

The Acts

of the Apostles

chapters 13-28

Expository sermons

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Witness to the end of the earth

Acts 13:1-3

(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)

The risen Jesus said to his disciples, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Mat 28:19). The gospel of Jesus Christ is to be preached in all the earth. Again Jesus said to his disciples, 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). In the gospel we proclaim Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but by him (John 14:6). If we believe this, and if we share God's love for all people, we will be preaching the gospel in all the earth.

The church has not always taken this truth seriously. Some think that there is salvation outside of Christ. Others say that, 'if God wants to save the lost, he will do so without your help or mine'. Thankfully the apostles did not have such an attitude, although the church in Jerusalem was reactive rather than proactive in complying with the command of Jesus. They were okay with witness in Jerusalem but when it came to the next phase of witness it was believers fleeing persecution who went to Samaria and beyond. Peter and John went down to Samaria to check on the church. Peter also went down to Joppa and Caesarea.

Here in Acts 13 we come to the third and final phase of gospel witness, witness to the end of the earth. We come to the first proactive witness into the Gentile world. We come to the first of Paul's missionary journeys. We come to the model for mission today.

When the apostles were called by Jesus to go into all the world and preach the gospel, they were sent with the promise, 'Lo, I am with you always' (Mat 28:20). How are missionaries called and sent today? Who determines where they go? What promise do they have when they are sent out? From the passage before us we will focus on the church and the candidates, the call, and the commissioning.

The term 'mission' is not found in the Bible (apart from 1Sam 15). It is a Latin word meaning 'sent'. A missionary is a person sent out on a mission. While the term 'mission' is widely used outside the church- every organisation and business has its mission statement- the term 'missionary' is linked to the church. But it has come to have such negative overtones in the world that the church now avoids this term. The term 'missional' has become popular, although no one seems to know what it means!

1. Church in Antioch

In the Roman world the city of Antioch ranked third after Rome and Alexandria. It was the gateway to the East. It was a cosmopolitan city with a sizeable Jewish population. Some believers came to this city from the island of Cyprus, and city of Cyrene in Libya (11:20). When they preached Jesus to Greeks or Gentiles in this city, many believed and turned to the Lord (11:21). In the providence of God, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas as its representative to check out what was happening in the church at Antioch.

Who was Barnabas? He has been made known to us by Luke from the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem. Although a native of Cyprus, he was in fact a Jew from the priestly Levite clan (4:36). He

may have come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, where he heard Peter preach the gospel, and three thousand believed. He was a member of the infant church in Jerusalem, where he was noted for his generosity. The apostles gave him the name Barnabas which means 'son of encouragement'.

Barnabas had relatives in Jerusalem, namely aunty Mary. The church met in the house of this lady. Mary had a son called John, John Mark (12:12, Col 4:10). This young man accompanied Barnabas and Saul back to Antioch, probably at the invitation of cousin Barnabas. This was after they handed over the famine relief funds to the church in Jerusalem (12:25). Apart from this relationship we are not told of other family relationships in the church at Antioch. Blood relatives, who are present in most churches, must be handled with wisdom and impartiality. We do not find any family dynasties ruling the church in Antioch or any other NT church.

On the list of candidates for mission we next note Saul, although Luke refers to him last. It hard to believe Luke was listing these in order of priority. Saul was a Jew like Barnabas; indeed he was a highly educated Pharisee. He had been dramatically converted. At his conversion the Lord said he would, 'bear my name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel' (9:15). It was some eight years after his conversion that Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch to assist with teaching in the church. They taught together for over a year.

Simeon was in all probability another Jewish convert, but the nickname 'Niger' is Latin meaning 'black' or 'of dark complexion'. Some think he is the Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus (Luke 23:26), but the name is spelt differently. Furthermore, we ask why Luke would not mention he was from Cyrene when he does so for the next man on the list, Lucius of Cyrene.

Lucius is a Latin name, which means he is probably a Gentile convert. It was converts from Cyrene and Cyprus who brought the gospel to the Greeks in Antioch. Lucius may have been a founder of this church. The fifth and final person mentioned is Manaen who, 'had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch' (13:1). This was the Herod who beheaded John the Baptist and who was despised by Jesus. Manaen may not have been of royal blood but still he had a privileged upbringing. But in the church he was just another member.

These five men were probably leaders in this church, and probably the men referred to as 'prophets and teachers' (13:1). These are different gifts of the Spirit (1Cor 12:28), but not mutually exclusive. Prophets engaged in forth-telling, as well as fore-telling. Like OT prophets, they brought God's word to bear upon the people of God.

So the church at Antioch was one of great diversity: different races, different backgrounds, and different levels of education, differences of status in society. Yet they were all one in Christ. It was a church that was praying and fasting. They were praying for the gospel to be taken into all the world, for men and women of all races and religions, all social and economic backgrounds to hear the gospel. Do you find it a blessing to be in a church of great diversity? It helps us to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for people of all ethnicities, people who are rich or poor, as well as for male and female, young and old. Churches without such diversity, like the church in Jerusalem, can easily lose sight of the Great Commission.

2. Called

In their desire to take the gospel to the end of the earth, what did the church at Antioch do? Did they organise a planning meeting? Did they start looking at different strategies for mission? What we read is that they fasted and prayed. In fact, they were fasting and praying when the Holy Spirit spoke to them. Fasting is often associated with prayer- serious prayer. What were they praying about as they worshipped the Lord and fasted (13:2)? They may well have been praying for the lost, the lost sheep of Israel as well as the lost Gentiles. These men were from different places; they may have been thinking of the people in their home places, men and women who were without God and without hope in the world. Do you pray for people around you who are lost, people without God and without hope?

Saul never forgot his divine calling to bear the name of Jesus before Gentiles as well as Israel. Barnabas was sent by the Jerusalem church but really found his niche in the church at Antioch. These men may have known about the command Jesus gave to his disciples in Acts 1:8. They were praying with knowledge. Their prayers were informed by the word of God. They were seeking the will of God, not just for their own lives but for the church and the gospel. They were ready for the Holy Spirit to direct them in the work of the Lord, ready to go wherever the Spirit sent them.

In this time of prayer and fasting the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them' (13:2). How did the Holy Spirit speak to them? Was it through a prophet? Remember, every one of them had the Holy Spirit because the Spirit is given to all who believe. If it was one who spoke then all agreed. It was not a case of one saying, 'I have a word from God' and the rest being surprised and feeling compelled to agree- something which I have seen in a church meeting. Nor was it a case of an individual saying, 'I have been called by the Lord to serve in Timbuktu'. In the work of mission, God works through the church. Sure, the Lord can call an individual to the work of mission, but mission is never the task of an individual. As Larkin writes, 'God sends the missionary through two essential and complementary means: the personal, inward call to the individual and the outward confirmation by the church'.

Saul, as we know, was called to Gentile mission when he was converted (9:15). After ten years this call was 'activated' by the Holy Spirit through the church, through the church praying and fasting. We understand that it was the whole church, not just the five leaders, who were praying. The Spirit called for Barnabas and Saul to be set apart 'for the work to which I have called them' (13:2). The work, of course, was preaching the gospel.

The work of mission was first modelled by Jesus himself, who went through the towns and villages of Palestine preaching the kingdom of God and healing the sick (Mat 9:35). The work of mission is not just healing the sick or feeding the poor. Nor is it just preaching the gospel to people who are hungry or sick. The church in Antioch had recently demonstrated their concern for the hungry, at least within the church. Those called by the Spirit will be equipped by the Holy Spirit for the task of ministering to the whole person.

3. Commissioned

The church continued in prayer and fasting after receiving an answer to their prayer. They went on to lay hands on the two divinely-called men before sending them off. As a model for mission, even today, we note firstly that two people were called and sent out as missionaries. This is important for reasons of support and accountability. Secondly, note that two leaders of the church were called and sent out. Surely a highly educated man like Saul should have stayed home to teach in a seminary, we might think. But no, Saul was called to cross the seas and preach the gospel 'not where Christ was named' (Rom 15:20). Mission work is not for those who drop out of Bible College, and certainly not for those unhappy in their current position.

I still remember the director of a mission organisation saying to me, 'If you are not happy in your current work do not come to us'. This was not the response I expected when I inquired about missionary work, but it was a wise word. It was some five years later that we were sent to India, a place where I had never before set foot. It was during those five years that the call came from India. Might I also say that on many days during our first year I was ready to quit and come home, but there were two problems: I had resigned my job, and it would have been embarrassing to front up at the church or churches that had sent us out!

