understanding of these things. Still, they did not have the Spirit. Jesus assured them He would come very soon, describing it as a baptism in fire.

But because they lacked that illuminating Presence, they still stumbled over their impression that the Kingdom was meant to be a human political order on earth. Was Jesus about to set Israel free from Roman domination? They had no doubt He could. Jesus had already told them repeatedly that this was not in the plans, but their minds were not ready for it. Instead, He pointed them back to the fundamental principle of believers living under various human governments. God retains full authority over such things, had long since ordained how it would all turn out and when, and seldom deemed it necessary to inform humans of his plans. Instead, they were to focus their minds on the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the mission which paid little heed to governments among men – to carry the gospel across all national borders to all men.

It almost seems as if we can see them hiking out of the northeastern gate of the city, across the Kidron, up the long sloping road to the pass between two peaks on Mount Olivet. As they crossed the zenith, they started down the slope toward Bethany, Jesus walking firmly in the lead. Except He didn't head down the road to Bethany, but simply stepped off into the air and floated away into the clouds, turning to raise His hands and bless them. As they stood there watching for one last glimpse of their Master, a voice told them that the time for such things was past. Turning to look at who spoke, they see angels. They promised that Jesus would someday return in pretty much the same fashion.

It was a Sabbath Day's Journey back into the city. By that time, the Pharisees had fiddled with the meaning of the phrase until it stretched as much as 2.25 miles (3.6km). We find the disciples had moved their latest base of operations away from Bethany to the home in the Bethesda Quarter that hosted their banquet before Passover. Luke names the eleven surviving disciples, as well as the women associated with Jesus' ministry, but he includes the Lord's own younger brothers. Indeed, the group had grown to some 120 members. About the only thing they could take action on at this point was replacing Judas Iscariot. Luke explains that Judas' betrayal bribe was used to purchase the field, apparently where Judas had decided to hang himself. That was the evening before Passover Day, when no one was going to retrieve a dead body, particularly one having died so shamefully as hanging. Since he wasn't dealt with until sometime later, his swollen body was pretty hard to handle, and may have already fallen to the ground. The easiest answer for the Sanhedrin, seeking to keep all of this secret, was buying the field where he lay and designating it as a pauper's grave site. The money they used was Judas' reward for betrayal, which could not be returned to the Temple treasury because it was blood money. Since

the secrecy was so poor, the acreage was eventually called “Field of Blood” in honor of Judas’ death there, and the dirty money used to buy it.

It turned out there had been a handful of other men who had strung along with the Twelve pretty much the whole time they followed Jesus. While He officially called out the original group, nothing kept others from participating as volunteers. Perhaps they were younger men not yet working, or wealthy enough to afford the time. It’s typical of ancient, and particularly Eastern cultures, to pay little attention to this minor detail, since it was too common. Central figures in a narrative get named, but it was almost silly to name servants unless they took part in the action, and equally silly to assume there were none present. Jesus had a steady entourage much bigger than the Twelve, except in those places when the Gospels specifically say otherwise. At any rate, these men had experienced pretty much the same as the Twelve, so they chose one of them for the office Judas held. The method they used was a holdover from the Temple rituals. It was still appropriate because the Holy Spirit was not yet present to change the mode of operations.

There is nothing to indicate that Peter was wrong to seek fulfillment of the passages in Psalms (69:25; 109:8). Both of those were long regarded as prefiguring the trials of the Messiah, so finding in those verses a call to fill Judas’ empty place is typical of Hebrew thinking. On the other hand, we have almost nothing about this man. Luke never mentions him again, but that’s not exactly surprising, since this is mostly about Peter and Paul, and events that connect them. Further, the scraps of information we can find among the Early Church writers are contradictory. Perhaps a historian might guess he eventually went on mission to Ethiopia, but little else can be said. What matters is these people continued applying the Law of Moses as best they understood in the absence of the Holy Spirit to clarify things. It may have been a pointless gesture in the grand scheme of things, but the action was not wrong in the context. They simply did the best they knew until the one defining miracle of God changed it all.

## **Chapter 2**

Jesus was the Passover Lamb. His death on the Cross ended the system of ritual sacrifice in the Temple, and ended the Covenant of Moses. His Ascension into Heaven allowed Him to return in Spirit to the earth and live among all His followers. Up to that moment, they were spiritually awakened, but not yet able to process truth through their spirits into their hearts. The lack of intellectual training was hardly an issue, but knowing what to do with the teachings of Jesus was beyond them. They were operating under a renewed, but still human, grasp of the Law for guidance in obedience. This was about to change.

Under the Pharisees’ version of the Law, it was all about nit picking with precise and concrete rational analysis. Jesus showed how that was all wrong, not the way God worked, not the way the Law worked. If we haggle over the precise meaning of Luke’s choice of words, we easily miss the drama of what he tells. Jesus taught them for some forty days after His resurrection to insure they understood what the Old Testament said about Him and His teaching. That puts His Ascension about the forty-third day after His death. A week later was Pentecost, the Greek word for the Hebrew First Fruits celebration. Those gathered that day in the Upper Room were the first fruits of this new covenant, not of laws, but of the Spirit.

There was the roaring sound of wind, and “wind” is the same word for “spirit” – the Lord dramatically returned in a form of great power, but not visible to human eyes. Only the effects are seen and felt. In Luke’s day, the only source of light on earth was fire. What they saw appeared as tongue-shaped flames, or brightly luminescent manifestations about half the size of a man’s hand. This glowing presence divided itself among the members of this gathering. This was the presence of divine illumination entering their very beings. Each of them suddenly began to speak in other languages, apparently human languages. We dare not miss how this was the reversal of the curse at the Tower of Babel. Under this power alone would man be permitted to unify under a single authority not rooted on the earth and with no earthly ambitions.

Take note of how the Spirit of Christ is manifested. There is unseen power and illumination, all of which grants a singular unity not otherwise available upon this earth. It served one purpose: To bring about the revelation of God through those who received this unspeakable gift. This sound and sight drew a crowd right away, as the disciples spilled out into the streets to address them. What was all of this roaring and shining lights? They came and heard the message declaring the things God had done on the earth to reveal Himself. They were bringing to life again all the things Jesus did during His days of ministry.

How did all these losers and bumpkins speak so as to be understood by the varied home languages of the mixed multitude from out of town? Were they drunk? On the day of First Fruits, Jews would fast until mid-morning. It was just now about the time they could start eating and drinking, so drunkenness was simply not possible. Peter, who had so recently been ashamed and broken, now in the Spirit stood up with the confidence he never had before and spoke assertively with an assurance that God alone could give. This was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (2:28-32), the one last chance for people of Israel to call on the name of the Lord, to reclaim the redemption they should have found by walking in the Law and perceiving the higher truth to which it pointed. As the Jewish leadership had driven the Covenant farther and farther away from them, it was necessary to restore its real meaning in Christ. Once again, the Father seeks to raise a nation of priests to the world, by calling the Nation to His Son. Peter makes it clear all this finds fulfillment in the man they had just recently executed. God had raised Him from the dead, a Son whose power over death was in His very nature.

David prophesied of it, too (Psalms 16:8-11). Does anyone think David meant it literally when he said God would not allow him to stay dead? Well, David’s bones rested still in his grave in Jerusalem, a short walk from where Peter stood that very moment. No, David spoke parabolic terms regarding one of his descendants. It was the same sort of symbolic language that predicted the Messiah would take David’s throne. Think for a moment how very far these men had come to realize now there would be no earthly kingdom of Christ, but a spiritual Kingdom on the earth! So this Jesus of the royal household came out of the grave and He now sits in Heaven. He sits there awaiting the Father’s promise to crush all His enemies. As it was Israel who crucified His Son, who now qualifies as His enemies?

It was not simply the words of Peter, but the power of the Spirit working in Him and through those words, which brought conviction to those listening. Had this been the old crew following Jesus in months past, their Galilean accent would have been hard to follow by men born and

raised in far countries. Those Jews could handle Greek as a common tongue, and were supposed to be familiar with some Aramaic, but Peter's message was clear to their ears. What could they do to redeem themselves before God?

Peter's words are so easily missed. First, the Covenant of Moses had always demanded repentance, to turn away from sin. In this case, it would mean disavowing the crucifixion and embracing Jesus as whom He claimed to be, the Messiah. As a sign of the new loyalty to the Messiah, they should participate in the old Mosaic ritual of cleansing in water, but now in the name of Jesus the Messiah, cleansing away the old life and living in the new life of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the eyes of the Jewish leaders this was a form of treason, had they considered what this all meant. It meant repudiating their Jewish national identity in favor of a higher claim on their loyalty. Those who were able to do such a thing would find this same power and enlightenment was theirs. Notice how Peter says no man can choose this for himself, but it is the Lord who chooses and calls, and national identity among men means nothing.

This preaching went on for some time that morning, as Peter and the others warned them the Jewish leaders were perverse and that following them led to God's wrath. Eventually some 3000 people passed through the ritual cleansing and joined this new community of Christ. This was not some mere ritual, for instead of taking the long journey to return to their homes after the Passover and Pentecost celebrations, they spent days and weeks trying to absorb this new teaching of ancient truth. They dug into the Old Testament with the clarity of understanding Jesus had given. There was a powerful sense of unity with no earthly explanation, sharing as close kin when there were so very many reasons in the flesh to be strangers to each other. But this divine peace with each other was merely a direct result of their new peace with God. They also shared a sense of awe and unworthiness, as they witnessed the signs of God's power at work. Like any close kin in a single household, they shared their possessions. This sort of social structure had always been inherent in God's Laws from at least as early as Noah, and is still the intended organizational structure of all churches.

By no means were they trashing their Hebrew identity, only the Jewish political one. This new loyalty to Christ did not mean leaving behind the old Temple, but gave them its true meaning for the first time. All the places and habits of life gained a new meaning in light of this new Life in Christ. Rather than being clannish, though, it made them even more loving to those outside their new community of faith. This was a powerful contagion of healing, love and grace, lifting more daily out of death to New Life. All that Israel was ever meant to be was reborn.

### **Chapter 3**

Jesus had already stated that the physical location of worship didn't matter because God did not reside in any man-made structure. He was a Spirit in Heaven, desiring the worship of those whose spirits lived and could approach Him in the Spirit Realm. Rather than make the earthly Temple and rituals worthless, it was a matter of giving them their true meaning. After Pentecost (First Fruits), there was a long stretch of time without any standard festivals, and the Diaspora Jews from the previous chapter were likely gone home to their far lands. Only a relative handful of them had stayed around to join the disciples. The city was now normally less crowded, and there weren't all that many trooping into the Temple during the hours of prayer. There were

three hours of prayer: mid-morning (“morning offering”), mid-afternoon (“evening offering”), and sunset. This was the second of those.

We have yet to identify which of the gates was called “Beautiful,” but that’s not important here. Luke’s sponsor likely would not have known, either. What matters is that the city residents witnessing this sign knew where it was. They knew about the lame beggar set there every day. Beggars in that time and place typically called for donations without making eye contact. It maintained the notion such gifts were gifts to God. So this beggar stared off into space as the two disciples approached and made his pitch. They called for his direct attention, which usually meant a large gift was coming, and they would expect some serious gratitude. He was willing to play this game to live. Instead, Peter offered the man something far more valuable, pulling him up to claim a miracle healing.

Peter did so “in the name of Jesus” – as if Peter were a high ranking servant of some great ruler. We have no doubt that the man would much rather have the healing compared to mere coins. In Jewish culture, it was not big arms that marked a big man, but a fellow with strong legs. This was more than just a healing, but a restoration of manhood and life. He was no longer a mere offering plate with a voice, but a real person. The three then went into the Temple to worship, but this fellow had more cause to celebrate than anyone else there that day. All during this ritual, he was clinging to Peter and John, jumping and dancing and yelling loud thanks to God. The crowd knew who it was, and their jaded urbanite senses were stunned. After the ceremony, they crowded around to see the spectacle. This was Peter’s chance to represent His Lord to yet another audience.

Peter denied he or John were any kind of miracle workers, the sort of claim traveling hucksters might make. Instead, he carefully called attention, in language they could not mistake, to Jesus as the Messiah. Using formulaic terminology, Peter called Jesus the highest Servant of God, a Messianic term. He then lowered the boom, as before, telling them that they had become the enemies of their own God by having Jesus executed. It was this crowd in particular that had been manipulated by the Sanhedrin to ask for Barabbas, instead of Jesus that day before Pilate. Yet, God proved them mistaken by raising Jesus back to life. Peter made it a point that both he and John had seen the resurrected Jesus with their own eyes. It was the divine authority of this Jesus Messiah who restored the legs of this man they all knew. By having committed themselves to following Jesus as their ruler, they had His authority to heal.

Peter was hardly in a position to hold it against them, having betrayed Jesus more personally. At that time, he didn’t know what he was doing, either. Knowing he could be forgiven a greater crime than theirs, he was offering them the same forgiveness. Even the Sanhedrin could be forgiven, since the prophets together had foretold that the Messiah would suffer and die. He died at the hands of those who should have been first to recognize and embrace Him. Now was their chance to seize the blessing God made from their sin. Peter phrased it as the whole nation’s chance, as every good thing God had promised under the Covenant was tied up in this Messiah Jesus.

If Jews could embrace Jesus as their rightful ruler, could seek a renewed understanding of the Covenant as Jesus taught it, this would hasten Jesus’ Return. Until that time, it was necessary

for Him to reside in Heaven whence He came, until His Father had restored all things under His authority. Would they be on God's side as loyal servants, or remain as His enemies? Peter quotes a Messianic passage from Moses' own words (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), calling to mind a fearful confrontation with God. They had not wanted to face God again at Sinai. However, the promised Prophet Messiah would have the same fearful authority to destroy anyone who rejected His Word. All the prophets from Samuel forward confirmed this threat.

Peter reminds them that they had been appointed by God to take His revelation to the whole world. That was the reason for having prophets, and for calling Abraham in the first place. In keeping with His Covenant, God sent His Son to them first. Would they embrace His message and turn from their sins? Would they accept this offer of redemption?

#### **Chapter 4**

Worship in the Temple had not been that lively for quite some time. The man born lame had caused quite a scene. When the man stood with Peter and John in Solomon's Porch, a crowd gathered and Peter preached a sermon. However, the crowd was noisy and seemed to grow by the moment. This was not a good thing in the eyes of the Temple guards. Crowds might get out of control and do bad things that would upset the precarious balance between Rome and the Jews' few remaining freedoms.

They first listened to the message Peter preached, and found he was expounding on the rebellious rabbi recently executed, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming that He had risen from the dead. For the Sadducees, the political party that included the ruling High Priest and the priestly families, this challenged their assertion that there was no afterlife and certainly no resurrection from the dead. For the Scribes and Pharisees, it was a promotion of Jesus as Messiah, which they could never allow. Since by now it was nearly dark, they arrested the trio and held them in custody overnight.

We don't know the occasion, but the entire extended household of the ruling priestly families was in Jerusalem, so virtually every possible member of the Sanhedrin, plus a large number of other political heavyweights, gathered the next morning for a hearing. They demanded that Peter and John, standing with the formerly lame beggar, declare on whose authority this disturbance took place. Peter had no trouble answering directly. He wondered aloud why they were bothered with a man's healing, but it was in the name of Jesus the Messiah, from Nazareth. Peter pointedly notes that the Sanhedrin were guilty of having Jesus executed, but God raised Him from the dead. Had the Sanhedrin produced the dead body of Jesus, or even firm testimony from a sergeant of the Temple Guard where the body lay, it would have been pretty simple business. Instead, they face Peter, who says Jesus is the one they found flawed, but which God chose as the foundation of His work among humans.

In Palestine, most structures were built on sloping stony ground. The most common way to prevent slippage of stone structures was to cut into the hillside, place a massive block that tilted back against the slope, and then place the rest of the stones up the slope against this immovable block. Were any cracks visible, it could not be used, since it bore the weight of the entire

structure. Jesus was God's Chosen, the one and only name by which any man could approach God for reconciliation. He was the one and final offering for sin.

Both Peter and John spoke with a Galilean accent, the speech of country bumpkins in their day. Educated men would cultivate the refined speech pattern of the priests. Further, genuine rabbis would always speak in a certain predictable fashion, giving verbal footnotes every sentence or two, which made it hard for peasants to follow. These guys simply asserted the truth, as if it were self-evident. They were just laymen, yet clearly not boasting nonsense. They sounded just like Jesus had. There they stood with the man now healed, and none of the three were the least bit cowed by the number or appearance of the whole governing class of Israel arrayed before them.

The trio was led out of the hall while the Sanhedrin conferred over the situation. There was nothing they could do about the miracle; it was all over town by now. Notice that they do not at all address the central claim of Peter and John about Jesus risen from the dead. Instead, they agreed that the preachers had to be silenced about the name of Jesus. Called back in, Peter and John were threatened. The two were not impressed, because they answered that the demand was at conflict with God's command. Whom did the Sanhedrin expect them to obey? Another threat served no purpose, and punishment was simply out of the question. There was not even a trumped up charge as they had against Jesus, and these two were rising quickly in popularity. A man over forty healed of lameness from birth – this was not something the Sanhedrin could hush up quickly.

Upon release, Peter and John reported back to the swelling congregation of disciples in Jerusalem. Luke records a lovely prayer that contains no hint of fear, but a request for even more boldness, and more signs and wonders by the name of Jesus. We should assume that prayer was granted, for there was a sign in the shaking of the building itself. Further, they were all so bursting with spiritual power that they had no trouble speaking boldly.

The primary manifestation in the several thousand members of the group was a divine sense of oneness. As noted previously, these people had turned away from their earthly identity as Jews to the heavenly identity as True Israelis. They no longer cared much for the trappings of this life, and regarded it all as mere means to bring more glory to the name of Jesus. So selling their property holdings back home was no challenge at all, while giving away the proceeds was a release from the cares of this world. There was plenty of money for just about anything anyone really needed to keep going, to keep telling the story of Jesus. One fellow in particular sold a very large estate. His name was Joses Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement." He was from the Tribe of Levi, and wealth was typical for them. What a contrast to the Sanhedrin, and what a testimony it was to the growing church in Jerusalem!

## **Chapter 5**

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not in how they chose to dispose of property or proceeds, but in their attempt to deceive. They were seeking to claim a renown and respect not rightly due them. They wanted the community of Christians to believe they were doing what Barnabas had done, and wanted a share of what they must have thought was his glory. They did not see how

the glory went to God, and merely reflected off the human existence of Barnabas. The original sin of Satan was also an attempt to claim a share of God's glory for himself. This remains a primary threat to the Kingdom still, where people in the community of faith attempt to deceive others in order to gain things that God has not apportioned to them. It is a very grave violation of the principle of Hebrew feudalism, demanding by fraud something that the Sovereign God has granted to others, a form of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit working in others.

The Holy Spirit cannot be deceived. While they owned the property, they could do as they felt God wanted. Once sold, they could use the money as they felt God wanted. Instead, they sought to buy cheaply the respect they could have freely gained by honesty. This sort of blasphemy against the Spirit threatens His work. At His discretion, God can decide you are no longer useful in this world, and take you home. There is a sin unto death. Were they simply worldly people, their antics would be no threat, because everyone would know. Ananias and Sapphira had already manifested the power of God's presence, but now were destroying that witness. They both died at God's own hand.

While knowledge of this did dampen some of the enthusiasm of those who might have considered too lightly joining this community of faith, the outsiders still found these people highly reputable. Not only was this a continuation of the massive healing ministry of Jesus, but the apostles multiplied it, with Peter at the helm. The city attracted a host of folks traveling to be healed by the passing shadow of Peter, as they continued meeting under the Law in the Temple. But this was the Law as Jesus taught it, a complete revolution. The message condemned the current political leadership in the Sanhedrin, not so much directly, but by comparing them with what Jesus had preached. The healings and other signs supported this indirect condemnation of the Sanhedrin.

Luke in writing this is careful to remind his sponsor that the High Priest and his entire cohort were Sadducees. This was a theological and political party known for secularism, a sort of cultural Judaism that compromised with pagan Rome for political and monetary gains. They were largely intellectual atheists, considering themselves the only people who really understood what was going on in the world. They dominated the Sanhedrin, but the opposing Pharisees were far more popular with the people. Yet both were at risk from this non-violent uprising. The Sadducees were particularly to blame for the decision to turn Jesus over to Roman justice.

So they had the Temple Guard arrest all twelve apostles, and put them in the peasants' jail overnight. God had other plans. He sent angels to escort them all from the prison, with a message to keep preaching in the Temple "this life" – the way of living according to the Kingdom of Heaven, according to the spiritual values and the power of the Holy Spirit. They hastened to obey first thing in the morning. By the time the Sanhedrin got around to convening for the day, they found their prisoners had vanished. There was nothing to indicate that the guards had done anything irregular, because they expressed genuine shock themselves that the apostles were gone. During the consternation that followed, other guards came to report that the apostles were back teaching in Solomon's Porch. This time, the officials chose to use gentle persuasion, because the crowd gathered there were entirely too supportive of the former prisoners.

The High Priest charged them with disobeying a lawful order to stop teaching in Jesus' name, along with slandering the Sanhedrin before the people, essentially claiming that the Court were all murderers. Peter answered that the Sanhedrin might as well accuse God Himself of evil. The Sanhedrin *were* guilty of murder, the most shameful execution possible under Moses – hanging on a tree or on wood. Yet God Himself raised Jesus back to life. Indeed, Jesus was now enthroned as God's Prince, and He was the sole venue for reconciliation with God. It would not matter what the Sanhedrin came up with in all their erudition and power, because the apostles were simply reporting what they saw with their own eyes. Further, the power of God Himself was present in the Spirit to support their claims.

At this point, the Sadducees were ready to execute the lot of them. Even as they began seeking ways and means, a very influential rabbi from the opposition Pharisee Party stood to warn them. After sequestering the preachers, this Gamaliel listed examples of the many popular Messianic cults rising during that time. Jesus was merely one of several who claimed to be the Messiah, but was the only one able to heal and raise people from the dead, including Himself. He was also the only one who didn't raise an armed force to unseat the Sanhedrin. What he didn't say was how, by far, Jesus' disciples were the greatest threat simply by making the Sanhedrin look as bad as they actually were. But Gamaliel recited how all the fakes died and their cults disbanded. If Jesus was also a fake, the same thing would happen. If He was the Messiah, they would be fighting God Himself, as the apostles asserted. In the minds of unbelieving Sadducees, it was enough that their subjects would see it that way.

So they ordered the disciples beaten with switches according to the Law ("forty lashes save one") and threatened that it would be worse the next time if they didn't stop teaching Jesus. It had the reverse effect. The disciples rejoiced that they were worthy of suffering for Jesus' name. Here we take a moment to note that their confidence was in their Messiah, but bore total humility regarding themselves. It was the highest privilege to be oppressed by the enemies of their Lord. This is not some perverse delight in stirring up trouble, as if they now had some ancient version of street credibility. They stood condemned by the exact same people who plotted to kill Jesus, and for the same exact reasons. The Sanhedrin saw them as a genuine expression of Jesus' teaching.

## **Chapter 6**

It is impossible to understand the first churches unless we grasp how they restored the tribal social structure of ancient Israel. They understood instinctively the necessity of recovering the Ancient Near Eastern feudalism, with household, clan and tribal elders as their internal government, while the Apostles replaced the ancient priesthood in function. The difficulty came in learning how to replace mere blood kinship with spiritual kinship. This was a critical element in restoring the original intent of the Law of Moses, even while some ritual elements were discarded in the New Covenant in Christ.

The community of faith was massive, a significant minority of the entire population of Jerusalem. They were all over the city; a great many were former Diaspora Jews from all over that part of the world. It was quite the chore to keep track of things on a human level. A significant element in running what was now a full tribe living as kin was caring for those who

had no local support. In that world, widows were a particular issue. The Gospels describe how lawyers were preying on those few whose husbands left them some estate. The vast majority were peasants, depending on their surviving children to support them. Jesus accused the Pharisees of finding excuses to avoid even that. It's no surprise that the community did their best to take care of their widowed members from the common treasury. There would have been dozens at least, and probably hundreds.

The task was huge. They had not yet adapted the standard administrative structure typical of that time and place to match the new spiritual realities. Long time residents of the area brought their clan structure into the community, as they should. They took care of their own, for the most part. Those who had been born and raised outside Palestine would have little of that to lean on, and might struggle to adapt their more Gentile ways to the old Hebrew social structure. Yet it seems these imported folks may well have been the biggest financial contributors. What drew men from their Judean home in the first place over previous centuries were the rich commercial opportunities elsewhere. Coming back, their money was welcome, but even this full brotherhood of faith found it hard to break back into the relatively closed and clannish local community from which the Apostles themselves arose (several of them were cousins). It's no surprise that these Greek-speaking members fell behind in some ways, particularly in the care of widows, who would probably have no significant social ties locally.

Complaints of prejudice would be entirely natural, as the Greek speakers would be more sensitive to it in the first place. They would have consciously excluded themselves from Gentile communities across the Roman Empire, but would find themselves excluded almost unconsciously by their less cosmopolitan brethren based in Judea. Filled with the Spirit, the Apostles knew that they were most ill-equipped for addressing this problem. On human terms, they were Galilean, and only God's power had overcome the prejudice against them among the urbanites. However, they were called to the Word, and settling such disputes would gravely degrade their priestly focus. So they instructed the congregation to come up with their own answer by selecting leaders from the Diaspora Jewish Christians to emulate the natural elders of households, keeping their eyes and hands on such practical matters. The term "serving tables" would have included just about everything administrative in nature. Thus, these men would be spiritual elders over spiritual households newly formed to maintain the social structure necessary to obey the restoration of Law as Jesus taught it.

The men needed to be no less spiritual than the Apostles. There would be a division of labor, but not of spirit. Organizational talent would mean nothing if not harnessed under the Lord. The community recognized this idea as God's wisdom, and proceeded to select seven men with non-Hebrew names. Indeed, the last named was not even Jewish in background, but a Gentile convert to Judaism who then embraced Jesus as Messiah up in Antioch. The Apostles laid their hands on these men, an ancient gesture most commonly seen in those days when new judges were appointed to the Sanhedrin. It was a way of saying that these men were now among the leaders of the community, fit to judge what was just and righteous. It worked out so well that the community grew even more. Luke notes that a large number of priests were joining them.

One of these seven men was a real star in God's crown. First, we must note Luke does not call them "deacons," but describes them as ruling elders separate from pastors. They preached, but

unlike the Apostles, they had the natural tendency to preach outside the old Hebrew communities. It's hard to explain Stephen's behavior unless we assume he had some rabbinical training. He knew not merely the text of the Old Testament, but also much of the oral historical traditions now missing or buried in Talmudic mythology. Highly educated, yet filled with the Spirit such that he manifested signs and miracles, this man took the message to places the Apostles could not. Preaching was not confined to those called to pastor.

Perhaps Stephen had previously been associated with the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The synagogue name refers to Greek-speaking Jews who had formerly been slaves under Roman law, but somehow won their freedom. It was quite an accomplishment. There may have been hundreds of such little cloistered synagogues in and around Jerusalem, catering to one group or another. This synagogue must have held some claim to fame, with big shots from Alexandria, North Africa, and what we now call Turkey and Northern Syria. It would naturally be a Greek-speaking synagogue, and Stephen was quite comfortable, not only in the language, but the Alexandrian style of rhetoric so popular with such people. It is important here to note that no one seemed to have any particular vision for spreading the gospel outside native Judeans; Stephen simply went to those with whom he had some affinity.

In debating with these Freedmen, Stephen was promoting the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this gospel he would surely have included Jesus' rejection of the Hellenized Talmud, so near and dear to Alexandrian hearts. Stephen approached them on their own terms, with their own style of reasoning. He showed how Jesus was the central focal point of all ancient prophecies, had fulfilled the Law of Moses, and closed the Temple rituals. There was now no other sacrifice acceptable to God but the blood of His Son for forgiveness of sins. So Stephen was arguing that the Talmud was wrong, the rituals were dead, and Jesus was the rightful King of all Jews worldwide.

We are hardly surprised that those who were not moved by the Spirit to accept this impossible message would be infuriated at this smart-aleck attacking everything they thought made them special in God's eyes. What far too many wish to underplay here is the hateful racist superiority complex of Jews in that day. They might argue among themselves who was more pure in Jewishness, but nobody would ever surrender an inch to including actual Gentiles in God's blessings. Jehovah made the world, but He was in their minds God of the Jews only, and everyone else was made by God to serve them. Any Messianic message failing to confirm this prejudice was hateful to them.

So they networked with other significant figures in the city to accuse Stephen before the Sanhedrin. All this sounded to them like blasphemy, and an attack on the Temple itself, "God's Residence." Luke calls them false witnesses in the sense that they lied against God and His Word, but the claims were more or less accurate from the slavishly literalist viewpoint of the Pharisees.

What had Jesus actually said? When the Twelve were discussing the Temple facility one day, Jesus said it was just a building, and would one day suffer the fate of all buildings. Moreover, it would be utterly destroyed because His Nation would reject Him. While it may well be in the minds of Jews the Residence of Jehovah, His divine Presence had not been there in centuries.

Instead, it was born in the flesh of His Son. So Jesus pointed to His own body and said if anyone tried to tear down *this* Temple, He would simply bring it back in three days. More, He was going away to make His followers into walking Temples of the Lord, just as He had been. He would reside in their hearts as the Holy Spirit. There was simply no room for such truth in the minds of the Jewish leaders.

So arresting Stephen and hauling him before the assembled court, they saw a man whose face glowed with divine presence. It must surely have made them nervous, for to be in God's presence always makes us aware of our sin. We can either confess it and be forgiven, or close our hearts and cling to sin as our "holiness." The tension between the truth and the established order was about to erupt.

## **Chapter 7**

Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin charged with blasphemy, to wit: a rejection of Moses and the Temple. It must be understood that in this context the "traditions of the elders," as a massive layer of rationalist interpretation of Mosaic Law, later called the Talmud, had been given precedence over the written Torah. It was alleged to be the oral teaching of Moses handed down via some chain of teachers. Jesus pointedly called the Talmud a perversion of Moses, serving to excuse violating what Moses actually wrote. Jesus had also said that the Temple was just a building, and the true residence of God was the hearts of those who loved Him. In a manner of speaking, Stephen was guilty as charged for teaching what Jesus had taught.

Caiaphas gave the accused an opportunity to answer, to deny the charges and defend himself. There is plenty of reason to believe there is a long precedent for his speech. What Stephen did was recite a selection of well-known events to provide a context for his defense, an argument that he committed no crime. His primary point was that the promises of God resided neither in the land, nor the Temple, nor the people. It always resided in the Person of God, who as Creator could never be confined to any portion of His creation. Nor could His promise reside in the people of Israel, who steadfastly rejected Him and His promise every step of the way. Saying that the Temple did not matter was manifestly obvious, and calling for a change from the bogus human traditions was not a departure from Moses, whom the nation hardly obeyed in the first place.

He begins with Abraham, who lived in Mesopotamia, far away from Jerusalem. Did the location prevent Abraham hearing from God? Not at all; he left Ur and moved north to Haran and heard God there. He stayed a while until his father passed on, and he could settle his household obligations by passing the headship to his younger brother. Abraham had no trouble surrendering all his property and privileges for something unknown promised by God. With that business settled, Abraham moved on to Canaan. He was promised the land for an inheritance to his descendants, but gained no possession himself. Did that hinder God's promises? No; in fact, they still had another four hundred years in Egypt to experience. Moreover, they would be slaves there. Did that hinder the Covenant? No, Abraham was circumcised because he was already pure in heart.

So it passed down to Jacob, the father of the Twelve Patriarchs. They were not nice men. Among other things, they sold their own brother into slavery in Egypt. The Nation of Israel arose from such men as that. But God did not fail His promise, and made Joseph the Viceroy of Egypt. Further, God used a famine to drive the 70-plus members of Jacob's household into Egypt. Things were quite nice for a while, but this was Egypt, not the Promised Land. So while the bones of the Patriarchs went back to Palestine to keep the promise fresh, it took quite some years of suffering to make Israel leave Egypt.

God kept His promise and raised up a man to deliver Israel when the time came. While everyone else was forced to offer their male babies to the Nile gods, Moses was spared. The cost of that was to make him, in effect, an Egyptian royal. And while Moses was quite willing to help his nation leave Egypt, they would rather stay in their misery than follow him anywhere. So when Moses knew he could be charged with a crime, he fled. The point here is that the nation was not ready for deliverance, would not accept deliverance, so God let them ripen a little longer.

How did God manifest Himself to Moses? The Burning Bush – a silly piece of vegetation far from the Promised Land, in some scrub desert. What made that ground holy? It was the presence of God's Messenger Angel, at whom Moses himself would not gaze directly. Moses was called by God because he had a pure heart, too. So the man whom his people had rejected as ruler and judge became ruler and judge. More, he was the agent of God's miraculous powers, including the Red Sea crossing, a scene of such pitiful whining. Moses himself warned Israel that there would be a Messiah. Since they didn't listen to Moses too well, would they listen to the Messiah? Well, they demanded Aaron lead them back to Egypt, instead of on to the land promised Abraham on their behalf. That was nothing new, for they had managed to carry several pagan idols the whole way to Canaan. That propensity is what got them a long vacation in Babylon.

Yet God gave them a highly visible and tangible reminder of His presence in the Tabernacle. That huge tent was a conceptual copy of God's courts in Heaven, which also happened to be the same sort of tent used by Ancient Near Eastern sheikhs. They managed to carry that into the Conquest, and God drove out the pagan Gentiles, keeping His promises. At one point, He raised up a powerful warrior king, David, who really established Israel as something just short of an imperial power in his own right. But as a warrior, his quest for a permanent Temple fell to his son, Solomon. Yet Solomon himself knew it was only symbolic, since God told him that He could not be confined to any one place on earth, given that He made the entire universe from scratch.