Barnabas and Saul, the two most senior men in the church at Antioch were sent out by the church after being called by the Holy Spirit. They were called by God but were commissioned by the church. This was done through the laying on of hands and prayer (13:3). This laying on of hands was not that they receive the Holy Spirit, nor was it passing on the gift of apostleship. It was the church recognising God's choice and setting these men apart for the work of the gospel, the work of mission beyond the church. Verse 4 re-states that they were sent out by the Holy Spirit. There is no indication that the Spirit directed where they were to go. He could have done so but seems to have let Barnabas make this decision. Barnabas knew the need for gospel outreach back in his home place of Cyprus, so that is where they started out.

First stop, Cyprus

Acts 13:4-12

What do you expect when you begin a Christian ministry? After being called to a particular ministry, and being set apart by prayer, you might expect an easy and rewarding ministry. But if you are truly ministering the word of God you should expect something else- opposition. In preaching the gospel to the end of the earth Paul came up against lots of opposition. This opposition took various forms, but behind it all was Satan. Satan opposes all attempts to make known the gospel of saving grace; and he does this without delay. He reveals his hand in the first days of any new ministry. When the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and he began his ministry at thirty years of age, what happened? He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. From the outset Satan tried to stop Jesus. From the outset Satan tried to stop the apostle Paul. Satan has tried to stop many missionaries from the outset, as you will see if you read their biographies. When we went to India with three small children we expected to be provided with a house to live in, but this was not the case. This was our first test. If you step out in faith to serve the Lord, Satan will oppose you.

1. Synagogue at Salamis

Barnabas and Saul were called by the Holy Spirit, and sent out by the Holy Spirit through the church at Antioch. And so these two men set out on the first missionary journey of the Christian church. We celebrate many landmarks in the history of the church but not this one. Is it because we do not know the exact date, or it because the church was more interested in reaching the world with the gospel than in making history? We note again that the first missionaries were sent out from Antioch, not Jerusalem. Antioch was a large cosmopolitan city, some 26km up the Orontes River. Seleucia was towards the mouth of this river, and it was from this port city that Barnabas and Saul set out. They sailed the relatively short distance to the east coast of the island of Cyprus (13:4). Cyprus was a strategic island in Roman times. It was governed by a proconsul who was appointed by the Roman senate rather than the Emperor.

At Salamis the missionaries found a synagogue in which to worship and preach the word of God- 'synagogues' in fact (13:5). The island had a Jewish, as well as Greek population. It became the practice of the missionaries to go to a synagogue of the Jews to first preach the gospel. Was this because of a command to go to the Jew first (Rom 1:16) or because they would find God- fearers in the synagogue, as in Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel? Those in the synagogues heard the OT read, and might more readily understand the gospel of the promised Messiah. Luke does not tell us what happened in this synagogue at Salamis, preferring to focus on the other side of the island. But he does mention that John, as in John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, was with them as their assistant (13:5). Does this mean he helped them in practical ways, or that he assisted in the ministry of the word- or both? It appears that John was invited by Barnabas to come on the journey; he was not commissioned by the church, and he was later at the centre of a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15:39). Barnabas was originally from Cyprus so John may have had relatives on the island also.

2. Satanic opposition at Paphos

From Salamis the missionaries travelled across the island to Paphos, the centre of government for the province of Cyprus. The Roman proconsul, a man called Sergius Paulus, lived in Paphos. He is

described as an 'intelligent man' (13:7), yet as with many pagan rulers, both then and now, he was open to the influence of magicians and astrologers. The most famous of such men in modern history was Rasputin who greatly influenced the Tsar of Russia, or his wife at least. Astrologers have a great influence upon the Hindu rulers of India; they would never set an election date without consulting such men as to the most auspicious date.

The proconsul of Cyprus had a Jewish fellow called Bar-Jesus in his court. Although the Bible condemns sorcery and magic (Deut 18:10f), this Jew and others, like the sons of Sceva at Ephesus (19:14) were into sorcery and exorcism. Sorcery gave Bar-Jesus power over the pagan proconsul, although he is described as an intelligent man so maybe he was not altogether duped by this man's claims. Certainly he was open to other indications of supernatural power. Bar-Jesus was aware of this and tried to protect his turf, as it were. He discouraged the proconsul from seeing the missionaries and spoke against them.

Bar-Jesus means 'son of Jesus', and Jesus means 'one who saves'. He is described as a sorcerer and false prophet (13:6). Not all men who call themselves prophets are true prophets- even if they are Jews or Christians. Power and influence over other people attracts many people. Some seek such power through politics, others through religion. False prophets may refer to the word of God, or parts of it, but will always oppose the true word of God. They will never adhere to the whole Bible- how can they when the Bible condemns sorcery and false prophets? Beware of men who claim spiritual knowledge beyond what is written in the Bible. This Jewish man had another name which actually means magician or sorcerer- 'Elymas' (13:8). He may have given himself this name, wanting to be known as 'Elymas the sorcerer'. The name Bar-Jesus was inappropriate, as Paul indicates by calling him 'you son of the devil'. Besides, the proconsul may have questioned the relationship between this man and the Jesus who Paul preached.

Paul wasted no time in condemning this wicked man for his opposition to the truth. Not only did he reject the gospel himself but was preventing others from hearing the gospel. What a wicked thing to do! This man was an agent of Satan, a 'son of the devil' (13:10). He was a frontline soldier for the enemy. Paul stood up to him. In the power of the Holy Spirit he 'looked intently' at this man and condemned him (13:9). He called him a 'son of the devil', not a 'son of Jesus'. He accused him of deceit and of fraud, and called him an 'enemy of all righteousness', a man who 'perverted the straight ways of the Lord' (13:10). 'Strong words', you say. But strong words are necessary when men or women distort the truth of the Bible for their own selfish ends. Our confession condemns the Pope of Rome for his claim to be the Vicar of Christ and head of the Church, calling him 'that antichrist' (Westminster Confession of Faith XXV.7). We condemn others who lead people astray with their false teaching, such as the 'prophets' of Mormonism and of Jehovah 'Witnessism'. We do so with the authority of the word of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul did not dialogue with Elymas the false prophet; he condemned him as an enemy of all righteousness. We should not dialogue with false prophets.

Paul went further in calling upon the Lord to render Elymas blind for a time (13:11). 'And immediately a dark mist fell upon him and he groped about seeking someone to lead him by the hand' (13:11). If Paul's condemnation of Elymas was not public, this affliction certainly was, and it confirmed his

condemnation as, 'you son of the devil'. Since this blindness was 'for a time' it may also have been intended as a call for repentance. Paul himself was struck by the Lord with blindness for a time. In his time of blindness his heart was changed and he became a follower rather than an enemy of Jesus Christ. We are not told of the outcome of the blindness that came upon Elymas. What we are told is that God's judgment upon him had a profound effect upon the proconsul. If affliction does not have the effect of bringing the afflicted person back to the Lord, it may have this desired effect upon those who witness the affliction. This is not to say that every affliction is the result of sin, but that the Lord can use any affliction for the purpose of his glory, as with Job.

Before taking up our final point, we note the change of name from Saul to Paul at this time (13:9). From now on Luke will call him Paul, and Paul will address himself by this name, as he does in his letters. Saul is a Hebrew name, as in the first king of Israel, while Paul is Latin. Roman citizens like Paul commonly had three names; Paulus would have been his third name, and a name better suited for use in a Gentile environment. The Gentile character of this name is clearly seen in the name of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus.

3. Sergius Paulus believed

The proconsul was an intelligent man. He was a pagan but was willing to listen to what others had to say. He did not shut his ears to the gospel as Elymas did, and as many do today. The proconsul called for Barnabas and Saul to come and teach him about the Lord. This is why Elymas opposed the missionaries. The proconsul saw what happened to Elymas, who up to this time had impressed the proconsul with his magic. But Elymas was exposed as a fake by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Satan is powerful, but the risen Jesus is more powerful. Jesus went to the cross saying, 'In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 15:33). Satan has great power, more power than any human being, but you who believe, you who have received the Holy Spirit, can resist Satan, as demonstrated by Paul. This confrontation with Elymas was a spiritual battle, a battle not against flesh and blood but a battle against the spiritual hosts of wickedness (Eph 6:12). All gospel ministry is a spiritual battle. If there is no battle then it is a human ministry, not a gospel ministry. Human ministry or humanitarianism does not attract satanic opposition.