God granted the covenant promises to Abraham, including the symbolic ritual of circumcision. God met Abraham in Ur and Haran, as well as Canaan. He cared for Israel in Egypt, in the Wilderness, and gave them the Promised Land. He gave them the deliverer they rejected, the Law they disobeyed, the Tabernacle they neglected in favor of pagan deities. He granted through David and Solomon both Jerusalem and the Temple as a way to focus their attention, while crushing every enemy they had. Yet they refused to accept what God intended the Temple for, and made it a god itself. Stephen turns the table, charging the Sanhedrin with rejecting God's revelation and His obvious intent, as the culmination of a long history of

fighting the God who made them. They had hounded and killed every prophet. It was no surprise that they had rejected the Messiah, too, whom Moses and every prophet had promised. Who were they to rise in judgment against the very Son of God?

Naturally, this didn't sit well with the Sanhedrin. If that weren't bad enough, Stephen suddenly claimed to see the same vision they rejected when Jesus said something about the Son of Man coming in clouds of glory. Here Stephen saw Him standing as the Executor of His Father's judgment in Heaven. This was literally the last chance for the Sanhedrin. Here was the Truth Himself starkly juxtaposed against their sin, but they were nothing if not consistent in their rejection of God. So they mobbed Stephen and lynched him.

We see here such a powerful reaction that the Sanhedrin themselves dirty their hands with the stones, leaving their most junior member as the one who had the official duty of witnessing the execution, a fellow named Saul. Barely taking the time to observe legal traditions, the accusing witnesses hastily dropped their cloaks at the feet of Saul and threw the first stones to knock Stephen off his feet. As he knelt, he pointedly called out to Jesus as God, and then expired under a growing pile of rocks that would have crushed him to death. His final words were a plea for mercy – God's mercy on the executioners.

Up to this point, it remained possible for the leaders, and thus the nation, to repent from centuries of rejecting God's ways and His Word. They turned that chance aside more fiercely than they did with the execution of Jesus Himself. The only mercy God granted at Stephen's request was the length of time it took for His wrath to culminate. This was around 35 AD, and it was another generation before the wrath of God through Rome's legions began to fall on the last vestige of the Old Testament nation of Israel.

## **Chapter 8**

The lynching of Stephen was the end of the line for the Jews. They held hidden within tight boundaries a universal revelation of redemption, refusing it themselves and keeping it away from anyone else. God was no longer in the business of working through a discrete political national entity, and would begin building His Kingdom in human hearts. It was now time to begin taking the gospel message to the Gentiles, for "God's People" was a term applying to a heavenly nation rooted in the Spirit, not in any human attributes. Moving the community of faith out of the city was no easy task; moving them to reach out to Gentiles was hard to imagine. As long as they were happily growing in the City, and in the shadow of the Temple, there was no reason to do anything differently. God's way to change this was not easy.

First, let's understand something about Saul. He was from Cilicia, so it is quite likely he was acquainted with the Freedmen Synagogue, since it included many from Cilicia. Indeed, it would seem Paul's primary interest was Greek-speaking Jews, because we see the persecution allowed the native Hebrew apostles to stay safely in the city. Beyond the initial growth of the Judean congregation, most of the later converts were raised outside Palestine. The nature of the conflict was among Greek-speaking Jews, so we should see here the emphasis of Luke's narrative on them. The Greek-speaking Christians driven out of the city would naturally tend to go "home" – back where they grew up, and the place they knew best. Paul wasted little time with the

native Judean Christians because they weren't causing much trouble; they weren't the ones who suggested the drastic changes in understanding that Stephen was teaching. The locals did not separate the ancient truth from the ancient trappings.

Step by step, the Early Church fulfilled the command of Jesus to carry the gospel first to the Jews in Judea, then Samaria, and then the rest of the world. Philip, one of the seven Greek-speaking Jews appointed to help oversee the charity operations for non-Judean Christians, was among those driven out of Jerusalem. The old Samaritan capital had been destroyed, but Herod rebuilt it and called it Sebaste. Still, many Jews called it by its old name. Unlike the Jews, the Samaritans had less trouble embracing this gospel message. The miracles of healing and deliverance carried a lot of weight with them. The city was in a very celebratory mood.

However, the ease with which they accepted the testimony of miracles also made the Samaritans easy marks for fake conjurers. A fellow there named Simon had been advertising himself as the best miracle worker of Jehovah. Luke chooses Greek terms here typically understood to refer to the God of the Jews, whom the Samaritans also claimed – the “Great God.” While we don't doubt men consorting with demons can display unusual powers, most conjurers had purchased the secret knowledge of their tricks from others. It was a commercial investment for future profit; Simon was simply a showman, not a real shaman. Seeing the miracles of Philip, he realized it was no trickery. He was touched by the gospel message, too, but had a long way to go leaving his old life behind.

Peter was the man to whom Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom. A spiritual kingdom operates on spiritual principles, not in human political methods. It was necessary for Peter to come and investigate this revival in Samaria, as he had been commanded by Christ to lead the Twelve in spreading the gospel message to the world. Implied in Christ's command was the spread of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and this was a part of Peter's commission. Finding the Samaritans had received the gospel, but not the Gift, Peter had to do something. While physical contact was not necessary, as if the Spirit is transferred by mumbo-jumbo magic such as Simon's, it was necessary for the apostles to cross the barrier in their own hearts. The symbolic act of laying hands on the Samaritans burst open the expectations of God's own personal Presence inside human hearts. But to Simon, it looked the same as any other trick he purchased, and he wanted it for himself. He didn't understand, and Peter's rebuke pointed out the stark difference between human ways and Kingdom ways. Whether or not Simon could have gained such a power was not the point. The Spirit was not for sale at a price in gold or silver, but at the cost of full commitment of the self. Simon was repentant, as much proof as we can have that his conversion was genuine. Meanwhile, the two apostles then followed Philip's example preaching in the surrounding Samaritan region.

At the height of his success, Philip was commissioned to a special task. An angel ordered him to take the roads southward, and follow specifically the route between Jerusalem and Gaza. Most of it ran through dry terrain. On that road he met up with a very powerful man in a chariot. He was the Royal Treasurer for a nation we now associate with Nubia, northern Sudan. As a eunuch, this man would not be permitted full conversion to Judaism, but was faithful. Heading home from a worship trip, the man was reading Isaiah aloud. The chariot would have been rather slow moving, with a large entourage on foot for such an official. Philip would have been

able to hear what the man was reading, and could simply walk fast to keep pace. Led by the Spirit, Philip did so, and asked if the man understood what he read. They would have conversed in Greek, and Luke quotes the official reading from the Septuagint (Isaiah 53:7-8). The man seized the opportunity for teaching at his own convenience.

The passage was known even then among Jews as a puzzling text about the Messiah. Philip pointed out that it was fulfilled in Jesus. For a eunuch who had struggled to find a path to embrace the God of Israel to now hear that he was welcomed as a full member of Christ was clearly joy beyond words to him. Philip's message would have been an obvious call to repent and embrace Jesus as the final offering for all sins. The eunuch signaled his readiness to be baptized, showing that he understood the meaning of the Jewish ritual of repentance. Once the act was complete, the eunuch was free to serve Christ as he had never been under ritual laws, and Philip was snatched away to a city some 20 miles (32km) north, called Azotus. Preaching all the way, Philip simply continued up the coastal highway through Joppa, as far as Caesarea.

Thus Luke shows that the command of Christ was fulfilled by stages. Once the Jewish leaders had made their final rejection of the Messiah, it was time to carry the Word farther. First came the Samaritans. Jesus had already preached among them, but now it was no longer mere repentance, but the power and presence of God Himself in every man who repents. The final stage of carrying the Word out to the larger world of Gentiles required a two-pronged approach. It needed the one man best fitted for the task, which was none of the Twelve, yet the senior Apostle must be the first to cross the barrier and bring the Spirit among Gentiles.

## **Chapter 9**

Luke offers precious little indication of the time factor during this part of his narrative. From other sources, we get the feeling that the persecution took some months, and the jump to the Samaritans easily takes us up to perhaps as late as 35 AD. What follows here would be hard to explain historically if the chapter takes us past 40 AD. We should not bog ourselves down in the minutia of secular history, but simply be aware that Luke telescopes his story over a period of years.

Whether Saul was an official member of the Sanhedrin matters not, for he operated on the High Priest's authority. He was granted the discretion to imprison the disciples, now referred to as those following "the Way." Subsequent to the lynching of Stephen, it would seem Rome turned a blind eye to their executions. After ravaging the church in Judea and Galilee, Saul secures letters of extradition to bring back any disciples who fled to Damascus.

It was several days' journey north and east to Damascus, where a very large Jewish community lived. In the complicated politics of that era, it was common in the Roman Empire for various ethnic nations to maintain some police authority over their own wherever they might be found within the empire. For example, Rome found the vestiges of the ancient Moabites and Ammonites living in alliance under Edomite rule. But their homelands were taken over by some Arab tribes, and Rome called it the Nabatean Kingdom. That kingdom maintained an *ethnarch* – a local magistrate's office – in the city of Damascus, where many Nabateans lived, but the city itself was fairly independent as a member of the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a collection of

cities so fully Hellenized, having enthusiastically embraced Alexander the Great's evangelism of the ancient Greek culture some 300 years earlier, that they were culturally different from the surrounding Near Eastern peoples. For Paul to enter Damascus with troops and a caravan of wagons to transport prisoners was a little unusual, but not at all out of order.

Before he arrived at his destination, the Risen Jesus Himself confronted Saul. In the middle of the day, the glory of the Lord was blindingly bright. Saul grew up in a Jewish household speaking the Aramaic language, but lived in a Greek-speaking world. There would be instant significance with the Voice addressing him in Aramaic, for it was a symbol of the very God on behalf of whom he pretended to be serving so zealously. As a Pharisee, he would have believed in miracles such as this, and realized at the minimum that he was being addressed by an angel. The question about persecution from Heaven would have shaken Saul to the core. Upon asking to whom he spoke, Saul learned it was the man whose memory he despised, Jesus. Everything Saul thought he knew was torn away from him in that instant. While the foundation of his conviction in the One True God remained, that foundation was swept bare, and a whole new life would be built on it. Saul was in no position to argue, but simply asked his new Master what was required of him.

We can't be sure exactly what Saul's entourage experienced. Surely they knew something unearthly was taking place, and there's no doubt they heard Saul speaking to Jesus, whether they heard Jesus or not. Saul had seen a vision that left him blind. After leading Saul into town and to some sort of accommodation, the mission is stalled, and they cannot act without him, as he held sole authority. We note that Saul is all but dead, in a sense, for about as long as Jesus stayed in His grave. We know nothing of Ananias except what we read here, but he is a spiritual man whom God sends as the agent to bring Saul into his new life. Straight Street was the main thoroughfare through the center of the city, still visible today. Ananias went there over his personal misgivings, and embraced Saul as a new brother in Christ, the man God had set aside as His new missionary to the Gentiles. We note that the Lord speaks to Ananias suggesting that suffering is the norm in the Kingdom. Saul's sight returned as if a scaly covering fell from his eyes, symbolic of the brittle nature of the lies that had formerly blinded him. He embraced this new life by the ritual of baptism.

Entering this new Kingdom fully, Saul first spent some time refreshing his understanding of the Messiah from the opposite side that he had previously argued against. Instead of raiding the synagogues for refugee members of the Jerusalem church, Saul preached the Messiah they served. The turn-around was shocking, even earth shattering to those who had heard of Saul's mission. Where previously he had officiated the execution of Stephen, he now took up the work of Stephen himself, debating with the same overpowering logic in the synagogues. To have their chief enforcer now become their chief antagonist was more than the rabbis could accept. They plotted to catch Saul leaving the city so they could kidnap and murder him. But their plans leaked and Saul slipped out of town by means of a house built atop the wall, with a window facing outside, where he was let down in a large basket.

Returning to Jerusalem, Saul had a hard time convincing the church that he was one of them. Here we see the wealthy Cypriot, Barnabas, in action again, vouching for Saul. Saul told the story of his conversion, and his ministry in Damascus. For a time, he remained with the church

there, literally carrying on where Stephen left off, debating in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the city. Again, there was a plot to murder Saul, and he was spirited away by the disciples, down to the port of Caesarea, from whence he returned home to Tarsus. However, there was no one else willing to take his place as the whip hand against the followers of Jesus, so the persecution waned somewhat. Thus, for a time, the disciples grew stronger and more numerous in Judea, Galilee and Samaria.

The vessel was prepared. Now it was for Peter to cross that last line with the gospel of Jesus Christ. As the senior shepherd, he visited all the congregations he could find. At one point, he stopped off in Lydda, on the Plain of Sharon, against the foothills northwest of Jerusalem. While there, he encountered Aeneas, a man paralyzed for eight years. After healing the man, the news spread across the Plain of Sharon, and many were moved by this noteworthy miracle to follow Jesus. Just down-slope from Lydda was Joppa, on the coast. A rather popular woman named Dorcas there was famous for charitable acts. She sickened and died. Jewish custom called for the body to be washed upon death, then a period of mourning for three days before embalming. The disciples there hastily sent word and had Peter brought down. He noted the widows showing off the clothing Dorcas had made for them, as such women seldom could afford to eat, much less clothe themselves. Recalling the way Jesus did things, Peter had the house cleared of guests, then prayed in the quiet privacy before calling Dorcas back to life. He pulled her up from her deathbed and presented her alive again to the Christians there.

As we might expect, this so overwhelmed the community there that they had Peter stay awhile. The time was ripe. We note that Peter stayed in the home of a tanner, a fellow who would be outcast in Jewish society as one who handled animal carcasses, a profession regarded as unclean by Jews. In every way, the old walls of division were broken down, and those who previously had little hope were becoming children of God. The old Israel was passing away, and the New Israel was aborning.

## **Chapter 10**

Fundamental to God's purpose in electing the Nation of Israel among all the peoples of the world was that they should represent Him and His revelation to those other nations. We have no record that Israel ever reached out to other nations, though we see plenty of Gentiles drawn to the regal faith of One God over all Creation. As early as Jonah's time, we see the bitter determination that the whole Gentile world deserved to roast in Hell. By New Testament times, the Judean people were openly hostile to any effort to bring redemption to Gentiles. Here we see how Peter takes the next step, according to the command of Jesus to use those keys of the Kingdom to open the gate for the Lord to enter His new home in the hearts of the wider world. This fulfills the original purpose of God's revelation. A critical element here is that Peter begins the process of discerning what parts of the Old Covenant no longer apply, though surely there was plenty of it that did point the way to righteous behavior.

Cornelius would be an army captain by modern standards. As a commander in something called the Italian Cohort, it would mean a rather privileged assignment at the head of citizens born in Rome itself, not simply some regional conscript force. Having felt the pull in his spirit, this man had become loyal to Jehovah as best he knew. While not circumcised as a full convert,

Cornelius lived according to the Law of Moses, willfully seeking the fullest obedience, and would have been welcomed by John the Baptist. He would have known quite well the standard synagogue teaching, and would be familiar with the contents of Old Testament Scriptures.

It was mid-afternoon when Cornelius was seeking God's face, and an angel stood by him. This apparition from God announced the Lord's favor on him, and instructed him to send for Peter, who was staying in Joppa. Most importantly, the angel promised that Peter would explain what God really wanted from Cornelius. Having in his own household servants and a soldier acquainted with his faith, the centurion explained his vision and instructed them to seek out Peter.

Most likely they left before dawn the next morning. It was a hike of some thirty miles (48km), and vigorous men serving a Roman centurion would have just been able to make it to Joppa by mid-day. It was about this time that Peter was praying on Simon the Tanner's rooftop, typically a good escape from the noise of a bustling house. We must not forget that Peter was now quite famous in that region, so there must have been somewhat of the same crush of people always dogging Jesus wherever He went.

While Peter was praying, he had a vision. Descending from the sky was a large square tarp suspended by the four corners. When it settled before him, Peter saw an assortment of non-kosher animals. A voice from Heaven commanded Peter to kill and eat something from this collection. Peter protested that he had always observed kosher, referring to the creatures as "unclean" – an ancient phrase going back before Noah. The voice responded that Peter was not permitted to call unclean anything that God had cleansed. It was not as if Peter had not heard Jesus teach how ritual kosher observance was not about actual food, but was symbolic of what a man put in his heart. But Peter carried the old reflexive avoidance of non-kosher food. That the vision was repeated thrice carried the same significance as his denial of Jesus, and the subsequent rehabilitation as senior member of the Twelve. He would not disregard such a message.

As Peter pondered the vision, the three messengers from Cornelius arrived at the gate of the household. Peter would have ignored them, as he had come up on the rooftop for privacy in the first place, but God told him to go down and meet this trio. In his loyalty to His Lord, he was to go with them without question. He went down to meet them and asked what they sought. They described their master and their mission to convey how Cornelius wanted to hear Peter's teaching. Peter had the servants lodge overnight after their long journey, and left with them early the next morning, along with a half-dozen fellow believers from Joppa.

Upon arriving at Caesarea, with Cornelius anxiously awaiting their return, Peter and his friends found a full house. Cornelius had gathered his family and other Gentile believers. This high-ranking Roman official honored Peter as an even higher-ranking official of God's Court. Peter quickly corrected this by remarking they were both just humans. The first thing Peter did was to explain the obvious violation of Jewish Law, entering a Gentile home. He remarked that God had made it clear this part of the Law no longer applied, because no one on earth was "unclean" or contemptible simply for failing to be born Judean. So he was there at God's command, and

wanted to know how he could serve them. Cornelius recited the story of his vision, and how pleased he was that Peter responded so quickly.

The obvious starting place was to note that God did not reckon things the way the Jewish leaders had taught. In every nation He had already moved the hearts of men to reach out to Him. Those who responded by seeking His justice were in God's eyes "clean." He then noted that the message of Jesus, who was the Messiah for all humanity, not just Judeans, was probably not news to them. It was wholly unlikely they could have lived there in Caesarea without hearing something about it, beginning with the message of John the Baptist.

Peter was there to affirm for them that this message was the truth, for Jesus had been too obviously anointed by God, demonstrating His divine authority over illness and demons alike. Peter was among the Twelve who traveled with Jesus for some years, witnessing all these things. They witnessed His death at the hands of His own nation, suffering the most ignoble death, but also His resurrection. He was not seen as publicly as before His death, but shared fellowship with those whom God called to follow Him. These many ate with Him some days after He arose. This same resurrected Messiah instructed them to take the message to the entire world, for He was Redeemer and Judge of all humanity.

Noteworthy for this audience, which had already absorbed the teaching of the Law, was the remark that Jesus was the final revelation of God, as well as the ultimate sacrifice for all sin. Embracing Him as the living revelation of God was the complete fulfillment of all He demanded of mankind; much of the ritual law was dead. Jesus was the final answer to the longings of those who had sought God, and been unable to find a path open to them through the false Jewish barriers. They were acceptable to God. Such was indeed the gospel good news that would change their lives.

Peter now opened the Kingdom to those assembled in the house of Cornelius. The Holy Spirit chose that moment to fall upon them, to burn His Presence into their souls. The Jewish Christians there with Peter were astonished to see the gift of Heaven poured out on Gentiles, for it was something they had not expected at all. Indeed, God had cleansed these people before their very eyes, and it was Pentecost in the Upper Room all over again. How could anyone deny these whom God accepted the ritual of baptism? So it was that Peter stayed a few days longer, confirming the teaching of Christ to these people.

There was no turning back.

## **Chapter 11**

The conversion of Cornelius's household was easily the climax of Peter's ministry in the Plain of Sharon. He returned to Jerusalem and immediately confronted a firestorm. For centuries the Children of Israel had been taught that their national identity was a calling from Jehovah, a sacred thing. This was almost correct; the community of those living the Covenant was the sacred thing, not the ethnic identity. The issue was not converting people to being Israeli, but to make them Children of the Law. When Jesus bluntly stated that His Kingdom would begin with Jews, but was hardly a matter of human political and racial identity, it simply did not register in

their minds. The realization that the Kingdom of Heaven only *began* with the Jews, but was hardly confined to their lawful identity, was slow dawning on them.

On the other hand, here is the birth of something we call today “the Judaizers.” A certain slice of the Jewish converts remained consciously and militantly nationalist, as it were, regarding the adoption of Judaism as a necessary first step to following Christ. It had never been so much about being a Son of Abraham, since there was nothing anyone could do to change that, but being a Son of the Law (*bar-mitzvah*). There were a few who simply rejected this clear teaching of Jesus, a teaching supported by the miracles of God Himself working in human hearts. Though the conflict is born here, we don’t see it rear its ugly head until much later.

Having already heard the news that Peter entered a Gentile home, ate there and even stayed there, those infected with the Judaizer tendency were ready to pounce as soon as Peter returned. The accusation carries a threat to the assumption held by most Jews of being God’s own unique people. In essence, Peter was denying this, by acting as if the separation between Jew and Gentile no longer mattered. It was tantamount to blasphemy in the eyes of some.

Peter recounted his experiences leading up to the decision to stay with Cornelius. He was in Joppa, saw the tarp filled with unclean animals, and was told to kill and eat. His protest about kosher was met with the stern warning not to call “unclean” what God had cleansed. The Law was a restraint on Israel, not on God. This exchange came to Peter thrice, right before he was called down to meet the messengers from Cornelius. Further, it was the Spirit Himself who directed Peter to go. Apparently the half-dozen companions who had come along were standing there that day as Peter’s witnesses. They were there when Cornelius told of the angelic vision and the precise instructions regarding Peter and his whereabouts. As soon as Peter got past the introduction of his message, the Spirit fell on Cornelius’s household with exactly the same manifestation as the disciples first experienced on Pentecost in the Upper Room. It is here Peter remarks that this was a direct fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy comparing the baptism of John with that of the Holy Spirit. How could Peter argue with God? This silenced the Judaizers on this occasion.

Luke backtracks enough to pick up the thread of those driven from Jerusalem by Saul’s persecution. Some of the places they took the gospel included modern Lebanon, the island of Cyprus, and the coastal region of Syria. The ancient city of Antioch was third largest in the Roman Empire, and the regional imperial headquarters. At first these scattered Hellenized Jewish Christians preached only to fellow Jews. Eventually, those who had been raised in Cyprus and Cyrene (nearby Libyan coast) began evangelizing the local Gentiles. Luke refers to them as Grecian in the sense that the region had embraced Alexander’s mission to Hellenize the world three centuries before. Antioch sported temples to Apollo and Artemis, and the city was known as a great stop for sex tourism because of the temple prostitutes there. It proved fertile ground for Gentile conversions, as well.

Having by now swallowed Peter’s explanation in the case of Cornelius, the church leaders in Jerusalem decided to send someone to ensure things went in the right direction. They chose Barnabas, the wealthy Cypriot, since there were so many in Antioch from Cyprus. Seeing this was clearly a work of God, Barnabas did what he was famous for, encouraging the church

members there to become eternally loyal to their Savior. His presence also encouraged a new wave of conversions. This was getting to be a big task, in need of more expert help. Barnabas headed north to find Saul in Tarsus, and brought him back for a year's mission work there. Luke notes that the term "Christian" first arose here, marking them as partisans or followers of Christ.

Of course, many in Jerusalem adopted this first Gentile church in Antioch. Among them were prophets, such as Agabus. This man explained how God had warned there would be a famine in the Empire soon. Luke associates that for us with the famine of 46 AD during the reign of Emperor Claudius. We note that, for the most part, a famine in those days was the result of a drought. As it turned out, the church at Antioch was all for supporting their brethren in Jerusalem. Since the latter were particularly vulnerable to famine, due to their general lack of financial prosperity as a church driven underground, the generally wealthy crowd in Antioch raised funds to send back to the mother church. Barnabas and Saul carried this aid.

## **Chapter 12**

The flow of narrative carried Luke up to 46 AD. However, the thread concerning Peter cannot be dropped until Luke explains why. Peter had exercised his office holding the Keys of the Realm, having opened the way to all mankind. He is not God's choice, however, to spread the gospel much beyond his own homeland.

We take a moment to review the political situation. Herod the Great died while Jesus was a child. His sons divided the kingdom, but Judea and Galilee were reunited under the authority of Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I. His good friend, Emperor Caligula, granted him this shortly before dying. Thus, Herod Agrippa I comes on the scene in 41 AD, and survives just three years. During his reign, he sought to curry favor with the Jewish leaders. Late in his term, he had James the son of Zebedee arrested and executed. This had the desired effect, and he proceeded to have Peter arrested. While Jesus was executed on Passover, that was extremely rare. Typically, no one would be executed during Passover and the following seven days of Unleavened Bread. Thus, Peter languished in the Fortress of Antonia, adjacent to the Temple, for at least a week.

Peter was under the guard of four squads, a total of sixteen soldiers. Their rotation came during the twelve-hour night shift, so each squad of four would take three hours. Two were supposed to sit awake with the sleeping prisoner chained between them. There were two inner doors, each with another guard. During the whole feast, the church had been praying for him. The last night of the feast, Peter surely expected to be executed the next day, yet slept soundly. An angel appeared, lighting up the chamber. He roused Peter rather roughly, and his chains simply fell off. The guards neither saw nor heard a thing. The angel had Peter arrange his clothing for departure. Peter was sure he was dreaming. They passed the two inner portals, and again the guards noticed nothing. At the outer gate that led onto the street, the thing opened automatically. After walking one block, the angel simply disappeared, and Peter realized it was not a dream.

It was a short walk to the old headquarters in the Bethesda district of the city, the house with the Upper Room, owned by Mary, the mother of John Mark. Peter knocked at the gate of the outer courtyard. It was still dark, and a young lady named Rhoda came to answer. Upon asking who was there, and hearing Peter's voice, she forgot to let him in, but ran back and announced excitedly to the assembled prayer meeting that Peter was outside. For all their faithfulness in praying, it seemed too incredible, and they finally decided it must be Peter's guardian angel, since it could not be Peter himself. Upon opening the gate to see Peter himself in the flesh, they burst into a million questions, but he had to silence them. With the angel gone, Peter reckoned the miraculous part was past and he needed to be careful. After telling them of that miracle escape, he asked them to relay the news to James, the brother of Jesus. Essentially, this officially places James in the lead, as Peter must go underground. With that, his place in the narrative is essentially finished.

Roman law decreed that if a soldier allowed a prisoner to escape, he suffered the same sentence expected for his prisoner. When the final shift came on duty, everyone suddenly realized that the chains were attached to nothing. Luke describes a scene of military panic. Herod ordered a full search to ensure none of the other soldiers in the fortress were playing games. It came down to the four guard squads having no explanation, and they were duly executed. Deprived of his prey, Herod went down to the palace at Caesarea on the coast, where Cornelius was stationed.

This places Peter's change of duties at 44 AD, which is the year Herod Agrippa died. A short time after Peter goes into hiding, the Sidonians saw their opportunity to get out of a jam. They had managed to anger Herod, and were at risk of being starved, since Herod controlled the delivery of food to the ancient Phoenician home, as it produced precious little of its own. They bribed the king's chamberlain (manager of the royal household, a very influential man), Blastus. Working through him, they arranged an audience to make peace with Herod. The king suffered a serious case of vanity, and received them in a robe of woven silver. The Sidonian delegation played on this vanity. When Herod made some fancy speech to receive them, they kept exclaiming it was surely the voice of a god. In their pagan culture, this was entirely appropriate, but it was a sin for any king claiming to rule the Jews. During this royal celebration, Herod became sick. A few days later he died, according to Luke, from some sort of worm infestation.

This latest threat neutralized, the church began to grow again in the land of the Jews, and the gospel spread afresh. Thus, we find Saul and Barnabas delivered their donation to the church in Jerusalem to stave off another kind of threat. While there, they enlisted John Mark into their ministry, and returned to Antioch.

### **Chapter 13**

The spiritual conquest of Earth had already begun, with the gospel taking such a firm footing in Antioch among the Gentiles. From this beachhead against the Darkness, Our Lord sent out emissaries to offer terms to nearby areas. Thus, we have the first half of Paul's First Missionary Journey.

The church had sprouted a very strong crop of spiritual leaders. We are already familiar with Barnabas and Saul. Add to that a fellow named Simon, with a nickname meaning he was black,

still rather rare in that area. Lucius was from Cyrene, and there was Manean. This latter was the official court playmate to Herod Antipas, and by custom could keep that title for life. These men were seeking the Lord specifically, and received guidance regarding Barnabas and Saul, men who had been called as the first ambassadors of God to the Gentile world. After a time of confirmation, the men were dispatched.

After a short journey down to the port of nearby Seleucia, they took a ship to Cyprus, Barnabas' home country. Typical of previous efforts, these two Hellenized Jewish Christians went to the synagogues. Luke notes John Mark assisted them. Having worked their way across the island, this being likely the spring of 45 AD, they stopped at the Roman headquarter city of Paphos. The imperial representative here was Sergius Paulus, and among his courtiers was a Jewish man claiming to be a prophet, who played at sorcery. His public name was "Son of Salvation," but he was also called Elymas ("Sorcerer"). When Sergius had invited our missionaries to share their message with him, Elymas realized it was the end of his free ride as a court "wise man," and tried to hinder their appearance. Luke notes in passing that Saul began using the Roman form of his name, Paul. Paul sharply reprimanded Elymas as a servant of Satan, and cursed him with temporary blindness to match his spiritual blindness. Sergius was impressed, and became quite absorbed in the gospel message.

From Cyprus, the trio sailed to the Roman region next door to Paul's hometown of Tarsus. Luke does not tell us why, but John Mark bailed out on the mission, returning to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Paul and Barnabas crossed the Taurus Mountains into southern Galatia, where another city named Antioch stood. As usual, they went to the synagogue there. As Jewish visitors, they were not unnoticed, and were invited to address the synagogue as was customary. Paul rose up to give a respectful greeting, then recounted a bit of history. The point was to emphasize how Jehovah had remained active from the very beginning of Israel's departure from Egypt. Despite the nation's apparent unworthiness, God had been faithful to His promises. So they demanded and got a king; first Saul's sad reign, then David heralding the golden age of Israeli prominence.

The focus of all this was to bring about the birth of His Son and Messiah, Jesus. The herald, John the Baptist, boldly declared he came to point out the Messiah. While the leaders in Jerusalem rejected Him, this simply played into God's hands. They didn't understand the prophecies pointing to Jesus, and were thus surprised by His resurrection, which had also been prophesied. There were plenty of witnesses ready to back the claim of resurrection. It should have been obvious that those prophecies about David were not literally about the ancient king, but about the Messiah, born of David's lineage. Jesus is now the one true sacrifice for sins, and in Him is a level of justification not possible under the Old Covenant, yet promised through it. Paul appealed for them to avoid the mistake of rejecting his message, quoting Habbakuk's warning of rejecting as hard to swallow a mighty miracle God had prepared.

Naturally, it was the Gentiles who were most interested in hearing more about this, lacking the vast hardened prejudice of the Jews. Not only did they beg the synagogue leaders to book Paul and Barnabas to speak at next week's meeting, but tagged along behind the men the rest of the week. Both men elaborated on what Paul had already said, stirring a very strong interest throughout the community. On the next Sabbath, it seemed the whole town had turned out for

the meeting. This set the Jewish members on edge. A message meant for them was obviously going to include these unclean barbarians, provoking the ancient Jewish contempt for Gentiles. The threat of having their own kind deny their special standing with God was too much, and they began harassing Paul and Barnabas, contradicting the gospel message. Paul noted that they came to the synagogue only to satisfy the command from Jesus to start with the Jews. Given their reception, Paul and Barnabas declared this obligation was fulfilled once and for all, and would no longer bother with Jews. Isaiah prophesied this, too, whom Paul quotes as a reminder from God that Israel was meant to reach out to the Gentiles in the first place.

We can be sure the Gentiles in any city with a Jewish synagogue had already had their fill of self-righteous contempt when trying to answer the irresistible pull of God to seek Him. The Jews kept Gentiles at a distance, and pretended God did the same. Hearing this message of redemption that could now be theirs provoked a thrill hard to describe in the Gentile seekers. In a very short time, the gospel won converts in the entire region as the offer of Christ was carried by word of mouth. The region had been conquered by the divine love of God, and it was now the Jews who were left out. They stirred up political turmoil, propagandizing how Paul and Barnabas were a serious threat to social order and peace, by which they meant they were feeling threatened in their sense of moral superiority. So the missionaries were expelled from the district. As commanded by God, the two men observed the ritual departure by shaking the very dust of that place off their sandals, lest the filth of sins cling to them. It hardly soured their mood or that of the Gentile converts they left in the region around Galatian Antioch.

It becomes necessary to note here what Paul is doing. While early in her history the Nation of Israel understood the Law of Moses was largely a ritual expression of much higher truth, that understanding was quickly lost. They made the rituals and trappings into a false god. Any attempt to draw mankind into redemption from the Fall through such a system was entirely too fragile; a critical part of God's revelation was proving that point. Mankind at his best was incapable of keeping a firm grip on what was utterly necessary to return to God. Instead of using the long hard path of human conditioning as the means to standing people in the place to hear from God, the Lord was granting a direct connection first, and then allowing humanity to go back and learn what was essential in this world for living out the implications of that redemption. Those essentials were hinted at in the Law of Moses, and Jesus' teaching clarified the situation greatly. He then implemented the new requirements by offering the final sacrifice to end the ritual necessities, even as it raised the moral standards to a much higher level. Both the higher moral demands and the reduction of ritual necessity were a major threat to the corrupted system which Judaism had become, far distant and greatly abstracted from the original religion of the Old Testament. Paul was attacking the corrupt Judaism, not the original revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures.