The proconsul believed when he heard the gospel, and saw the power of the gospel (13:12). The power of the gospel does not have to be in miracles; it can be seen in changed lives and acts of kindness. But miracles or good works are not sufficient. The word must be heard. The proconsul was astonished at the teaching of the Lord (13:12). He heard the missionaries preach the gospel of Jesus Christ; he heard about the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He repented and believed, even though baptism is not mentioned. Are your words matched by good deeds? Are your good deeds matched by words, the words of God?

Sergius Paulus is the first Gentile convert outside Judea, the first fruit of the first missionary journey. He was not required to become a Jew before becoming a Christian- in fact he was not even a God-fearer before he believed. Archaeologists think that this Sergius Paulus is the man whose name is inscribed upon a tablet recently discovered in Cyprus, but more importantly this man's name is inscribed in the Lamb's book of life. Is yours?

Second stop-Pisidian Antioch

Acts 13:13-41

The risen Jesus told his apostles that they would receive the Holy Spirit and would be his witnesses to the end of the earth. It was Barnabas and Saul who set out on the first mission to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the end of the earth. Having been called by the Holy Spirit, they were commissioned and sent out by the church at Antioch in Syria. They sailed across to Cyprus where they preached in synagogues, and also to a Roman leader called Sergius Paulus. The only opposition they met on Cyprus was from a Jewish magician, a man who sold his soul to Satan.

Satan always opposes those who preach the gospel. He does so using men and women who are powerless to resist him. Those who believe in Jesus have the power to resist Satan but they do not always do so. Satan can even provoke believers into disrupting the work of mission. We see this in this first missionary journey, and sadly on many other missions down through history. Missionaries do not only return home because of hardship or persecution; they often return because of disputes with fellow missionaries; just like ministers often leave the ministry because of disputes within the church.

1. Setting sail

Barnabas and Paul set out from Cyprus to sail to the mainland of Asia Minor or southern Turkey. Actually, it was no longer 'Barnabas and Paul' but 'Paul and his party' (13:13). This change is subtle but significant. It was Barnabas who brought Saul into the ministry at Antioch. But on Cyprus it was Paul who dealt with Elymas. Paul became the chief speaker of the party (14:12). This change in dynamic within the missionary party may have contributed to John Mark leaving.

From Cyprus they sail to Perga, a place a few kilometres up the river Cestrus and in off the river. It was from here that John Mark departed to return to Jerusalem, where his mother resided (13:13). Was he feeling homesick? If so Paul was not impressed. Paul took Mark's departure very seriously; he saw it as desertion and refused to have Mark join them on their next mission (15:38). Barnabas saw things differently; he insisted that Mark, his cousin, be allowed to come, and so Paul and Barnabas parted ways.

The reason for Mark leaving is the subject of much speculation among scholars. Was it a simple case of being homesick? Or did it have something to do with the change of leadership within the team that we have just noted? Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement' had no problem with Paul assuming the role of leader, or chief speaker at least, but Mark may have been upset by this. Another speculation is that Mark wanted to begin ministry in Perga while Paul wanted to set off for the central hills, to the province of Pisidia. Did Paul see Pisidian Antioch as a more strategic centre within the Roman Empire? William Ramsay suggested that Paul got malaria and needed to get away from the lowlands; he bases this idea on a note in Paul's letter to the Galatians where he writes that he preached to them because of a physical infirmity (Gal 4:13).

We cannot be certain as to why Mark left, but clearly Paul did not approve. Barnabas was more understanding and forgiving. Barnabas continued with Paul on their journey north, a journey of some 150kms and up to a plateau over 1000m above sea level. The city of Antioch in this region became

important in Roman times because it was on the main road to the east. Being a Roman colony, retired military people were settled in this city. It also had a sizable Jewish population, as indicated by the presence of a synagogue in the city.

2. Synagogue

Paul and Barnabas came to Antioch of Pisidia. On the Sabbath day they went to the synagogue to worship, as was their custom. It was also their custom to begin gospel preaching in the synagogue. They were Jews and they preached Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah, the one in whom all the OT promises are fulfilled. But synagogue worship was also attended by non-Jews, by Gentiles who were attracted to the monotheism and the teaching of the Jewish religion; they were not satisfied with worshipping lumps of wood and stone. The Gentiles in the synagogue are called God-fearers; Paul began his sermon addressing the 'men of Israel and you who fear God' (13:16). God-fearers were reluctant to become full Jewish converts because this necessitated circumcision of the flesh. In the gospel that Paul preached, circumcision was not demanded. Paul simply called for them to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Gentile God-fearers were ripe for harvest.

Do we in the church demand more of converts than is required in the Bible? Some would say 'yes', and maybe they are correct. Do we demand a certain dress code? Do we demand a certain food code? Do we demand a certain code of behaviour? We should examine such things, but we make no apology for demanding profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul did not demand circumcision of the flesh, but he did demand circumcision of the heart. He called for people to repent and believe in Jesus. When they did so they were welcomed into the church. Those who refused to repent and believe were not welcomed but were warned of the consequences of unbelief- as we see at the end of his sermon. The NT church was not a cosy club where friends could meet. It was not a place for people wanting their children to get a bit of religion. Members of the NT church were routinely persecuted. People do not endure persecution unless they believe in their heart, unless they believe that even death cannot separate them from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:39).

Here at Pisidian Antioch we get a rare glimpse into synagogue worship in the time of the NT. Luke tells us that when Jesus went to Nazareth he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He was handed the book or scroll of Isaiah to read. After reading, he sat down to explain or expound what he read. He explained that this Scripture was fulfilled that very day (Luke 4:16-21). Many years later Paul and Barnabas were in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. The order of service was the same. Someone read from the Law, the five books of Moses, and someone read from the Prophets, the rest of the OT, excluding the Writings. We know from elsewhere that the Psalms were sung in synagogue worship (cf. 1Cor 14:26).

The synagogue ruler was in charge of proceedings. Visitors were welcomed and even invited to bring a word of encouragement for the assembly. We see this with Jesus- even though he was in his home town. Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read and seemingly invited to explain what he read. Paul's party was welcomed - 'men and brethren'- and invited to bring a word of encouragement. Paul stood up and began his sermon. We are not told the Bible passages that were read that day but Paul

covered most of the Bible anyway! Although he quotes from the Psalms and from Isaiah later in his sermon this does not mean that these were the passages read.

3. Sermon

This is the first sermon preached by the apostle Paul, and is some ways the first gospel sermon. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the Jews in Jerusalem. Although a gospel sermon, it was preached to explain their speaking in tongues. Peter used Scripture, as all NT preaching does, but picks up OT history with David, the most revered king of Israel. David was unique in that he was given a promise that one of his descendants would rule in his kingdom for ever. Paul uses David to introduce Jesus as the Saviour of Israel (13:23). Both Peter and Paul quote Psalm 16:10 about God not letting his holy one see corruption or decay (2:29, 13:36).

We might also compare and contrast Stephen preaching in the Sanhedrin while in chains. Stephen began with Abraham, the father of the Jews. Paul began with 'our fathers', without specifically mentioning Abraham (13:17). In speaking to the Jewish leaders, Stephen focusses on Moses because Israel rebelled against Moses and rejected him, just as they later rejected Jesus the prophet and the Son of God.

Paul's sermon can be divided into three or four points- like F. F. Bruce, we will go with three.

First point: preparation for Christ as seen in OT history. Remember, Paul is preaching to people who had heard the OT. It will be different when he preaches to pagans in Athens; on that occasion he went back even further than the patriarchs to the creation. We need to start with the creation, not just because we are preaching to an increasingly Biblically illiterate people but because we are preaching to a people who have been taught a lie, namely that God is not the creator.

Paul moves quickly, with only brief comments highlighting the sovereignty of God at every step in their history. He moves from Egypt to the wilderness where they spent about forty years testing God's patience. In Canaan God destroyed seven nations (Deut 7:1) and gave them the land by allotment. All this took about four hundred and fifty years (this is probably the period Paul refers to although manuscripts differ). After the judges came Samuel the prophet. They wanted a king and God gave them Saul, who lasted forty years before God removed him and appointed David, a man after God's own heart (13:22).

Second point: fulfilment in Christ the Saviour. Paul jumps from David to Jesus because of the promise God gave to David. He uses the word 'Saviour' rather than Messiah because of nationalistic overtones in the latter. Jesus is the long awaited deliverer of Israel; even Abraham and Moses looked forward to this day. In a more immediate sense, John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, preaching the baptism of repentance (13:25). John recognised that Jesus was greater than him; Paul notes his saying about not being worthy to untie his sandals (13:25).

Paul pauses to assure his listeners that this word of salvation that he is preaching is for them (13:26). He is not just giving a history lesson; nor is he just telling stories. What Paul has said, and is about to say, is for all to hear and to heed, as it should be with all preaching.

Jesus is a Saviour, but how could he be their Saviour when the Jewish leaders asked for him to be crucified- and got their way? Although the Jewish leaders failed to listen to the prophets, they were inadvertently fulfilling the words of the prophets in condemning Jesus. Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing, as Pilate admitted, but he gave in to them; all this was according to the sovereign plan of God as written in the Bible (13:28, 29). After making Jesus suffer a cursed death by hanging him on the tree, his body was taken down and put in a tomb. Jesus died for sure, and was buried, but God raised him from the dead. The risen Jesus was seen for many days by many people, people who knew him well and were not mistaken or deluded in some way (13:31).

Paul goes on to quote Scripture and then to his final point in which he calls upon his hearers in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch to believe in Jesus in order to be forgiven and justified before God (13:39). We will look further at these verses and the response of the worshippers another time, God willing.

In closing for now, do note that we have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ being preached for the first time, at least within the Gentile world, in a city in Asia Minor, today's Turkey. In this gospel we see that Jesus did not appear out of nowhere. The God of Israel promised a Saviour way back as far as Abraham. He gave a special promise to David, a promise fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. God was fulfilling his sovereign plan even as Jesus was put to death. But God raised him from the dead (13:30). Do these words ring in your ears bringing you great joy?

Finally, note the words 'they found no cause for death in him' (13:28). Why then did they put him to death? Why did God allow an innocent man to die? Was it not that he was bearing our sins when he went to the cross? It is only in Jesus Christ that you, or anyone, has forgiveness of sins. It is through his death, through his sacrifice, that our sins are blotted out and we are set free. Many at Pisidian Antioch were filled with joy as they left the synagogue that day (13:52). May you be filled with joy as you leave worship today!

Sermon at Pisidian Antioch

Acts 13:16-41

On the first missionary journey undertaken by the church, Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch in Syria. They went to the island of Cyprus and then across to the mainland of Turkey, or Asia Minor, as it was known in the first century. From Perga on the coast, they pushed inland to the central highlands, to a place called Antioch, Antioch of Pisidia, in the province of Galatia. On the Sabbath day the missionaries went to the synagogue to worship. They were in a new city and there would have been many interesting things to see but it was the Sabbath day so they looked for a place to worship God. When you are away on holidays what do you do on the Lord's Day? Do you enjoy the fun park, the beach, the museum, or do you look for a church where you can join with God's people in worship?

In the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch the Scriptures were read. The rulers of the synagogue invited the visitors to bring a word of encouragement for the people. And so Paul stood up to speak (13:16). It was not only Jews who gathered to worship; there were Gentiles there also. In fact there were three types of worshippers: Jews, converts to Judaism or proselytes, and other Gentiles call God-fearers. Proselytes submitted to circumcision in order to become Jews. God-fearers were attracted to monotheistic worship and the moral law of the Jews but were not circumcised.

Paul's sermon can be subdivided into three points. We looked at some of his sermon previously; so today will focus on the latter part, after briefly reviewing the earlier part.

First point: preparation for Christ as seen in the OT

We saw in verse 17-22 how Paul covers the vast expanse of OT history in a few verses. He began with God's choice of 'our fathers', of men like Abraham, then moves quickly from Egypt to the wilderness, and into Canaan. Then came the time of the judges, and of Samuel the prophet, before the people asked for a king. God gave them Saul and then David as their king. Paul reminds his listeners of God's sovereign hand in all these historical events. God chose the fathers, God brought them out of Egypt, God destroyed the Canaanites, God gave them judges and God gave them a king; not to mention that God put up with them for forty years in the wilderness.

Second point: fulfilment in Christ the Saviour

David was Israel's greatest king. God gave him victory over all his enemies. He was a man after God's own heart. But there was something else about David; there was a promise that God gave to David through the prophet Nathan when he wanted to build the temple. God promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever (2Sam 7:12-13). Paul declares that this promise to David is fulfilled in Jesus, whom God raised from the dead (13:23).

The people in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch knew this history. They may also have heard about John the Baptist and the baptism of repentance that he preached. Paul told them how John made it clear that he was not the promised One or Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth is that person. Yes, Jesus was taken by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans to be crucified, but 'they found no cause for death in Him' (13:28). These Jews in Jerusalem failed to understand the words of

the prophets, words which those in Pisidian Antioch were having explained to them by Paul, a former rabbi.

The death of Jesus was in fact the fulfilment of all that was written. Jesus did not die because of any wrong he had done. How could Paul say this? He could say it because God raised Jesus from the dead (13:30). God vindicated Jesus. The risen Jesus was seen over many days by many people, people who knew Jesus intimately. The resurrection of Jesus is not just a story dreamt up by the apostles or by Paul himself; it is historical fact. And more than this, it is a fact that demands a response. Paul calls this fact 'good news' or 'glad tidings' (13:32); it is news that goes beyond the intellect and to the heart. It is heart-changing news. Paul's heart was certainly changed by the realization that Jesus is risen.

Paul returns to Scripture, picking up on specific passages that clearly refer to Messiah or Christ. He returns to the promise that was 'made to the fathers', the promise made to David- compare vs 32 with vs 23. God has fulfilled this promise in Jesus- the 'raised up' here in verse 33 meaning 'sent forth' rather than resurrection. Paul refers to familiar words in Psalm 2:7: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten you'. The Jews saw this Psalm as referring to the promised Messiah. In this Psalm the Lord refers to 'My Son' and 'My King'. This is not 'son' in some figurative sense but the 'begotten' of the Father. It cannot be referring to David, the son of Jesse (13:22).

Paul links the words of Psalm 2 with the promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7. One coming from the body of David, namely Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, is also called the Son of God. He is the only begotten of the Father. Paul could say this because God raised Jesus from the dead, no more to return to corruption or decay (13:34). He can, and does, sit on the throne as King forever. Paul's audience may have recalled that Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as King just days before he was crucified.

Another word of God spoken through Isaiah refers to the covenant God made with David and the 'sure mercies of David' (13:34). The prophet promises a new era. The reign of David was remembered by the Jews with a sense of longing for those days to return. They were looking for another great king, a king to deliver them from Roman oppression. Paul tells them that a king greater than David has come, and that greater blessings have also come, just as foretold by the prophet. This new kingdom is characterized by mercy and grace.

'Therefore He also says in another Psalm' (13:35). Paul always refers to Scripture as the word of God. What is written cannot be changed. What is written will be fulfilled. The words of another Psalm, Psalm 16, have been fulfilled in Jesus also, fulfilled in his resurrection. Peter first noted these words at Pentecost, where he explained to the Jews in Jerusalem that David's nearby tomb was intact- they could visit it if they wanted (2:29). So who was the Psalmist speaking about when he said, 'You will not let your holy one see corruption' (13:35, Ps 16:10). Not even David escaped death and bodily decay. But the body of Jesus did not remain in the grave to undergo decay. Jesus died and was buried, but God raised him from the dead and he did not see corruption (13:37). Paul demonstrated conclusively that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the anointed of God, the deliverer and the Saviour of the world.

Third point: call to repent and believe in Christ

The rulers of the synagogue invited Paul to bring a word of encouragement to the people. You will agree that they got more than they expected. Paul did not depart from the Scriptures, but in the power of the Holy Spirit shone a new light upon those Scriptures. The brilliant light that some years before shone upon him, was now shining in the synagogue as he preached the good news of Jesus Christ. Wherever the Scriptures are read and preached, there the light of God shines upon the hearts of men and women.

Paul did not stop with reciting the facts of history, or with showing how the Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus. He brought his message to a conclusion with a call to repent and believe the gospel he had just preached. Mid-way through his sermon, you may recall, he made his message personal, telling 'men and brethren' that, 'to you this word of salvation has been sent' (13:26). He again addresses them directly in verse 38: 'Therefore let it be known to you brethren'. What did he want them to know and understand? He wanted them to know 'that through this Man', through Jesus, they can be forgiven of their sin and justified before God.

Paul did not have to explain what sin is because these people knew they were sinners. They did not deceive themselves by trying to redefine sin, or simply stop using the word in the hope that their guilt would go away. The people were in the synagogue worshipping God in an effort to overcome sin and get right with God. People who recognise they are sinners and are seeking to appease God, often through animistic worship, are most open to the gospel of Jesus Christ. How ironic it is that the secular humanist wants the animists to continue in their bondage to sin when they are hearing the gospel and being set free from sin and death. The humanist, with all his knowledge, is, of course, deceiving himself by denying sin; he hates the word 'sin'. Yet he is out there trying to be a good human being? Why? Is it that deep down he fears divine judgment?