## **Chapter 14**

Turning to the Gentiles in Antioch did not mean Paul and Barnabas would simply stop trying to reach Jews everywhere they went. Yet, the same pattern repeats itself every time, where they seek Jews first, only to be driven off to evangelize Gentiles. It served to show them and us how utterly far Judaism had drifted from God's work in this world. Thus, God shows the justice in

closing the Covenant of Moses, and taking away the unique status Israel held before Him. As Paul noted, they had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life.

So we see the missionaries left Antioch and went to Iconium. This was on the major route toward Paul's hometown. The scene here repeats itself somewhat. First, they enter the synagogue and are invited to speak. Here a large number of both Jews and Gentiles attending the synagogue meetings are moved to faith in Christ. Tension took a bit longer to rise here. Again, it was the unbelieving Jews who manipulated the Gentiles. This only emboldened Paul and Barnabas, who managed to keep things going much longer than at Antioch. As the Lord began supporting their teaching with miraculous signs, the debate began spreading across the entire population of the city. At some point, the tension rose to the level of action, as the unbelievers planned to stone the missionaries, having gained support of the synagogue leaders. Someone tipped off the intended victims and they fled down the road a bit farther to Lystra.

This was a distinctly Phrygian city, with almost no Jews, so no synagogue. The preaching took place in the public forum, probably the city square just inside the main gates. While preaching, Paul realized that a man born crippled had gained complete trust in Christ, sufficient to be healed. Paul directed the man to stand, which the man did with great enthusiasm. The problem was the context. These folks had a pagan temple outside the city gates, and at some point had simply renamed it as a temple of Zeus/Jupiter, the closest from the Greek/Roman pantheon to their ancient deity. There had been some legends about Zeus, with his spokesman Hermes, visiting the area and performing miracles. The locals seized upon this association, and began chattering excitedly in their native dialect, which Paul and Barnabas didn't understand. Since Paul was younger and speaking, they assumed he was Hermes the Messenger, while the older Barnabas was Zeus, the King of gods. A few went off to fetch the temple priests and a sacrifice fit for their patron deity. When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they reacted as typical Jews, tearing their garments to symbolize distress over blasphemy.

The approach Paul used was tailored to those lacking knowledge of Jewish religion. They first protested that they were mere men. The whole point of their message was to turn them away from useless animal sacrifices to dead gods, and to embrace the One True Living God. He is described as the one who made all things, who tolerated the nations wandering from the true revelation. We note in passing God's tolerance was in part due to the failure of Israel to get the message out. Meanwhile, He made sure nature testified of Him, by having regular seasons and predictable crops. This harkens back to the Covenant of Noah, which remained in force among all Gentile nations. It was still difficult to dissuade the local priests from leading a sacrificial celebration for the city residents, as Paul surely taught them that Christ had become the final and eternal sacrifice under all covenants.

Paul and Barnabas stayed for some time. Eventually, the persecutors from Antioch and Iconium caught up with them. Manipulators to the core, we can sense they took advantage of the embarrassing incident to build a case for treating Paul and Barnabas as a serious problem for the city. The residents formed a mob and tried to silence Paul by stoning him. They dragged his body outside the gates, assuming he was dead. Once the mob melted away, Barnabas and the believers gathered around, only to be stunned as Paul simply got up and walked back into the

city that had just tried to kill him. The next day, the missionaries left for Derbe. Things were less dramatic there, as they stayed for quite some time, making disciples.

Luke tends to ignore the time factor, but we can guess that the mission up to this point was already several months, with days of walking between destinations, and few details in the narrative during long stays. In places where there had been a Jewish witness, it was a matter of correcting false understandings. But in other cities, they had to build from scratch, and this took much longer. The reason Paul and Barnabas didn't continue on toward Tarsus by land was the small kingdom in between whose ruler protected the one official religion, recognized by Rome, and would have authority to execute them for daring to challenge it. We can be sure that the king was known for vigorous action on such matters. Thus, Paul and Barnabas simply retraced their steps.

We would be fools to read our modern cultural biases back into the text. Though Rome operated on a magisterial imperial structure, almost the entire empire was a collection of tribal nations. The fundamental meaning of "elder" is drawn from the ancient head of household, the patriarch. This man may not be the oldest in years, but would be the most influential, the one that the extended family would follow. It remains the same as the level rises to clan and tribe. While the churches started by this mission were seldom actual households, it was the assumption of Jesus' teaching that each congregation would act as a single household. Not just using the words "brother" and "sister" as mere titles, they reflected embracing the fellow members as if they were genuine blood kin. However, the blood shared is that of Christ. For Paul and Barnabas to appoint elders in each congregation was to allow the church to form familial ties under their leadership, as the entire church would be structured as an extended household.

This form of tight dependence was necessary to survive the brutal opposition Christians faced. This was, after all, a form of conquest. The Realm of Christ displaced all other loyalties, and called into question the legitimacy of every other tie by which humans are bound together, as Christ Himself had taught. Operating under oppression was taken for granted, and must be embraced as the duty and call of every citizen of Heaven's Realm. Working their way back through the churches they had started, Paul and Barnabas took time to stay, pray and fast with each congregation, confirming this otherworldly outlook, which would dismiss as unimportant the possessions, comforts, and life itself in this world.

They stopped off in the cities of Perga and Attalia, the port. They found passage back to Seleucia, just down river from Antioch, whence they began this first mission. After making a full report, they rested up for perhaps a year or so. A good thing it was, because trouble was brewing, and it required Paul to resolve things.

## **Chapter 15**

This chapter should serve as the final nail in the coffin of a false belief still troubling us today. It's not enough that the Jews of the first century confused the Talmud with God's Word, but they confused the Two Realms – that of the Flesh and of the Spirit. The Law of Moses applied to the historic human artifact of the Nation of Israel. It never applied to Gentiles, and was most

certainly no constraint on God. Jews are still free to cling to their cultural and historical roots, as their conscience may demand of them, but they cannot presume to bind the conscience of all humanity, because Christ came to save all mankind.

The Judaizers we met in chapter 11 did not go away. As more Judeans were moved to join the Christians, particularly former Pharisees, there arose again a wave of zeal in the Law. We can't be sure this zeal included some Talmudic perversions of the Law, but we should not be surprised if it did. Whether this was purely the Law as Jesus taught or a fresh insinuation of Talmudic legalism makes little difference, as the underlying point was the demand that all those who claim Christ must surely become Sons of the Law. Whatever they meant by that, it wasn't what Jesus taught, nor what Moses commanded.

The source of this obsession with clinging to their old ways is not easily untangled. At a minimum, the whole of a Pharisee's identity would be tied up in scrupulous observance of Moses, as they saw it. The Messiah was promised to their nation, and they steadfastly rejected the criticism from their own prophets that they had refused to carry out the premise of the Covenant: a revelation of Jehovah to the whole world. The mental framework was so deeply ingrained that it literally took a miracle to wash it out. Many resisted that miracle, as they just had no place in their thinking for the Spirit to heal it. We can sense some carried this failure to their graves.

Yet, while they lived, they made it their business to pester everyone claiming Christ, demanding such converts go through the rituals of embracing Judaism. This was hardly calling libertine sinners to account, since the Lord had already blessed the Gentile churches without the Law of Moses. Thus, Paul and Barnabas, two men particularly adept at understanding the demands of Judaism, were the strongest resisters to this attempt. The debate was so heated and intractable that the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem, whence these Judaizers claimed was their commission.

On the way, our two missionaries reported the good news of Gentiles turning to Christ in other lands. There seemed to be little support for the Judaizers among Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria. Arriving in Jerusalem, they reported in somewhat more detail their mission work to the church there. Immediately, the Judaizers chimed in on what they saw as shortcomings in that work. The Apostles and elders assembled to discuss this. The debate would easily have continued on into eternity, but it was clear nothing would change. Peter reminded them of his unique experience, now some years past. If the Law was essential to repentance from sins, why did the Lord grant the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles while they remained outside the Law? It did not appear God was too worried about the Law in that sense, at least as the Judaizers conceived of it. Whatever it was the Judaizers proposed was something even Israel, at her best, seldom kept. Do they suppose Gentiles could now perform any better as Children of the Law?

Peter insisted grace and faith were the focus of God's work in human hearts, even their own Jewish hearts. Paul and Barnabas then backed that up by relating the various miracles they had seen outside the Law of Moses. The Judaizers had no real answer to this. By now, James, the brother of Jesus, had become the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem. He rose to remind them that Peter's experience was the initial fulfillment of their own Jewish prophecy. Quoting

Amos 9:11-12, James notes that the Messianic promises were given precisely to fulfill the original purpose of God choosing Israel, as those who would reveal Him to the world. Amos declares that, since the nation would not do it, God would remove them, and raise up a new Messianic Nation of Israel to carry out the purpose, an Israel drawn from all humanity. In essence, James reminded them that their national identity had died on the Cross. While the old rituals might be comfortable for Jewish Christians, there was nothing requiring Gentiles to embrace that.

Thus, he ruled he would not support the Judaizers, but rebuked them. Their message was trouble, and the Gentiles had always been under a different covenant than Israel in the first place. For them to repent would include a fairly simple and short list of things that Jews had always required of Gentiles as the grounds for associating with them. Thus, he directed preparation of a letter to Antioch in particular, but to all Gentile Christians in general. They would observe the ancient Laws of Noah as the marks of repentance. Three items in particular would be unfamiliar to them: idolatry, sexual immorality, and meat with blood in it. This was enough for Gentiles; had they been called to be Jews, God could have done so at any time in the past through the Diaspora synagogues. Instead, God waited for the gospel message of grace without the Law to grant them repentance.

Keep in mind that Jesus was on record saying the Law of God would never pass from this earth. Rather, the problem here was the obsession with a particular national law code that was deeply stained with Talmudism. The issue was not simply Moses, particularly Moses as taught by Jesus. It was the racist spite that Jewish Christians brought with them, and refused to share space with Gentiles they thought of as feral dogs. They wanted Gentiles to become “purified” Jews or they wouldn’t associate with them.

The church in Jerusalem as a whole accepted James’s judgment. They selected representatives to help carry the message and verify its meaning: Judas Barsabbas and Silas. The letter carefully notes the nature of the conflict, and repudiates the Judaizers. The letter further specifically commends Paul and Barnabas, and names the men commissioned to go with them. Then it briefly recounts the few issues that would bring the Gentiles in line with the ancient Laws of Noah. It was well received in Antioch, as were the encouragements of Silas and Judas. They eventually returned to Jerusalem with compliments from the church in Antioch. However, Silas was moved to go back to Antioch again. The church there continued to grow.

Paul felt moved to go back and visit the churches established during their missionary journey. He and Barnabas made plans, but there was some trouble over the idea of bringing John Mark again. Paul felt the young man was not ready, but Barnabas refused to go without him. In the end, they simply divided the mission between them. Barnabas took Mark back to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas overland with him toward Galatia.

## **Chapter 16**

Obedying the Laws and commands of God is no warranty against human compromises and pain. God will surely require of us actions that He knows will bring sorrow. The spiritual principle is to always obey, knowing that Christ paid a far higher price. We enter His service by a

willingness to accept that price. To accept that price means to embrace the justness of it, and to embrace paying it ourselves, as we take up our own crosses.

The first compromise was in dealing with Timothy. Upon Paul's return to Derbe, then Lystra, he found a young disciple who had risen to prominence among the believers there. Timothy's Jewish mother surely taught him the Old Testament, but never pressed him to convert to Judaism. His Gentile father was well known as a pagan. To the Jews, Timothy was considered a Gentile, but to the pagans, a Jew. His confused identity among the people was a problem. Paul needed his service as a fellow Jew, so had him ritually circumcised, which surely included official conversion to Judaism. This allowed Timothy to fully partake in evangelism to both Jews and Gentiles, a simple choice of expedience.

The letter from the Jerusalem Council was also read to all the congregations Paul and Barnabas had previously planted in the region. Its effect was to sharpen the Christian identity among the mixed religious atmosphere. Clarity of message always serves God's purpose, and He granted the churches continual growth.

Paul and Silas planted more churches in Phrygian cities, which work indicates inland Western Turkey today, but was not exactly a Roman mapping term. Luke's use of the term "Galatia" is somewhat confusing, but the point is that the missionaries were held back from visiting either the western coast ("Asia") or the northern ("Bithynia"), but ended up at Troas, near the ancient city of Troy. In a night vision, Paul was called to Macedonia. Here, Luke subtly shifts to the first person, indicating he first began traveling with Paul at Troas. They took passage on a ship to the Island of Samothrace, spent the night, and then landed at the Port of Neapolis the next day.

A short hike up the slope and inland brought them to Philippi, chief city in one of the four districts of Macedonia, and a Roman *colony*. That designation made it rather like a virtual island of Roman citizens with privileges matching those back home in Italy. In a city lacking enough Jews to have a synagogue, Paul checked the most likely gathering place, on the riverbank outside town where baptism rituals were possible. What they found were mostly women, since their conversion to Judaism was less demanding than for men. We note that the Law of Moses granted women a better social standing than most pagan religions. Paul sat down in front of the group, which was customary in synagogues for teaching the Law. Among the audience was a very wealthy woman named Lydia who believed their message. She traded in very expensive purple fabric, produced in her home city of Thyatira. She led her entire household in accepting the gospel message, and became the missionaries' hostess.

Regardless of pagan beliefs on the matter, we know from the Old Testament that there were from ancient times people who managed to gain some regular contact with demons. These unions often exhibited unusual abilities. One young female slave in Philippi was able to cast fortunes by her demon, certainly with sufficient accuracy to bring in quite a big profit to her masters. There's no doubt they knew it was the work of a foul spirit haunting her life. When she began following Paul and Silas around town, she spoke the truth. She used the standard pagan term for the Jewish God and said the men knew the way of spiritual security. The problem is that when demons speak the truth they do so without the power of the Holy Spirit, so it becomes a form of blasphemy, gutting the power of Truth. This grated on Paul's nerves, and he

felt compelled to deliver the girl from the demon, if only to end the blasphemy. Sadly, a good thing for her was bad for her masters' business.

Jews were permitted to practice their own religion under a Roman grant, but were not permitted to inflict it on others. The charges made by the owners of the slave girl noted that these men, whom they took to be Jews, had acted beyond the proper legal limits of their religious freedom. They added accusations about causing social turmoil. By now a crowd had gathered, and quickly turned into a lynch mob. Those appointed by Rome to rule and judge disputes in the city ordered Paul and Silas flogged with the rods carried by the Roman soldiers assigned to these magistrates. Then the magistrates ordered them confined in the prison. The jailer would most likely be a retired Roman military officer, who felt the order warranted putting his prisoners in stocks, which meant a very unpleasant posture.

All night Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns as the best way to deal with their misery. It gained the ears, and most likely the admiration, of the other prisoners. Earthquakes were common in that area, and the one that struck at that moment breached the security of the prison. Rather than suffer the grave indignity and hideous death sentence common for jailers who failed to keep their prisoners, the jailer prepared to fall on his sword. Paul knew this, and called for the man to desist, since no one had escaped. At this point, we discover what God had in mind with all this sorrow, for the jailer asked how he might find the spiritual security all pagans sought. Whatever deity these men served, one that made them sing happily after torture, it was obviously more powerful than all the rest in the Roman religion market.

A jailer was free to handle his charges as he saw fit, as long as he could produce them on command. Having seen that these men intended him good, not evil, the rest of the night passed in celebration as the entire household embraced Christ. With the dawn, the magistrates decided the two Jews had been made sufficient examples, and sent the two lictors that beat Paul and Silas to have them released. You might think Paul was getting revenge for the shameful treatment. Instead, it was necessary to impress upon the magistrates and the whole city that these two men were above reproach, and so were all the other Christians. The rulers hastened to offer an official apology to avoid suffering charges against themselves for violating the rights of Roman citizens: beating them was forbidden, and they were sentenced without a full hearing. Paul and Silas could easily have appealed to the district officials, and the magistrates would be lucky if all they suffered was dismissal. They begged Paul and Silas to leave, but could not order them to depart. So the missionaries went back to the congregation, set things in order, and made a leisurely departure.

## **Chapter 17**

The pattern is by now well established. Jews tended to reject the message, and a broader Gentile audience would partially respond. The only people to readily embrace Paul's message were the believing Gentiles. Jews at least had a moral obligation to hear him out, but winning a hearing among Gentiles at large could be tricky. While Paul seemed to avoid talk of the Kingdom of Heaven, we note many hearers could detect that this was very much a call for a shift in loyalties, a change to citizenship far higher than anything Rome could offer, and certainly at many points plausibly viewed as a rival claim.