What is sin? 'Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God' (Shorter Catechism Q14). Sin is breaking God's law. Every human being has sinned; to say you have not sinned is to make God a liar (1John 1:10). The people in the synagogue knew they had sinned and that this sin brought them under divine judgment. They knew that the way to please God was to obey God's law as it is written in the Scriptures. But this was not easy- in fact it was impossible. They could never be sure they had obeyed everything- what about coveting? So when Paul preached forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ they listened. He told them he had good news for them and this was indeed good news.

Forgiveness is not just about getting rid of guilt. It is about being made right before God. Sin cuts us off from God. Being forgiven means being brought back into a relationship with God the Father. Paul introduces judicial language with the word 'justified'; sometimes explained as meaning 'just as if I never sinned'. Justification means both forgiveness and the imputation of righteousness. You are not forgiven so you can go free and sin again. You are saved from bondage to sin and brought into a bondage to God as his beloved child. You are brought into a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The Law of Moses was at the centre of all synagogue preaching- up till this time. The Jews always read from the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Paul showed how the words of the prophets were fulfilled in Jesus. The Law of Moses is also fulfilled in Jesus, as Jesus himself said (Mat 5:17). If justification comes through repentance and believing in Jesus, it cannot come through the Law of Moses; in fact it never came through keeping the law. Paul speaks of 'all the things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses' (13:39). The Law of Moses has its place, but this place is not in making anyone right with God. Only through the death of Jesus do we have forgiveness of sins. Only through his resurrection are we justified before God, as Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans (Rom 4:25).

Paul concluded his sermon with a word of warning taken from the Book of Habakkuk (13:40, 41). He may have anticipated a negative response to what he said about the law of Moses- remember how Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses (6:11). If the Jews rejected the good news he preached they would be following in the footsteps of their fathers who rejected the words of the prophet Habakkuk, and Jeremiah his contemporary, in the days leading up to the Babylonian exile. The people of Israel might not listen and pay heed to God's word but God's word would come to pass anyway. Those who fail to listen or fail to pay heed to the gospel will perish in their sin, just as the people of Judah suffered when Nebuchadnezzar came and destroyed the temple and took them into exile.

Peter concluded his sermon at Pentecost with a call to repent, as well as a solemn witness and warning (2:40). Elsewhere Paul completed his sermons with a solemn 'Day of Judgment' warning. The gospel is not really a take it or leave it message; it is a take it or suffer the consequences message. The world may see this as unloving and a terrible arrogance. In fact, warning a person of the danger that lies ahead, and telling them how to escape that danger, is the most loving thing anyone can do.

Jesus is risen and has ascended to heaven, just as he said. He also said he is returning to judge the world, that is, every human being who has ever lived. Preaching the love of God in Jesus Christ means preaching the whole gospel, not just the parts that we, or others, find agreeable.

Response at Pisidian Antioch

Acts 13:42-52

There are many blessings associated with being a minister of God's word, but there are negatives also. One of the latter is not having much opportunity to hear other men preach. It was good to do this recently when we had visiting preachers. Otherwise I listen to sermons on the radio, or read printed sermons. It is good to hear a preacher expounding the word of God and letting that word seep into the soul. Sometimes the preached word is not easy to swallow; it is like a bitter medicine. Other times the preacher fails to explain the word, or challenge the thinking of the listeners.

Nobody in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch left without being challenged by the preaching of Paul. The gospel impacted the thinking of everyone present- some positively and some negatively. This will always be the case. If a preacher gets a ringing endorsement from everyone he should be concerned. Only those appointed to eternal life will believe (13:48). The difference between the preaching of Paul and the preaching of today is that people who don't like the message usually leave rather than riot- yet riots can still happen!

In the closing words of Acts 13, Luke outlines in some detail responses to the preaching of the gospel for the first time in Asia Minor. The missionaries stayed at Pisidian Antioch for at least a week and probably longer, before being told to leave. Our subheadings today will be: saved by grace, stirring up opposition, spreading word, shaking off the dust, and surprising joy.

1. Saved by grace

As Paul and Barnabas left the worship service in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, the people begged to hear more from them the next Sabbath. Some could not wait that long; they followed Paul and Barnabas, maybe to a park or a house. Here the missionaries told them more about Jesus and about believing in him. They were persuaded to 'continue in the grace of God' (13:43). To 'continue in the grace of God' indicates that they had received the grace of God; that they were saved by grace through faith. Paul preached forgiveness of sins and belief in Jesus Christ.

It is important that people not only know about Jesus but know Jesus as their personal Saviour. Sometimes those growing up in the church think they are saved without ever being called to respond personally to the gospel. And sometimes they do not know how to respond, maybe because they were never told. Repent of your sin and believe in Jesus Christ is what you must do- if you have not yet done so. Those who followed Paul and Barnabas 'continued in the grace of God' which means they kept on growing in the knowledge and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. What is the opposite of growing? Dying? Make sure you are speaking the truth in love, and growing up in all things into Christ (Eph 4:15).

In this synagogue at Pisidian Antioch were Jews, converted Gentiles or proselytes, and God-fearers. Who were the people who followed Paul and Barnabas after worship? We read, 'many Jews and devout proselytes followed' them (13: 43). The word 'devout' is the same as that used of God-fearers, but here most translations and commentators agree it is used in the sense of 'worshipping'. F.F. Bruce translates as, 'many of the Jews and the proselytes who were worshipping'. This is not to exclude God-fearers from those who believed in Jesus.

2. Stirring up opposition

'On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God' (13:44). How amazing! Everyone must have gone home and told their neighbours, their workmates, their friends and their relatives about what they had heard at the worship service. They must have invited every one they met to come and 'hear the word of God'. Note that it was not 'come and hear a great preacher' but 'come and hear the word of God' (13:44). These days the invitation is more likely to be 'come and hear this famous preacher'. This can backfire, as happened recently with a high profile preacher from a mega-church in Seattle. People flocked to hear this man when he came to our city, but when he went back to his home church they removed him.

We are not given the details of the worship service on the second Sabbath- apart from the fact that it was a huge gathering. We might think the Jews would have been glad to see the synagogue full and overflowing, but this was not the case- 'they were filled with envy' (13:45). Do you complain when the car park is full, or when someone is sitting in your seat? Do you complain when church traditions are not followed? The Jews did not like the fact that Gentiles flocking to the synagogue were not being told to keep the Law of Moses, nor were they being told that they had to be circumcised.

Paul must have been allowed to speak again- they could hardly say no! But the Jews started contradicting him and blaspheming (13:45). They probably started calling Paul a heretic, among other names, and dishonouring the name of Jesus. It was a rather unpleasant meeting, but Paul and Barnabas did not stay silent or quietly slip out of the meeting. They stood their ground and boldly told the Jews that in rejecting the gospel they were subjecting themselves to divine condemnation (13:46). They were cutting themselves off from eternal life, which is found only in Jesus Christ.

Paul said it was 'necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you (the Jews) first' (13:46). The Jews were given 'the oracles of God' (Rom 3:2) which contained the covenant promises. Jesus came in fulfilment of these Scriptures. But the Jews rejected their Messiah/ Christ. Paul was a Jew whom God chose to save, even while he was bound in the sin of self-righteousness. Moreover, Jesus had told his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. This witness was to Gentiles, as well as Jews.

Paul was specifically called to take the gospel to the Gentiles, but not exclusively so. If the Jews were ready to listen to the gospel he preached to them. If they were reading the Scriptures they should have been ripe for harvest, and many were saved. But some Jews, mainly the leaders, allowed jealousy to overrule their response to the gospel. Paul was not going to argue with jealous Jews. He left the synagogue saying, 'we turn to the Gentiles' (13:46). It is impossible to preach the gospel in the face of jealousy.

Paul had a divine mandate to go to the Gentiles; not just the personal word he received through Ananias but the written word of the Lord given through Isaiah the prophet. In Isaiah 49 we read about the servant of the Lord or Messiah. The very Scriptures read by the Jews spoke of Messiah being a light to the Gentiles, so Paul would preach Jesus to the Gentiles with this divine mandate. 'And thus' writes F.F. Bruce, 'we are introduced to a pattern of events that was to reproduce itself in almost

every place to which Paul brought the gospel: the local Jews, almost invariably, refused as a body to believe it (though in every place there were individuals among them who did believe), and it was accordingly preached to the Gentiles, who embraced it in large number'. It is a bit like the people of Europe and the West rejecting the gospel today while the people of Asia, especially China, are embracing it in great numbers.

3. Spreading word

When the Gentiles heard the gospel preached by Paul and Barnabas they were glad and glorified God (13:48). They did not start talking about Paul as a wonderful preacher and saying 'we are followers of Paul'. That happened in other places but not in Pisidian Antioch. If they had started saying, 'I am of Paul', they would have been at a loss when Paul was forced to leave their city. Because they worshipped Jesus, and gave him all the glory, they continued in the Lord long after Paul had gone.

Luke comments, 'as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed' (13:48). This is a clear statement of the truth of predestination. What is such a statement doing here in the context of the preaching of the gospel? Surely the wonderful response of the Gentiles to the gospel was because of Paul's powerful preaching? Not so, according to Luke, and to Paul himself who taught the truth of predestination (Rom 8:30). Even so, there are those who want to water down this statement here in Acts 13:48 writing things like, 'as many as were disposed to eternal life believed'. Predestination means that the individual is enrolled in the book of life from eternity and for eternity. Since Luke writes like this there is every reason to believe that this truth was taught to new believers. It is, after all, this truth upon which the doctrine of assurance is founded.

4. Shaking off the dust

The Jews were jealous of Paul and Barnabas because of all the people who came to hear them preach the gospel. They spoke against them, and against the gospel they preached, in rude and blasphemous ways. Even when Paul left their synagogue they went after him. 'They stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city' (13:50). Politics is a dirty business, even when it enters the church.

How did the Jews get the chief men of the city, the Roman rulers, to move against Paul and Barnabas and have them expelled- not just from the city but from the region? The clue seems to be the devout and prominent women. The Jews could have gone to the authorities directly and accused Paul of preaching another religion, but the Romans would probably have told them to get lost. It seems the wives of the city leaders attended the synagogue as God-fearers. The Jewish leaders were able to sway them into thinking Paul was preaching a dangerous message, hoping they would convey the message to their husbands. Sadly, such whispering and secret plotting still occurs in the church.

And so Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Pisidian Antioch and from the region (13:50). They travelled down the highway called Via Sebaste to the east and into the next district, and to a place called Iconium. They were expelled for no other reason than for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were expelled at the instigation of the Jews, men who claimed to be the people of God; Paul and Barnabas did not see them as such. As they left town they, 'shook the dust from their feet against them' (13:51). By this symbolic act Jews pictured the removal of every speck of pagan filth as they

were forced to leave a town (Luke 9:5). It symbolised the cutting off of all ties, indeed a cutting off from the grace of God. Among the Jews this act was tantamount to calling a man a pagan.

5. Surprising joy

Despite seeing the missionaries who brought them the good news of Jesus Christ being rudely thrown out of their city, the new believers were 'filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit' (13:52). Paul and Barnabas must have told them about the Holy Spirit; they may even have baptized them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The focus of the new believers was on Jesus, and they continued in the joy of the Lord despite the absence of the missionaries. They, of course, kept in contact, and Paul would return through this city (14:21). The work of any missionary or preacher must always be to point people to Christ not to themselves. The response of the believer must always be to look to the Lord, not to man, no matter how powerful or influential that man may be in the church of God.

Third stop, Iconium

Acts 14:1-7

Have you seen a book called 'Operation World', originally put together in the 1970's by Patrick Johnstone of WEC international? It is a prayer guide for the 242 nations in the world. Details of religion, churches and unreached people groups are given for each country. While meant as prayer guide, it is also used as a mission guide. Mission organisations develop strategies to send missionaries to the unreached people groups. There is nothing wrong with having a mission strategy but it is difficult to find any such strategy in Paul's first missionary journey. I suppose the whole world was unreached in Paul's day. Even so, his call was simply that, a call from the Holy Spirit for Paul and Barnabas to do the work the Spirit called them to do. They went to Cyprus, maybe because this was the home place of Barnabas. From Cyprus they went to Perga and then up to Pisidian Antioch, possibly for health reasons (Gal 4:13). They ended up in the city of Iconium because they were expelled from Pisidian Antioch, not because of any mission strategy. We know that on his second missionary journey Paul was specifically called by the Lord to preach the gospel in Macedonia (16:10). People sometimes ask us how we ended up in India. It was not that we had a call to go to India; our call was to join a particular mission organisation and go to a country where they were engaged in ministry.

Paul preached the gospel in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. The preaching had two outcomes: firstly, many believed and secondly, there was a division leading to opposition. They were only in this Roman colony for a few weeks before being expelled by the authorities. Back on the road, the Via Sebaste, Paul and Barnabas headed east to a city called Iconium- the place called Konya in modern Turkey. This city was more of a Greek city-state than a Roman colony- it retained the Greek language and resisted Roman influence. The name comes from the Greek word '*icon*' which means 'image'. It was still within the region of Phrygia and the province of Galatia.

Even as we look at Paul preaching the gospel for the first time in this region, it is good to glance at Paul's letter to the Galatians as we have it in the NT canon. While some scholars hold to what is called the 'north Galatian theory', most believe the letter was written to the churches of south Galatia (Gal 1:2), the region Paul visited on this, his first, missionary journey. We earlier noted Paul's reference in Galatians 4:13 to his first preaching the gospel to them because of a 'physical infirmity'. The letter is a plea and a warning not to turn away from the grace of the gospel- the gospel of grace alone. Apparently Judaizers got to these churches after Paul and Barnabas left, telling them they had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses.

Back to the present, as in c.46AD, and to Paul and Barnabas reaching Iconium, some 145km east of Pisidian Antioch. How were they received in this city? They first went to the synagogue, as was their custom. After they preached there was division, followed by persecution and then growth in the church. This came to be the pattern in their ministry, but we will look at their time in Iconium under the headings: poisoned minds, persevering boldness, plotting to harm, and preaching never stops.

1. Poisoned minds

Reaching Iconium, Paul and Barnabas went together to the synagogue of the Jews (14:1). They were not in the least silenced or discouraged by their expulsion from Pisidian Antioch. Paul must have again

been invited to speak to the assembly. In the power of the Holy Spirit he preached the gospel and a great number of both Jews and Gentiles believed (14:1). Others, however, did not believe. Why did they not believe? It is difficult to understand why people do not believe the good news, the news that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sin and give eternal life to those who believe in him. For those burdened by sin and struggling to get to heaven through their good works, the gospel must surely be good news. Repent and believe in Jesus is all that is asked- it's free! Some, it seems, do not want to get down on their knees and confess their sin before the Lord. Others think that because the offer is free it is cheap. While salvation is free, it is certainly not cheap! How can anyone think that the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is cheap?

Our family reading the other day included the story of preacher who went down a coal mine to minister to the miners. After the message, the foreman took the preacher back to the elevator. On the way the preacher asked this miner what he thought of God's great salvation. The miner replied, 'Oh, it's too cheap; I cannot believe in a religion like that'. Without making an immediate reply, the preacher asked him, 'Just how do you folks get out of this place?' 'Oh, by getting into that cage over there' he replied. 'And does it take you long to get to the top?' 'No, only a few seconds.' 'Well', said the preacher, 'that certainly is very easy and simple; but say, don't you need to do something to raise yourself?' 'Of course not' replied the miner, 'as I said, you have nothing to do but get into the elevator.' 'What about the people who sank the shaft and perfected all this? Was there much labour or expense connected with it?' 'Yes, indeed; it was very costly and difficult work. This shaft is 600 m deep, but it was necessary, for without the elevator we would never be able to get to the surface'. 'That's very true' said the preacher, 'yet when God's word tells you that whosoever believes in the Son of God has everlasting life, you say to me 'it's too cheap, too cheap'. God's work to bring you, dear friend, out of the pit of destruction and death was accomplished at great cost, the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Have you considered that cost? The ultimate reason for some believing and others not believing after Paul's preaching of the gospel is that 'as many as had been appointed unto eternal life believed' (13:48).

The unbelieving Jews did not go away quietly, but 'stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren' (14:2). Paul spoke the word of God to the Jew first because Jesus is the promised Messiah. Jesus came in fulfilment of all that was spoken by Moses and the Prophets. But some Jews were not 'appointed to eternal life'. Those who rejected the gospel began speaking against Paul and against Jesus Christ. They may have been angry that the Gentiles were not being forced to get circumcised and obey the Law of Moses (were they incipient Judaizers?). Or maybe they were just jealous of Paul and Barnabas (cf.13:45). They began a campaign to discredit the missionaries. We are not told what lies they told, but they 'poisoned the minds' of Gentiles, who were broadly sympathetic to the missionaries and their message.