Leaving the church at Philippi well established, Paul, Silas and Timothy went west along the Egnatian Way. There was a distinct strategy to Paul's efforts, choosing major cities, from which he knew the gospel would spread of itself. The next stop was Thessalonica, a very large free city with a synagogue. Again, it was obedience to Christ to preach the Jews first, but it was rare when the believing Gentiles did not embrace the far simpler path of Christ over the Law of Moses. This was the source of contention, of course, with the Jewish leaders of any synagogue. With the hope of having so many proselytes gone, along with their offerings, they felt Paul was stealing their sheep. Lacking the dignity to simply run these preachers out, the Jewish leaders hired pagan thugs to create a disturbance. A fellow named Jason hosted the missionaries; he had the foresight to hide his guests. The mob dragged him before the ruling council and made wild accusations. Since the targets of this mob, Paul and Silas, were absent, the rulers could only demand a bond from Jason against any further disturbance. This bond would be forfeited if Paul or Silas were spotted again, because the Jewish leaders would surely stir up another mob.

That night, Paul and Silas slipped out of town, and were escorted to another large city, but off the main route – Berea. As usual, Paul and Silas preached in the synagogue, but this one was blessed with leaders who cultivated an open mind about searching the Scriptures to test the message. A larger number of both Jews and Gentile believers embraced the gospel here. However, in the normal daily traffic between Jewish communities, the synagogue at Thessalonica got wind of this and came down to break things up. Before the situation could get out of hand, Paul was spirited away down river to the coast, and put on a ship to Athens. Silas and Timothy were not so much the target, and stayed behind until they knew where Paul ended up. While Paul's escort made its way back with the message for his companions, he wandered Athens.

While a city very self-conscious of its ancient grand heritage, Athens was no longer a seat of government under Rome, just an ancient university town. The world's scholars still came, seeking philosophical and religious knowledge. Paul hadn't really planned to exert much effort there because the city just wasn't that important. Still, he spoke in the synagogue, and in the open market with anyone else who showed an interest. Of particular discomfort to Paul was the plethora of deities whose altars and shrines were thickly dotted around the place. Legend has it that when catastrophe struck, the residents would simply set loose a flock of sacrificial sheep in hopes that somehow the gods who were upset would draw one or more victims to their altars. When a sheep was found near no particular altar, a new one was erected to "The Unknown God." There were several of these around the city.

With his advanced education, Paul fit right in with the intellectual atmosphere. The current fashionable schools were Epicurean and Stoic. The local education council decided to test him for certification, since his subject matter was new to them. Here we see in stark relief just how much of a barrier Hellenistic intellectual assumptions were to the gospel. The Epicureans asserted that the gods hardly cared about human affairs, and surely there was no afterlife. Man could, at best, try to enjoy life in grand style, though not in raw hedonism. The Stoics felt man had a duty to live by natural law, and tended to rather strict ethical conduct. Both were afflicted with the foundations of Plato and Aristotle, making no allowance for anything they could not see or theorize from reason.

Paul was willing to outline his gospel message. He began by making note of the local religious culture, and selected the altars to the Unknown God as his anchor point. From there he outlined the basic claims: Jehovah is Creator and Sustainer of all life. All mankind came from His hand, and He is directly involved in natural and human affairs. However, He permitted humans to wander a bit with religion. Here and there one could find glimpses of the truth, Paul noting a smattering of accurate ideas in pagan philosophy and religion. However, He had finally revealed Himself with the intention of calling all men to an accurate knowledge of Him, who was too transcendent for man-made idols or temples, but a spiritual being far apart from His Creation. The final revelation was a particular Man apart, who was so marked by His resurrection from the dead.

At that point, Paul had stepped outside the acceptable ideas of Greek philosophical assumptions. They had no place for the notion of mere mortal bodies being resurrected. Anything tangible and real was of necessity inferior. In their world, there was no place for a belief in a human spirit, an eternal soul that could be contained in flesh. The educators politely tabled the notion of granting Paul a license to teach, while some of them sarcastically dismissed his ideas. There were a few who embraced his teaching, among them a Dionysius and a Damaris. We have no record of any church ever existing in Athens during this time.

## **Chapter 18**

If this were simply a chronology of Paul's ministry, we should actually be disappointed at Luke's habit of skipping details that make sense of the events. However, this is more about the character of Paul's ministry. This man never attacked the Jewish religion, but practiced it himself. He was peaceful with the Jews where he roamed, but too often they were not peaceful with him, resorting to crude criminal methods and constantly trying to have him killed. Paul was no threat to Judaism; Jews were the biggest threat to their own religion.

We learn from Paul's own letters that Silas and Timothy came to him at Athens and warned him he could not return to Berea. Timothy returned there, but Silas went on to Philippi, while Paul decided to do some work in Corinth. This was the seat of the Roman government for the region of Achaia (southern Greece), and a major trade center, sitting astride the narrow neck of land separating two small seas. A lot of freight came across this place to avoid a long sailing voyage around Achaia. This was also home to the Temple of Aphrodite, with her thousand temple prostitutes. The city was the most prominent symbol of debauchery, and entirely cosmopolitan.

Paul was hardly the only one spreading the gospel message. In Corinth he met two Christian Jews from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila. They had left Italy on the orders of Emperor Claudius, decreed in about 49 AD because the Jews in Rome kept rioting over teaching and preaching about Jesus "Chrestus" – so all Jews had to leave. These two were engaged in the same business trade Paul had learned, since rabbis were not permitted to draw pay from rabbinical duties. They worked in leather and heavy fabrics during the week, and Paul would teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. When Silas and Timothy joined him again, Paul felt driven to press the gospel message more directly and full time. This caused a reaction in the synagogue, so he symbolically turned them over to Satan. Instead, he began preaching next door at the home of Justus. When the synagogue ruler, Crispus, was converted with his household, it must have

rankled the Jewish community. But Paul was encouraged by a vision, being told by God that there were many yet in the city He intended to call.

Thus, Paul broke with his habit of short stays, and remained a year and a half. Sometime around the summer of 51 AD, a new proconsul rotated into office in the city, by the name of Gallio. The Jews decided to bring their case against Paul. Their religion was officially tolerated, and they claimed Paul was inciting an attack on this religion that the law protected. Gallio was brother to the famous philosopher, Seneca, and no fool. He saw right through this as an internal matter between Jews, and none of his concern. We find the locals did not easily tolerate the Jews. As soon as they saw this curt dismissal, with troops driving them from Gallio's open-air judgment seat, the locals began beating the new leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes. While technically a breach of peace, Gallio acted as if nothing happened, in part to underline his own distaste for Jews.

Paul stayed even longer in the city. Eventually, it was time to go. On the eastern coast was the port city of Cenchreae, the other end of the famous wagon track across the isthmus. There Paul went to a Jewish ritual barber to shave his head. This signaled the completion of a Nazarite vow, showing that Paul still took his Jewish practices seriously. Priscilla and Aquila came with him as they sailed to Ephesus, where the two took up residence, preparing to amplify Paul's mission by witnessing there. Paul appeared briefly in the synagogue, where his message was well received. But when they asked him to stay, he declined because of a commitment to be in Jerusalem for some feast. He promised to return sometime, if God willed. Then he sailed for Caesarea, on the coast of Palestine. He made the feast in Jerusalem and spent some time with the church there. Then he returned to Antioch with his mission report. While church scholars make much of breaking Paul's work into specific journeys, Luke simply notes briefly Paul later went back north and west to the first churches he planted.

Now more than two decades after the Ascension of Christ, there were still a large number of devout Jews who did not hear about the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. They knew only the revival of John the Baptist, the call to repentance, the return of genuine Old Testament faith, and some of the teaching of Jesus. Among these was a very sharp fellow named Apollos, from Alexandria, Egypt. He arrived in Ephesus during this time frame, and very powerfully witnessed in the synagogue there of this revival of true Hebraic faith. Paul's friends, Priscilla and Aquila heard this man, and met with him privately to share the rest of the story, how Jesus died and became the final sacrifice for all sins. With this new message, Apollos felt called to preach in Achaia, and was given letters of introduction to the Christians there. With their warm welcome, he stood up among the Jews, and in a very public debate, proved their sin in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah.

## **Chapter 19**

Paul's long sojourn in Ephesus was preceded by his visit to the Galatian churches. He hiked the back roads through the mountains instead of the longer trade routes around to this great port city and Roman capital of Asia Minor. Apollos had departed for Corinth just a short time before and left a dozen disciples still clinging to their commitment to the teachings of John the Baptist.

Paul told them the rest of the gospel story. For them, it was almost a private Pentecost experience, men of Israel coming home to the final revelation of God.

Keeping his promise to the synagogue at Ephesus, Paul preached for three months. Eventually the synagogue leadership sensed the loss of control and ran Paul out, with the very large group who embraced his message. Again, the synagogue leaders resorted to using thugs from the local population to do their dirty work. Paul simply moved his ministry to the Hall of Tyrannus. The image we get is standard Mediterranean life, working from dawn to midday and then taking an extended siesta until late afternoon (11AM to 4PM). It was during this afternoon break, when businesses were closed, Paul would teach and preach. For two years his work prospered there, and the gospel spread to the whole province.

His extended ministry was characterized by a tremendous influence. The Lord granted signs and wonders, even through the work garments Paul would wear during business hours. His authority over demons in particular gained him notice from early practitioners of what would become Kabbalism. These Jewish frauds wandered the Mediterranean selling the same religious mumbo-jumbo that had helped create the demonized crowds that taxed Jesus during His time on earth. But these men were simply out to make a buck with their imitation magic, and sought to add the name of Jesus as a talisman. When confronting a real demon, it recognized the authority of Paul and Jesus, but not that of the Sons of Sceva, a Jewish High Priest. Their failure became famous and merely added to Paul's credibility. Not just primitive Kabbalah magic, but all sorts of black magic was proven to fail before the gospel. At one rally, magicians revealed their tricks and burned their "Ephesian Letters" – the magic scrolls for which that city was a famous market. Indeed, the market value of those books was easily fifty thousand days' wages for a skilled worker, more than such a man could earn in two lifetimes.

In preparation for moving on, hoping to pass through Macedonia and Achaia, Paul sent Timothy and Erastus, in part to organize the collection of famine relief offerings for the church in Jerusalem. Then he wanted to pass through Rome on the way to Spain. While making final preparations, things in Ephesus got out of control. It was not simply the magic trade that Paul had disrupted, but the standard pagan worship of Cybele, the ancient mother goddess of Asia Minor. The locals had simply adopted the Greek name Artemis, then the Roman Diana from the widely recognized pantheon. Her temple was quite massive and ornate, famous worldwide at that time. It housed a meteorite supposed to bear the image of their goddess. The local silversmith guild made most of their sales in replicas of both the temple and statues of the goddess. Sales dropped off as more people became Christians, obeying the Laws of Noah and having nothing to do with pagan worship.

A central element in Luke's work is correcting baseless rumors. News passing by word of mouth in that part of the world had falsely branded Paul as a troublemaker. Demetrius strummed every sensitive chord, particularly the slump in silver trade and what he termed an attack on their dignity, and more, an attack on their sacred goddess. In those days, when a mob in the city was stirred about something, demanding some action, they gathered in the outdoor theater. While a couple of Paul's companions were seized by the mob, the whole thing was utter confusion. Paul was hoping to face the crowd himself to save these friends of his, but those who knew what was going on kept him back. In particular, the current and retired Roman officials

who led public worship of Caesar in the region begged Paul to stay out of it. The local Jews figured they might be tainted by whatever scandal was unfolding, and put forward Alexander as their witness, but he never got a chance to speak. Realizing Alexander was a Jew, the crowd finally figured it had to be about their goddess, for whom they proceeded to chant for two hours.

The one real authority figure they recognized, the City Clerk who reported to the Roman authorities, got them quiet. He dressed them down for having no real cause for rioting. Nobody was robbing temples, nobody was disparaging the goddess, and if they had, the courts were available. If that were not good enough, the regular orderly assembly was available often enough. Meanwhile, the city was in danger of a crack down from Roman troops if they didn't disperse quickly.

As Jesus had warned, the truth of God is polarizing. It makes no profit, and tends to reduce sinful commerce. Luke points out the moral bankruptcy of those most active in resisting Paul's message. This is how it has always been, and has not changed since. Anything that reflects God's ways will surely be the target of those who seek only worldly power and wealth. What a man does, and particularly how he spends his money, not what he says, will indicate where his loyalties reside. If more people take up an otherworldly focus, as the message of Christ requires, then the market shrinks for the hucksters.

## **Chapter 20**

By the time of Christ, the Jews had moved so very far from their original calling in Abraham that Jesus said God could have gotten better results from stones. Not only were Jews odious to God, but to most of the world around them. Yet, just as Jews were required to shed the trappings of Moses to enter the heart of God's Law, and reshape themselves under divine hands to the New Realm of Heaven, so the Gentiles could not carry their old hatreds of Jews, however justified, into the life of the church.

Luke does not address it directly, but underlying this whole narrative is a recognition of the conflict. He writes in part to explain how the tension was wholly unjustified. We know that there were divisions in the churches from the very start. If there was one thing for which Paul was known, it was vociferously defending his stepping away from the Pharisaical rendering of the Law of Moses, even while he steadfastly adhered to the true meaning of the Law as Jesus taught it. At the same time, no one was demanding anything of the Gentile believers that didn't fit their place under God's Laws, either. The tension between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians was a mere matter of cultural comfort zone, and little more. Luke does not mention that Paul's mission included a large collection for famine relief among the Gentile churches for the church at Jerusalem. This would do much to heal any rifts.

Still, even without noting this fundraising, Luke manages to portray how torn Paul was about the necessity of being in Jerusalem as soon as possible, even as he struggled to edify the Gentile churches one last time. Even without a warning from God, Paul surely could see the tension rising, as the Jews would seek to do with him as they had with His Lord. Having escaped the uproar in Ephesus, Paul passed again through the Macedonian churches. This meant showing

his face again in places where he had already made enemies among the Jews. On the way, Paul had written two letters to Corinth, and then came in person to correct the many errors. While there, he wrote to the Christians in Rome. His three months there in Corinth gave the Jews another opportunity to plot his death, apparently setting up an ambush in Cenchrea. As he was about to take a ship headed for Syria, he learned of that plot, and decided instead to head back along the land route through Macedonia. This time, he gathered an entourage to help protect him and the funds collected for Judean famine relief, but also to reinforce the message of unity that the fund represented.

It was this unplanned return across Macedonia which sees Luke rejoining the journey. While the entourage traveled on across to Troas, Paul and a smaller crew celebrated Passover in Philippi. Luke recounts a lot of details, not only because he was there to keep track of things, but to convey powerfully how torn Paul was in his heart. He was in a hurry to make Jerusalem at Pentecost, with some forty days left, as the church there was suffering. But so were the churches in Asia and Greece, though not in the same sense. Luke portrays Paul dawdling one last time on a daylong hike from Troas to Assos, a beautiful walk even today.

Sea travel in those days typically meant finding a ship going more or less in the right direction, but surely with stops along the way. Paul chose to sail early with a vessel not stopping in Ephesus, but with a layover nearby in Miletus, just a few miles farther south on the same coast. There he sent a messenger to bring down as many elders from Ephesus as would come to meet with him. Luke includes here a message he witnessed first hand, which seemed to sum up all that Luke tried to portray of Paul thus far. Paul did not lord it over anyone, taking in stride the hassles from Jews who rejected the gospel. He refused to be intimidated and taught the whole truth, training the elders very well. He also refused to be intimidated by warnings of what the Jews would do back in Jerusalem, because he had no choice in the matter. Apostle or not, he was merely a disposable asset in the Kingdom. The only bad part about knowing he wouldn't see them again was the surety that they, too, would come under attack. That's why he was so careful to teach them as much as they could absorb, so they would not be surprised at the inevitable appearance of hucksters passing through, building big business on a mere slice of the gospel. And just as surely, from within the church, would come those misguided and seeking to build their little kingdoms, too. These things must come, as surely as Paul's trials in Palestine.

Indeed, Paul had been careful to work for his own support, and he was bearing a large offering for someone else. It was all just a means to the gospel in his eyes. Otherwise, it meant nothing. That was what he taught them, as well. Nothing mattered but the gospel truth. So with this sad departure, they saw him off at the port of Miletus.

## **1 Chapter 21**

The entourage boarded ship again in Miletus, stopping overnight twice more until they arrived in Patara, on the southeastern coast of Modern Turkey, in the region known as Lycia. There they caught another ship heading directly to Syria. It was a straight shot southeasterly to Tyre, where the ship took a week to unload its main cargo. Naturally, by this time a vivid congregation of Christians had grown up there, and Paul stayed with them. Here, Luke records the more insistent warnings from them about Paul facing real trouble in Jerusalem. When the ship was

ready to sail again, they all accompanied Paul to the shore, where one last prayer meeting was held.