2. Persevering boldness

Having been told in verse 2 that some Jews were stirring up opposition against the missionaries, we might have expected the following verse to be verse 5, which tells of planned violence towards them. Instead, we read that the missionaries, 'stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord' (14:3). It seems the effort of their Jewish opponents in stirring up opposition was not immediately successful. 'It is not until later in the story that we hear of active measures against the missionaries being

planned' (Marshall). Paul no doubt knew of this opposition, of the slander that was being spread around town. They may have been thrown out of the synagogue, but pressed on undeterred in the work of the Lord. They became even more bold in 'bearing witness to the word of His grace', meaning to the gospel of Jesus Christ (14:3).

The Lord granted them power to perform signs and wonders as part of their ministry (14:3). Paul may have been alluding to such miracles in his letter- Galatians 3:5. The ministry of Jesus was accompanied by miraculous signs. The ministry of Peter and the apostles was accompanied by signs and wonders (2:43). The exact nature of the signs and wonders here in Iconium is not recorded, but probably included healing; as in the next town, Lystra. The wonder or miracle performed by Paul and Barnabas was a sign, a divine confirmation of the message they preached. Such signs no doubt made it more difficult for the unbelieving Jews to get an audience for their 'poisonous message'. This enabled Paul and Barnabas to stay a long time, both preaching the gospel and teaching new believers how to continue in the grace of God.

You will notice that the missionaries are called 'apostles' in the next verse, verse 4, and in verse 14. Only here does Luke use this term of Paul and Barnabas. Larkin writes, 'Paul freely used the term *apostle* while Luke, in the main, reserved it for the Twelve'. The term 'apostle' really means 'sent one', and it may be that Luke is using it in this broader sense here in this chapter. This being the first mention of signs and wonders as part of Paul's ministry, does bring to mind the ministry of Peter and the twelve apostles. It does not mean that all gospel ministry will be accompanied by signs and wonders, any more than it means that there are apostles today. Do remember the qualifications of an apostle found in Acts 1:22.

3. Plotting to harm the missionaries

As Paul and Barnabas continued preaching the gospel, division among their hearers continued to take place (14:4). Even with signs and wonders confirming their message, not all believed. They were not like some missionaries and popular preachers today who think that if only they could heal the sick, or perform some sort of miracle, everyone would believe in Jesus. Not all who saw Jesus or the apostles perform miracles believed in Him, so why should anyone expect a different response today- even if they claim the ability to perform signs and wonders. Do remember that today we have the NT, the authoritative word of God that confirms to us the truth of Jesus Christ.

As the gospel was preached in Iconium, the number of believers grew. In the end the whole city probably heard the gospel. But the campaign begun by the unbelieving Jews finally got momentum, maybe because of plans for violence. Some turn to violence when they lose an argument. Moreover, violence attracts a certain group of people. Opposition towards the missionaries came to a head with a plot to assault and stone them (14:5). The plot involved both Jews and Gentiles, including rulers, most probably Jewish rulers- stoning was a Jewish method of violence and execution.

Paul and Barnabas heard of these developments in the opposition camp (14:6). They took the matter seriously and fled to the neighbouring jurisdiction, to the towns of Lystra and Derbe. This was not cowardice or surrender to the enemy; it was being sensible and practical. Defending yourself in a court of law is one thing; defending yourself against a violent mob is another. Their work in Iconium

was done. God providentially and powerfully permitted them to stay a 'long time' (14:3). The believers were looking to the Lord not the missionaries. Paul never thought he was indispensable to the ministry.

4. Preaching never stops

And so the missionaries moved on to preach the gospel in the next region. The main road out of Iconium led south to the town of Lystra, some 29km away. In taking this road, Paul and Barnabas crossed the border from Phrygia to Lycaonia. Lystra was another Roman colony, but a very different city to the ones they had come from- as we hope to see next time.

Before seeing what happened in Lystra we note that they preached the gospel in the surrounding region (14:6,7). Paul and Barnabas were not just 'synagogue preachers' or 'convention speakers'. Yes, they preached in cities, but they also preached in villages and homes. They preached wherever there were people, people made in the image of God. They preached to Jew and Gentile, to rich and poor, to literate and illiterate, to people of all religions, because the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ is for the ears of all people, and the hearts of those whom the Lord chooses.

Fourth stop, Lystra

Acts 14:8-20

On the Pacific island of Tanna, the local people celebrate February 15 as John Frum Day. The name 'John Frum' is believed to have come from an American GI who introduced himself as 'John from America'. The sudden arrival of US troops on this island during WW2 was a great shock to the islanders. It was a material shock, with aeroplanes, vehicles and marching soldiers impacting their simple village life. It was also a spiritual shock impacting their animism and ancestor worship- and in some places their corrupted Christianity. They sought to include what they saw into their beliefs, and so the cargo cult was born.

When Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip visited Vanuatu in 1974, a tribal man saw the Prince dressed in his naval uniform with everyone paying homage to him. He concluded that the Prince, a pale face man, was the son of the mountain spirit who went across the seas to marry a powerful woman. And so began the Prince Phillip Movement, a version of the cargo cult adopted in this particular community. These people sent a killing club to the Prince in England, and when he accepted this they knew he was their 'god'. They worship his photo and believe that one day he will come and rule over them. Many would laugh at such beliefs, but does not searching the planets for 'Martians' reflect a similarly primitive belief?

The tribals of Tanna are not the first, nor the last, to worship the spirits of their ancestors or to believe in gods of their own making. In the ancient world the Greeks had their gods, among whom was Zeus the thunder god. One of his sons was Hermes, a wheeler-dealer, as it were, a talkative and even trickster god. In Latin they were called Jupiter and Mercury. These gods were worshipped in the region to which Paul and Barnabas came when they fled Iconium.

Apart from archaeological evidence of these Greek gods, a Roman poet called Ovid wrote of a myth about Zeus visiting the area of Lystra. Zeus appeared in human form but no one welcomed him except a poor, elderly couple. Shortly afterwards, the valley was flooded and all the people were drowned, except this old couple, who were rewarded to become priests in a golden temple to Zeus. In light of this story the people determined not to miss any future visitation of Zeus.

This background helps us to understand what happened when Paul and Barnabas came to the Roman outpost called Lystra, the fourth stop on their first missionary journey. We have previously noted how Luke uses the term 'apostles' or 'sent ones' in the broad sense here in this chapter (14:4, 14) and is not aligning these missionaries with the Twelve apostles. We will now look at what happened in Lystra under three headings: man healed, Maker of heaven and earth, and move to Derbe.

1. Man healed

After escaping a plot by the Jews in Iconium to stone them, Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra, in the district of Lycaonia (14:6). They did not go to a synagogue, as was their custom, probably because there was none in this town. There is no mention of Jews in the town; those who stirred up the locals were from outside (14:19). The locals were idol worshippers, worshippers of Zeus and other Greek gods; they had a temple and a priest of Zeus (14:13).

Neither the trauma of almost being stoned in Iconium, nor the absence of a synagogue, stopped Paul and Barnabas from preaching the gospel. In fact, they were preaching the gospel in the surrounding region before entering Lystra (14:7). In Lystra they continued preaching the gospel, probably in public places. Luke does not give details but does tell of a cripple who was healed as part of their ministry. This man was a cripple from birth; he had never walked and was sitting because he had no strength in his feet (14:8). Luke the physician leaves us in no doubt as to the physical condition of this man. The man was not complaining of a bad back! He may have been begging outside the temple, like the cripple healed through Peter and John in Acts 3- except this was a pagan temple. Even so, the cripple heard Paul speaking, presumably speaking the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul saw this cripple- he looked at him intently and saw that he had faith to be healed (14:9). Peter similarly looked for signs of faith; Jesus saw that a person had faith to be healed. Paul watched this man closely as he spoke about Jesus; he saw the man was listening, not looking around at others or looking at his watch to see when the preacher would finish. I guess the cripple was a captive audience! In truth he was captive not to Paul but to the Holy Spirit, and this is what Paul observed. He saw that he had faith to be healed. The Greek word can be translated as 'healed' or 'saved'.

Seeing the man's faith Paul shouted at him, 'Stand up straight on your feet!' And the man leaped to his feet and walked (14:10). Like the man at the gate Beautiful, he stood up immediately and began to walk. He did not crawl away or limp off on a stick. His healing was immediate and complete because it was of the Spirit of God. We need to 'test the spirits' when we look at 'healing' ministries today (1John 4:1). Some ways of testing are to see if the gospel is preached, if faith is seen, and if people go away 'saved'.