In the next port, Ptolemais, there was another overnight with the local church. The final port of call for Paul's entourage was Caesarea. Back when Stephen was martyred, the Hellenized Jewish Christians had fled Jerusalem. Of the Seven Elders, Philip (now called "the Evangelist" to distinguish him from the Apostle) had settled there. His four young daughters, along with Agabus, prophesied stern warnings that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. Agabus went so far as to demonstrate symbolically. Everyone was begging Paul to change his mind.

Paul declared that those threats didn't matter, nor did his life, if God planned to take it soon. The final say was in the heart of the steward appointed over the item at hand, Paul's freedom and life. The others had to accept his decision.

Apparently Paul had made better time than he had hoped, because he no longer seemed in a hurry. After a few days with Philip, they all packed and headed off to Zion. Along with them was a long-time disciple named Mnason (a Greek name), who owned a house in the city. He would be able to host the Gentiles among the group without troubling the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

While the Covenant of Moses had ended, it would be hard to imagine a Jew simply abandoning his way of life. In the ministry of Peter, Luke showed us that Moses was no longer strictly binding. It was fine if Jews observed Moses purely, as Jesus taught, and not according to Talmudic corruptions. It would certainly fulfill the Laws of Noah, but for Gentile believers, Noah alone was enough. Judaizing was a sin. That had always been the case; Jews had always been required to work with Gentiles who observed Noah. The Jews persecuting Paul were in the wrong by any genuine standard, but he observed Moses to leave them no legitimate pretense at all.

Thus, once he met with James and the elders, they suggested he emphasize the point by showing he was no enemy of Judaism. There were false rumors Paul had taught Jews to simply abandon the Law, and their entire Jewish identity. Four men were to undergo a ritual head shaving, which Paul had done not long ago, himself. Paul paying for them and their offerings was another ritual act, which would identify him very publicly as the sponsor. However, the church remained steadfast in their letter denying Moses applied to Gentile Christians.

Still, during the seven days it took to carry out all this ritual, some radically minded Jews from Asia spotted Paul, who had traveled there for Pentecost. During that season, the Temple would be quite crowded. Having seen Paul recently in the company of a certain Ephesian Gentile Trophimus, they assumed Paul must have defiled the Temple by bringing that man into the Court of Israel. So they started a riot, and men in the crowd seized Paul. They dragged him down to the Court of Gentiles, and closed the doors of the other courts behind the crowd to prevent the riot defiling the Temple any further. There in that very large lower court, they began beating Paul, intent on killing him.

Of course, the Roman barracks were on the northern end of that same Temple Court, and as soon as the watch commander heard, he sent a company of troops to stop the fight. For

safekeeping, Paul was chained between two soldiers. When the commander could get no sensible answer about what was going on, he took Paul away toward the barracks. The crowd was so violent that the soldiers lifted Paul over the heads to keep him out of reach.

On the double flight of steps leading into the fortress, Paul got close enough to the commander to speak in their common tongue, Greek. For some reason, the officer had assumed Paul was the Egyptian fellow who had led a small army of assassins out to Mount Olivet, declaring that the walls would come down miraculously so they could invade to wipe out the Roman cohort. Instead, the assassin army was attacked and wiped out, but the leader got away. That Paul spoke in Greek was proof enough that he was not the same man. So Paul identified himself as a Jewish man from Tarsus, and thus a Roman Citizen, and wanted to address the crowd, in hopes of taming their rage. Since the soldiers were blocking the stairs below, it sounded reasonable to try.

Paul offered the signal that he wanted to address the crowd, and they grew rather quiet. As he began speaking in the local Aramaic dialect of Hebrew, the crowd grew hushed, as many had no idea what was going on, and had not expected that

## **Chapter 22**

From as early as the Exodus (19:6) God had commanded Israel to be a kingdom of priests. Whatever else that meant, they were to bring the light of God's revelation to the whole world. This special nation would carry the direct Word of God to all mankind. We can easily surmise it took little time for them to forget this aspect of their national identity, for we see in Jonah an arrogant desire to avoid prophesying to Assyria, as he would prefer they all die and go to Hell.

By the time of Jesus, this had become quite an ugly thing. In their twisted understanding of prophecy, Jews carried some eternal irritation that the world had not yet come crawling on hands and knees to be their slaves. It was so common for them to express contempt for Gentiles that Jews commonly referred to them as dogs, filthy, unclean, etc. While Peter had been thoroughly conditioned before his vision on the housetop, it still came as quite a shock that His Lord wanted him to actually go and visit in a Gentile home! Yet it was precisely for this cause that Jesus had told Peter he held the Keys of the Kingdom, so he might open the door for his Lord to enter the company of Gentiles He had called as His household. Paul absorbed this lesson, as well, but we aren't sure when.

We do not learn much new from Paul's testimony here. He shares his sterling background. The choice to address the crowd in the local dialect was a powerful message itself. He told of his experience near Damascus in the very act of persecuting "this Way." He spoke of the blinding light, and the ministry of Ananias, another devout and observant Jew, and his baptism. Paul skips over the years in Arabia, and jumps to his return to Jerusalem. At this point, he adds interesting details to Luke's narrative back in chapter 9. He notes that not only did the other believers send him away to avoid a death threat, but also Paul had been warned at that time in a vision.

Paul already knew that the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem would not allow him to share his testimony. Surely it was a dynamic story to go from being the chief persecutor to the chief

apologist for following Jesus? No, God had other plans. At the point Paul mentions that the Lord wanted him to fulfill the call to take the message to Gentiles, the Jews in the Temple Court erupted in their now-ancient hatred and contempt for the idea of doing any good thing for Gentiles. If Paul ever needed any confirmation of the Lord's warning way back some twenty-five years before, this was it.

The commander, having understood nothing of the presentation, decided that Paul should be forced to confess whatever it was that made the Jews so upset. It was common to extract confessions by torture, but illegal to do so with Roman citizens. Paul warned the centurion in charge, who quickly got word to his commander. Meanwhile, the lictors backed off from Paul. The commander asked Paul directly, in a manner that indicated the answer was an official statement. If Paul lied, he would be tortured slowly to death. The commander noted that he paid a small fortune for the privilege of Roman citizenship, something that had been common during the previous two decades. Paul noted that he was born to it, which typically indicated a very high privileged status. To the commander, it meant that he had to be very careful, and had already violated Paul's rights simply by having him bound without a court order, as it were.

The commander was determined to take the next step by sounding out the local Jewish leaders on what charges there might be against Paul. Having already tested the waters, Paul prepared himself for rough handling at the hands of the Sanhedrin. Paul had committed himself to getting to Rome one way or another. Already a trained lawyer and Jewish magistrate himself, he must have used the time that night to prepare his legal options.

### **Chapter 23**

Given the nature of the disturbance in the Temple, it is hard to imagine some members of the Sanhedrin had not been present in the crowd hearing Paul's defense from the stairs of the fortress. Thus, they already knew who he was. Just as surely, they also would be familiar with accusations against him from his missionary activities. Finally, it's hard to imagine that some did not remember him personally, since he had been a magistrate sent to Damascus some two decades earlier. Indeed, there is every reason to believe Ananias had some personal memory of him.

Thus, when Paul stands before the Sanhedrin that next day, they would have taken Paul's first words as utterly offensive. For him to claim a clear conscience was simply not possible, since the God they thought they knew would not permit Paul to rest at peace for what they were certain was blasphemy. However, the action of the High Priest was most certainly illegal. It was illegal when done to Jesus, as well. So Paul is fully justified in reacting strongly. Paul describes him as a section of wall crumbling under a thick coat of whitewash. When the sycophants questioned whether Paul dared to condemn "God's Anointed," it's not as if Paul could fail to recognize either the face or costume of Ananias as High Priest. Given Luke offers no hints, the only reasonable explanation for Paul's response is sarcasm. The Law actually forbade cursing a ruler, and at some point in the past three centuries, the High Priests had technically become the legal authority, so that Rome vested and removed them just like kings. At any rate, Ananias was no better than what he accused Paul of being.

Clearly, this was not going to work at all. This was a kangaroo court, and unworthy of Paul's submission. Thus, he chose to play upon their greatest weakness. In fact, Paul taught that Jesus rose from the dead, so by the legalistic standards of the Sanhedrin, Paul correctly identified the primary issue as belief in resurrection, part of believing in the afterlife. This the Sadducees denied. So Paul declared himself a Pharisee, standing before the Court because he believed in life after death. Naturally the unsettled partisan tensions in the Sanhedrin exploded. Luke summarizes the complaint of the Pharisees, suggesting that they saw the prosecution of Paul as unfair to them. As the arguments flew back and forth, the Court got rowdy enough that the commander felt compelled to rescue Paul again, sending the troops to escort him out.

That night, in the barracks again, it must have been a familiar vision for Paul. Christ stood by his bed, telling Paul that he had accomplished his mission in Jerusalem, and Rome awaited the same message. The Lord guaranteed that Paul would get there, yet. To emphasize the point that the Jewish leaders were enemies of God, a few dozen met at dawn and bound themselves under an oath to execute Paul one way or another. They proposed to the chief priests (mostly Sadducees) to have them request another hearing for Paul, presumably with a promise to keep things calm this time. This would mean escorting Paul from the fort to wherever the Sanhedrin met in those days, but surely far enough that some forty desperate men could possibly overpower the Roman escort sufficiently to kill Paul. Some would naturally expect to die in the process, so the oath to neither eat nor drink until Paul was dead makes perfect sense.

We know nothing of Paul's family, but we discover he had a nephew who got wind of this plot. The young man visited Paul in the fortress and told him. Paul suggested that the centurion escort the kid to the commander, and his words implied secret information of dire consequence. The centurion did so, and the commander, sensing the need for secrecy, pulled him aside for a private interview. By now it should be all too clear that matters between the Romans and Jews locally were not at all peaceful, because the boy's message regarding the assassins' oath was taken quite seriously.

The commander assigned a huge guard to escort Paul to the regional headquarters, Caesarea, down on the coast. They were to leave late that night, around 9PM. The guard force was composed of seventy horsemen, Paul riding with them, and two hundred each of light and heavy infantry. From Jerusalem down to Antipatris, almost half way, the hilly terrain would have slowed the cavalry somewhat, and the rest of the force would prevent anyone taking advantage of that. At Antipatris, the whole entourage stopped overnight. The next day, having reached the coastal plains, the infantry turned back and the cavalry could make haste with Paul to their destination. It is here we learn the commanders' name, Claudius Lysias. He addressed a letter to Felix, an infamous governor who never got along with the Jews. Naturally the commander somewhat pads the message to make himself look good, indicating that he rescued Paul from that first riot in the Temple as a privilege of Paul's Roman citizenship, avoiding mention of the mistake of binding and almost beating Paul. He also plays on the antipathy of Felix for Jews versus Romans by making it sound like the Sanhedrin were out of control.

So it was that Felix evaluated this odd situation. Given that Paul was a Roman citizen from Cilicia, Felix could have decided things on his own. At a minimum he would force the accusing jurisdiction to appear on neutral ground. However, the letter also gave him an opportunity to

remind the Jews of his power. His response to Paul hints to us that he would command the Sanhedrin to come to him, and they had better mind their manners when they present their case against this Roman citizen. The Romans had taken over Herod's sumptuous palace at Caesarea. To the best of our knowledge, there was no dungeon, so we may assume Paul's accommodations were comfortable, making him more a guest than prisoner.

## **Chapter 24**

It took the better part of a week for the Sanhedrin to appear before Felix at Caesarea to bring charges against Paul. They hired a Jewish man who was a Roman lawyer, Tertullus (a common Roman name). He offers a nice flowery introduction, making mention of some administrative reforms Felix had instituted, probably one of his few good deeds.

The charges against Paul only sound serious. First is the matter of stirring up trouble, provoking his fellow Jews wherever he went. Then, Tertullus tries to portray Paul as seditious, rather like a gang leader. We learn here the term "Nazarene" is the official Hebrew term for Christians, and even today is so used in Modern Hebrew and Arabic. The final charge is the most serious, but Tertullus hedges a bit with careful wording. If Paul had profaned the Temple, it would justify death under Roman law. However, Tertullus suggests that Paul was caught before he could do it. He then lies about the Roman commander's rescue of Paul, suggesting that Jewish leaders were conducting a hearing when Lysias violently intruded. The latter was not there to defend himself.

Paul's defense began with less flattery, and notes his good fortune that Felix knows enough about Judaism not to get lost in lies. The facts were clear. It was just under two weeks ago when Paul had arrived in Jerusalem and had been worshipping there for some days before his arrest. He did not so much as engage in public debate on the Temple grounds, nor provoke anyone, but went about his business in the city quietly. The Sanhedrin had no proof otherwise. However, he most certainly admitted to being a follower of Christ, but his contention was that this actually fulfilled everything the Jews claimed about their religion in the first place. His conscience was clear; he was no threat to the Jews. Indeed, after all these years traveling around the Roman Empire, he brought a large charitable donation for famine relief. When they spotted him in the Temple, he was ritually pure, which could be easily verified through the business of sponsoring the head shaving. He was escorting this small group of men in the Temple, all proper and reverently. The Asian Jews who set upon him were the ones who should have presented their accusations, since they started the riot.

No one standing before Felix had any real evidence of a crime. The only thing they could possibly complain of was his ploy of dividing the Sanhedrin Council over an issue that hardly concerned Roman law. Felix realized that there was nothing here of interest to Rome, but he was not a just man by any means. He put off a decision until he could check with Lysias about the arrest in the Temple. This was a sop to the Sanhedrin, but the case against Paul was dead. Paul was returned to custody under the least confining terms possible, making him no more than a guest who couldn't leave.

Felix had married the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, Drusilla, essentially stealing her from her first husband, a petty king in Syria. Shortly after the hearing, she joined Felix in Caesarea. The Herodian palace in Caesarea was divided, with an official courts and offices section down on the shore, and a residential section built higher on a mound. The latter was where Paul was kept. Luke's brief wording suggests that Felix moved operations up to the residential palace. He wanted a bribe, so he kept dragging the case on, chatting with Paul about Christian faith. But this was perhaps the biggest risk of all to Felix, for it impinged upon his evil conscience. After two years of this, Nero recalled Felix. The Jews had been agitating against him for some time and there had been a riot in Caesarea that Felix handled very poorly. To help curry the favor of his accusers, he left Paul in custody. It didn't work, because Porcius Festus replaced Felix.

Here we note that Luke was still in attendance on Paul. If there is any situation when Luke could have conducted the research that led to his Gospel, followed by Acts, it was this. Two years allowed him to interview everyone living who could add to his understanding. The need for the research was surely obvious as the background for Paul's defense. Why is there so much trouble over this fellow? Because he dared teach something that challenged the establishment, about a man who was far more important to the world than he was.

## **Chapter 25**

At the best of times, Jewish leaders detested the Roman occupation of their ancient homeland. A primary difference between various political parties in Jewish society was their degree of compromise in dealing with Rome. This only made things more tense, as Roman administrators typically found Jewish culture and politics incomprehensible. Felix had failed to keep the peace. Upon his appointment as procurator in 60 AD, Porcius Festus was under pressure from Rome to make all efforts to restore order and calm. Balancing between the demands of Roman law and Jewish intransigence was challenging, to say the least.

His first inclination was to court the Jewish leaders, seeking to smooth any ruffled feathers. Just three days after arriving in Caesarea, he traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the senior members of the Sanhedrin. Seeing their opportunity, among other things, they raised the issue of Paul. Luke notes the cynical nature of their request. They wanted Festus to bring Paul up for a hearing, but planned to ambush him. We can be sure that their plans included plausible denials of involvement. However, unlike the previous plan to murder Paul, Luke indicates that the Sanhedrin were in charge, not simply going along with someone else's plans. We aren't told why Festus declined, but it would have been proper procedure for a Roman prisoner to be heard in a Roman court first. After another ten days in Jerusalem, a Sanhedrin delegation accompanied Festus back to Caesarea.

Festus proceeded immediately with Paul's case. The delegates made all sorts of dire accusations, but offered no proof. Thus, Paul needed state only for the record that he had broken no laws, neither Roman nor Jewish. It was clear to Festus that this was true, at least for Roman law. The nature of the dispute was completely outside his jurisdiction, consisting merely of Jewish religious questions. But he was obliged to make nice where he could and he proposed moving the case back to Jerusalem, where the crime was supposed to have occurred. As a

Roman citizen, Paul had the right to be heard before a Roman magistrate, and Festus offered to perform that chore himself.

Paul was not so easily swayed. We cannot forget that he knew he was going to Rome one way or another. It wasn't lack of faith, but a sure knowledge that this thing had dragged on long enough. If Luke knew about the plot, then Paul did. Telling Festus might sound like the same wild exaggerations made by the Sanhedrin. It was painfully obvious they had no case. At any rate, even Rome would be more just than the Jewish leaders, so Paul appealed to Caesar. If that resulted in execution, so be it, but the blind murderous hatred of the Sanhedrin was hardly the place to look for justice. After conferring with his advisors, Festus announced Paul's appeal was granted.

Still, it was no simple matter, since Festus had no clue how to address the Imperial Court regarding Paul. A client state, which Festus had been ordered to pacify by the best means he could find, wanted this man executed. But their complaint was of no interest to Roman law. While he could have easily dismissed the case out of hand, it seemed too important to the Jewish leaders. Even if released, Paul's life would be at risk until he could disappear, much as Peter had done. Remaining in Roman custody was frankly safer, and would allow him to finish his mission. What was Festus to do?

The next order of official business was receiving Herod Agrippa II, who brought along his sister, Bernice. Her first husband had died, so she played her brother's consort until she was later made mistress to two Roman emperors. While Agrippa's limited jurisdiction did not include Jerusalem, Festus was hoping to have advice from someone more familiar with these incomprehensible Jewish disputes with Paul. Thus, Festus made this the central entertainment of an official reception, which included ranking Roman officers and dignitaries from the City of Caesarea. It would be a high honor for these guests to act as jury of an important case.

Festus made a very formal introduction to the case. His stated concern was guidance in what he should present as the charges. This required an acute understanding of both Roman law and Jewish religion. Surely in such an august assembly, with a Jewish king, he could find something useful to write for Caesar's court. We can be sure no one missed the importance of placating the Sanhedrin, if at all possible. The case would have been utterly inconsequential otherwise. Still, it had to at least resemble Roman justice.

## **Chapter 26**

We are granted a fresh retelling of Paul's testimony, from yet another perspective, due to a difference in audience. It would be easy to pick over the differences instead of sensing what the variations tell us about Paul's state of mind, and what he considered important for his hearers. Agrippa was more Jewish than most of the Herods had been. Keeping his oath of loyalty to Rome was hardly at conflict with his record of doing the Jews a favor when possible. Paul had the advantage of addressing someone who did not need convincing on certain fundamentals.

When offered the chance to tell his side in this confusing situation, Paul began with an arm gesture for recognizing he spoke to royalty. His polite introduction established the tone,

beckoning Agrippa to put on his best Jewish ears. As with all things Jewish, it would require a bit of telling, and needed the king's patience.

Who was this man, Paul? Pertinent was the statement that he was not some nobody, but his youth and training were public record among the Jewish leadership. He wasn't just a Pharisee, but an exemplary member who had gained renown for his scruples. That had not actually changed, yet somehow he passed from fast-track promotion to murderous persecution. As far as he was concerned, he was pursuing all the hopes of his nation. Oddly, this is what got him in trouble.

Why would anyone with a Jewish background reject the notion that God raised the dead? That was the ultimate end of the Covenant and all prophecies. It was the pursuit of that hope which drove him to persecute the early Christians. He mentions prison for them, and for the first time remarks that more than one was executed by this effort. If anything, Paul was famous as the chief prosecutor in every synagogue, even outside the Jewish lands. Indeed, on his way to one of those places, Damascus, Paul's life changed. Bearing his charge as magistrate of the Sanhedrin, in the broad light of a sunny mid-day, an even brighter light fell upon his party. How could it not be a manifestation of God? They all prostrated themselves. But it was Paul who heard the voice in his native Hebrew, berating him for daring to persecute Him. Was it not painful to reject the goading of his conscience? Paul had to admit right then that he had surely been wrong about what God had wanted.

All he thought he knew about God was clearly false, and it was time to go back and start over. Whoever was addressing him now would be his God; no other options were available. By what name would he know his Lord now? Jesus Christ. And his new marching orders were a radical reversal from his past course. While his travel plans were unchanged, his life was beginning anew. He was called to serve Jesus as messenger, telling of things he had already seen, but through the fresh understanding of things he was about to learn. Unspoken was the realization that Paul was about to face the same persecutions he had been handing out. Instead, Jesus spoke His promise to deliver Paul from such things because the mission was to take His message to them and to the rest of the world. Paul would be delivered and he was to share that deliverance from Satan's kingdom to God's, to announce the offered gift of repentance, and a holy life and identity as God's People under Christ.

The same zealous Paul now served the Kingdom he had persecuted. This was a command from Heaven's throne. He began with Damascus, and then returned to Jerusalem, and went about the rest of Judea (more the people than the place), and finally the rest of the world. The basic message was a call to repentance. This was nothing different from what Jesus, or John the Baptist before Him, or any of the prophets all the way back, had called Israel to do. Not just in ritual, but in full commitment of life. Somehow, this became a crime in the eyes of his fellow Jews, who were willing to defile the Temple in trying to kill Paul there.

But Jesus had kept His promise and delivered Paul from their hands. Not only to the common nobodies of the world, but Paul was still around to share the message with rulers, the same message every Jew had been called to share since Moses. He and the prophets had said consistently that there would be a Messiah who would pay the price for their sins. Then, He

would rise again as the first to open the portal between Eternity and this world, bringing a clear light of heavenly revelation to all.

Most Gentiles in general, and Romans in particular, found the idea of returning from the dead utterly foreign, even frightening. So at this point, Festus burst out with a declaration. Paul, educated though he may be, was surely out of his mind. Romans were always a little suspicious of philosopher types, and Paul seemed like one of them. Given the situation, it is essential that we see Paul treading carefully here. Shifting from his typically impassioned explanation to Agrippa, he faced Festus rather mildly, projecting a rational and peaceful mind. Addressing him properly, Paul gently contradicts him. It may sound like madness, but it was surely the truth of things. King Agrippa wasn't shaken by such ideas. Besides, the king surely knew the facts regarding Jesus, since none of it was done in secret. Surely the king believed the Jewish prophets regarding the Messiah?

Too many English translations take liberties here. Paul had put Agrippa in a tight spot. Confessing to believe the prophets was what he claimed to curry favor with the Jews. But it would force him to agree with Paul, in general. Yet his host and the other guests would then see Agrippa tinged with the instability Festus alleged was Paul's. He had to stay neutral. What he says amounts to a joke, sarcasm to kill the tension of the moment. What Paul had said was not enough to make Agrippa a Christian. Paul accepted this, and returned to the one thing which depended on no other man: Whether it took a little or a lot, Paul earnestly desired that the king and everyone else there that day could share what great things he had, with the exception of the legal hassles.

The show was over. As the guest of honor, it was for the king to say so. When he stood, Bernice and Festus rose with him, then the rest of the guests followed. They retired to a private conference. Festus and Agrippa agreed Paul was harmless, if strange. Had Paul not publicly appealed to Caesar, he could be released that very day. Of course, had he not appealed, he would surely be dead at the hands of the Jews. We can be sure that Agrippa then went on to help draft a letter to the Imperial Court, which would recommend that Paul be released. But what mattered most was, this would allow Paul to fulfill his mission to see the Christians in Rome, and at Rome's expense.

## **Chapter 27**

In a district as large and busy as the Roman province of Syria, we can be sure Festus would have inherited a rather large caseload from Felix. Paul was simply the most perplexing case. Once they settled on sending him to Rome, Festus arranged to transport Paul with other prisoners, but we can't know how many. It was enough for a centurion and some portion of his troops to escort the prisoners. At this point, Luke includes himself in the narrative again, and travels with Paul. There was also Aristarchus, whom we know from Paul's letters was an active worker in missions. This entourage took passage on a small coastal cargo vessel.

It's unlikely Paul and his friends got much advance notice, so it was with some relief that the ship stopped the next day at Sidon. The centurion, Julius, granted Paul as much liberty as regulations allowed, which probably meant at least one soldier escorting him to see his friends

in the city. These would surely have seen to it that Paul was better supplied for this long journey to Rome, since Roman provisions would have been sparse, covering only the bare minimum for the prisoner himself, and none for his voluntary companions.

This would be early autumn, the end of a long dry spell. For a time, the prevailing winds would be westerly. So running north was fine, but heading west commonly required sailing around the horn of Cyprus, where they could pick up sea currents and breezes off the mainland which would allow them to make Myra in a week or two. In Myra, Julius found a Roman government grain ship. These were some of the largest ships on the Mediterranean, typically having two sails, the smaller one a jib near the bow. There were two rudders mounted rather like very large oars on either side of the stern. The cargo was stored in thousands of amphorae. There was room for quite a few passengers and crew. This one was forced by prevailing winds to come almost straight north up from Alexandria so as to crawl along the islands and coasts that time of year.

The situation made Julius the senior officer on the ship, and he was anxious to avoid delay. By now the winds would have shifted to the northwest. They sailed right away, and it was slow going. The ship crept along the shores and islands, barely getting past Cnidus, and then dropping south toward Crete. They were pretty much forced to take a break and rest at Fair Havens. It was hardly safe from the increasingly stormy weather, facing directly into the northwesterly wind, but they could make no progress until the winds dropped or changed. A mere forty miles farther west and a bit north was a better harbor named Phoenix. Luke notes that at this point the Day of Atonement was past, which makes it early October. Sailing in the Mediterranean typically ceased by then until after winter. Paul warned that the ship would be lost if they proceeded, which would surely be fatal for all aboard. Julius was more swayed by the confidence of the pilot and ship's owner, who were up for a contract bonus if they delivered during winter months. So they decided at least to make Phoenix.

At some point, the winds shifted around south and were light. They cast off and hugged the coastline where it turned north, but a short time later were hit by a fierce gale, which varied from east to northeast. It drove them off the coast and out to sea. So they crossed south of Clauda, where they laboriously pulled aboard the skiff that had been dragging off the stern, now almost swamped by high waves. Then heavy ropes were wrapped around amidships to prevent planks working loose on the hull from the flexing such high waves would cause on a heavily laden ship. But the winds appeared to be driving them into the Syrtis sands (modern Gulf of Sidra, Libya), so they lowered the sails and faced the ship north, almost into the wind, letting it drift slowly westward by facing broadside to the more easterly gusts.

The next day, they took the obvious step of lightening the ship so it would float higher out of the water. First to go was personal baggage. Next day it was the spare ship's equipment. The grain was simply too important still. Day after day, they could not even see the sky to gauge their direction of drift, and were preparing themselves for sinking and drowning. It was hard to eat during such conditions, with emotional and physical turmoil, hardly able to stand and prepare anything.

Paul addressed the masters of the ship. He reminded them that he had warned this would happen. Then, he told of a vision. Among superstitious pagans of that day, sailors and soldiers were the more so. It would be hard to imagine that they did not credit his promise they would all be saved because of his prayers, since the whole point for Paul was his God's call to Rome. So while they would all survive, they would lose the ship running aground on some island. So by now, two weeks into this mess began, the sailors noticed around midnight the sounds of water crashing on some shore. Dropping a weighted line with depth markings, they found the bottom was drawing shallower and dropped anchors to slow their movement, since Adriatic shores were typically rocky. This would turn the ship stern to the wind, and slow their drift. Unable to see, they hoped to hold position long enough for daylight.

The crew was ready to abandon ship, and set the skiff over the side on the pretense of adding anchors off the bow. The Lord permitted Paul to see through their ruse, and warned the centurion. He had his soldiers cut away the lines securing the skiff and let it drift away. It required the sailors to turn the ship into the bay, so as not to miss it, since they were drifting along parallel to the northern shore of Malta. At dawn Paul advised everyone to eat a full meal, because they would need their strength to swim ashore, and again promised they would all survive unharmed, if wet. So he offered thanks in the traditional fashion and ate a full meal himself. Everyone suddenly realized how hungry they were and joined him. Luke notes that there were 267 people on the ship. Then they jettisoned all the grain jars. At full light, they could see a bay with a nice beach, and proceeded to steer the ship toward it. They cut the anchor lines and dropped the rudders into the water. The rudders were mounted to the sides in those days, and had been lashed up out of the water, since they had been useless until that point. They also raised the jib sail.

Near the place today on Malta known as Saint Paul's Bay is a long finger of land, and we surmise it was this that the ship struck before making the turn south along the shore. With the bow stuck hard, the ship's planking already loose from days of rocking in heavy seas, the waves pounding the ship from the rear began breaking it apart. The soldiers prepared to execute the prisoners to prevent any escaping due justice. This was standard policy, but Julius countermanded it. This was about the only way he could spare Paul, who had won his admiration. He ordered those passengers who could swim to jump first and clear the ship. Then those who needed assistance could grab anything that would float, or be helped by the crew. Sure enough, they all survived.

So we see Paul's confidence in a horrific situation, because he knew of a certainty beyond all reason that His God was not ready for him to perish. By such faith he also prayed for the safety of the people with him, and God granted him their lives.

## **Chapter 28**

The island of Malta was in those days called by the Phoenician name, Melita ("Refuge"), because the population was Phoenician. Luke describes them in terms indicating that they spoke neither Greek nor Latin. They were exceptionally friendly, building a fire for the storm-tossed survivors. Today the island is treeless, but that was unlikely under Roman rule. Thus, Paul pitched in gathering firewood along with others. As he dropped one armload on the fire, a

viper fled the flames, biting Paul on the hand. He shook it back into the fire. Chattering in the local tongue, the islanders concluded Paul might have escaped the storm, but not the goddess Dike (*dee-kay*: Justice).

As far as we know, that viper's venom prevented blood coagulation and would immobilize all muscles. Victims typically collapsed and blood pooled in the extremities until asphyxiation from the inability to breathe. Paul was completely asymptomatic, and after a while the islanders decided he must be some deity, instead of a criminal.

A "First Citizen" named Publius ruled the island; he hosted the bunch until they could secure accommodations for the winter. The island's goats were the primary source of dairy products, which were notorious for causing major digestive problems. The host's father was suffering dysentery and Paul prayed, and then laid hands on him. The news of the healing spread quickly, and between Luke's treatment and Paul's prayers, they spent the winter running a clinic on the island. Having become local celebrities, they lacked for nothing. When they finally departed three months later, they all had at least as much as they lost to the sea.

While mid-February might be a little early, another grain ship wintering on the island sailed north, and Julius loaded his troops and prisoners on it. Luke notes that the ship's emblem was a carving of Castor and Pollux, twin patron deities of sailing. It must have been still rather rough sailing, so upon reaching Syracuse, a beautiful Greek colony on Sicily's east coast, they waited three days. While their next stop, Rhegium, was some 75 miles (120km) straight north, Luke describes it as "circling" – heavily tacking around in circles to proceed slowly northward. The wind changed the next day, offering a stiff southerly blow. They made over 200 miles (320km) in just two days, landing at the port Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli) near Naples.

They had the good fortune of finding Christians who welcomed Paul and his companions. We aren't told why, but the prison escort team is held up for a week there. Most likely the delay was due to waiting for proper transportation overland. Paul continued in relative liberty, though by policy he was supposed to be chained to a single guard who was sworn on his life to deliver the prisoner on command. It's hard to imagine the fellow wasn't at least partially a believer by now. At any rate, private accommodations would be far superior to the dilapidated and filthy publicly provided hostels used by most Roman military.

The informal communication system of private runners passing messages among Christians in Italy brought news of Paul's approach to Rome. There were probably several congregations. Luke mentions one bunch meeting them at the Appian Forum, some 40 miles (65km) out, and another bunch at the Three Shops (*Tres Tabernae*) 10 miles (16km) closer to Rome. Either would have been a common first overnight stop on the way out of Rome. It greatly restored Paul's spirits to know that he had finally made it, as God had promised. Paul was permitted liberty to find his own quarters, with his guard, of course.

His freedom was still limited, so when Paul sent notice to the Jewish community, they came to him, some three days after settling into his house. He had been charged with a crime by the Jewish nation, and was probably hoping to clarify matters with the local synagogues, who would have taken up the case on their nation's behalf. Paul explained his side of the story and why he was in custody there, how his choice of appealing to the Imperial Court was not meant

to slander his nation's leaders. He maintained his teaching was a fulfillment of all that Israel had ever hoped. They denied having any idea what this was all about, but were interested in hearing his teaching to judge for themselves.

Thus, Luke indicates that the Roman Jews did not carry any particular prejudice to the message. They returned, and Paul spent the whole day detailing his teaching of Jesus as the Messiah. Some believed; some did not. There was no consensus, but apparently the majority rejected it. Paul's parting shot was to quote the passage in Isaiah where the prophet laid out God's charges against Judah.

It was a solid reminder that the prophets had indicated repeatedly: as men judge such things, Israel was the worst choice of nations God could have made. Having delivered to them a unique covenant of law, and a wealth of background literature to clarify revelation, then sending a long train of prophets to ensure that there were no mistakes in understanding, they always wandered away from Him. Having chosen to ignore God one time too many, He had given them their wish of not hearing any more. They rejected the terms of the Covenant. They had no unique place in His plans any longer. Every other nation on earth had been open to the gospel, so the Kingdom was now open to anyone.

We are left with Paul passing two years preaching and teaching anyone who came to visit him. About the only reason Luke would close here is because the narrative was delivered to some official as background to Paul's case. Tradition has it that Paul was released and visited Spain, among other places. Two or three years from this point, another wave of persecution, from the Roman government itself, saw Paul arrested again, and this time martyred, we believe in about 64 AD.