The crowd that was listening to Paul heard what he said to the cripple and saw the result; they were amazed. Paul would have been preaching in the name of Jesus and healed this man in the name of Jesus but his heathen audience focussed on the person they saw, namely Paul. As idol worshippers they were ready to worship gods of wood or stone, as well as 'living gods', gods in human form. Idol worshippers will often add another god to their collection. This new god may be an avatar or 'incarnation' of one of their gods.

The people of Lycaonia, as we have learned, were on the lookout for Zeus to make another appearance. So when Paul performed this miracle they cried out in their native tongue, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' (14:11). Paul and Barnabas were ministering together. Paul was the 'chief speaker', the one doing all the talking, so they called him Hermes. Because Barnabas talked less he gave the impression of being the one in authority, so they called him Zeus.

We have learned from ancient mythology how these people did not want to miss an appearance of Zeus as their ancestors had done, and suffered the consequences. So the priests of the temple quickly brought bulls to sacrifice to Zeus and Hermes, as in Barnabas and Paul. They also brought garlands, either for the bulls or more likely the two missionaries. For a while Paul and Barnabas did not understand what was going on because the people were speaking their Lycaonian language. When they did understand they were horrified. They realised that their healing of the cripple was completely misinterpreted by these people.

It is not always easy to communicate the gospel to people whose beliefs and world view are vastly different to our own. Some 'read' your material help or giving of medicine with a 'cargo cult' or 'rice Christian' mentality. The 'prosperity gospel' is easily understood in such communities. Even today, many misinterpret healings, real or apparent, often because they are not explained. There are missionaries who read the book Acts and claim that signs and wonders are a vital part of evangelism today. John Wimber, a leading 'signs and wonders' man wrote, 'Rarely was church growth attributed to preaching alone- signs and wonders were the catalyst to evangelism'. But, as we see here at Lystra, even if healing miracles are substantiated, they can backfire.

Ministry based on signs and wonders has proved to be disastrous in Africa and other places. Even Paul had great difficulty restraining the pagan crowd from worshipping him. Missionaries with a poor or erroneous understanding of the gospel would have no hope. In fact, many allow the mixing of pagan practices with Christian rituals and practices. Syncretism is often a feature of Roman Catholic missions. In India, Roman Catholic churches display their images of Mary in the same way Hindus display their idols. False teaching or over-emphasis on the second coming of Jesus and the end times, by groups like the Seventh Day Adventists, may have contributed to aspects of the cargo cult mentality among Melanesians. We can learn from Paul and how he overcame misinterpretation of the healing at Lystra.

2. Maker of heaven and earth

When Paul and Barnabas understood what was going on, they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd yelling, 'Why are you doing this? We are only men, human like you'. Tearing one's clothes was the Jewish way of showing dismay or grief. Moreover, in this way Paul and Barnabas showed the people that they had bodies just like theirs. Men who pretend to be gods put on ornate robes and sit above the crowd (as with Herod in 12:21).

The apostles or missionaries not only rejected the people's attempt to worship them; they told the people who they should be worshipping. They should be worshipping the living God, the Maker of heaven and earth and everything in them (14:15). They did not start 'dialoguing' with these pagans about their idols. They lovingly told them the truth- 'your idols are useless or worthless'. Idols are obviously dead, unless they are human. Idols have no power. The true God is the living God. He is the powerful creator of everything that exists, including human beings, and the giver of life (17:26). Larkin writes, 'Our dialogue with non-Christians is not a simple exchange of religious opinion but a discussion of life-and-death issues'.

Without explaining Genesis 3 in detail, Paul pointed out that God allowed previous generations to go off worshipping gods of their own making (14:16 cf.17:30). They went off because of sin, which Paul describes as a blindness or ignorance. People worship creatures and created things, rather than the creator, because of sin (Rom 1:25). This blindness began in Eden and continues today; we still see people worshipping creatures and things made by man. They even talk about football as their religion, and about a political leader as their 'messiah'. While God overlooked such ignorance in their past he does so no longer; the gospel has been heard and God commands all men everywhere to repent (17:30). God's overlooking, writes Bruce, 'betokened not indifference but patience'.

You will have noticed the apostles different approach to the pagans of Lystra compared to the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue at Antioch. The pagans knew nothing about the Bible, about Abraham, Moses or David. As pagans they were focused on nature and gods of their own making, which they were required to appease. Paul preached the God of creation, the living and true God, and the God who is good and gracious. When people believe that the universe came into existence with a 'Big Bang', and is under man's control, it is difficult for them to understand the power and majesty of God, not to mention his goodness and grace.

3. Stoned

Even by tearing their clothes and running into the crowd telling them about the true God, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the crowd from sacrificing to them (14:18). However, it was not long before the people who saw them as gods, saw them as 'devils'. Such is the fickle nature of human beings. Sinful people are never satisfied. They keep on looking for a new god because their sin remains. The people of Athens were like this (17:21). The people who have taken Prince Phillip as their god are like this. People down the street are like this. Some come to church to try it out but then leave. They go looking for other gods, maybe drugs or some sexual perversion, because sin makes them restless. They have no peace and indeed no joy and gladness (Isa 48:22). Jesus promises, and delivers, rest for your soul when you come to him repenting of your sin (Mat 11:28). Do you know this rest?

The people who wanted to worship the missionaries were soon out stoning them. What happened? What happened was Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to town. They managed to stir up the crowd, inciting them to riot against the missionaries. They took hold of Paul, stoned him and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead- they 'supposed him to be dead' (14:19). The Jews must have led this attack because stoning was their way of execution.

There were some in Lystra who did not go along with the crowd. Wonderfully, some in this pagan place who heard the gospel Paul preached, believed in Jesus. The cripple was one of them. Elsewhere we read of a Jewish woman who believed- the mother of Timothy. The believers gathered around Paul as he lay on the ground. They would have been praying for him to recover. They saw Paul get up and then go back into the town- it may have been going on dark by this time. The next day Paul and Barnabas left Lystra; they set out for Derbe, some 90km to the east. Paul would later write to the churches of Galatia, 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus' (Gal 6:17). Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is sure to bring trials and suffering, even physical suffering. 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God' (14:22).

Fifth stop, Derbe, and home

Acts 14:21-28

The first mission undertaken by the church was challenging but rewarding. Paul never forgot the places that he and Barnabas visited on his first missionary journey. He never forgot the people, mainly Gentiles, who were wonderfully converted. He never forgot how he was persecuted for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Timothy, a young man from Lystra, believed in Jesus after his mother, Eunice, heard the gospel and believed. His grandmother also heard Paul preach at Lystra and believed (2Tim 1:5). As a brother, or son in Christ, Paul loved Timothy deeply. Some fifteen years after his visit to Lystra Paul wrote about the persecutions and afflictions which happened to him in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (2Tim 3:11). The Lord delivered him out of these persecutions, which included being stoned at Lystra. From this experience Paul learned that, 'all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2Tim 3:12). Despite the difficulties, Paul urged Timothy to 'Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching' (2Tim 4:2). If you are facing difficulties as you live a godly life in Jesus, do not be surprised and do not be discouraged. Nothing and no one can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39).

1. Derbe and return

The final stop in the preaching tour of Paul and Barnabas was Derbe, a town 90km east of Lystra on the border of the region of Lycaonia within the province of Galatia. It was not much further on to Tarsus, Paul's home town, but they did not go on. Instead they turned back to visit the towns where they had already preached the gospel; places they had been forced to leave after plots and attempts to kill them. They had gone to Derbe after a Jewish-led riot in Lystra ended with Paul being stoned and left for dead.

Luke tells us very little about the missionary's time in Derbe but what he says, and does not say, is important. Firstly, he does not tell of any persecution in this town. Secondly, he says they preached the gospel and 'made many disciples' (14:21). Nothing stopped the missionaries from preaching the gospel. If there was a synagogue in the town they went there to preach. If there was no synagogue they preached in a public place. They preached to large gatherings and to small groups. They were, as Paul later wrote, ready in season and out of season to preach the gospel (2Tim 4:2). Are you ready to share your faith in Jesus wherever you may be? I hope you do not confine your 'religion' to church, and that on a Sunday morning!

We do not know how long Paul and Barnabas stayed in Derbe although the whole missionary journey is thought to have taken about one year. Since they were not forced to leave Derbe they may have stayed a bit longer than in the previous towns. Whatever the time, they saw many people, mostly Gentiles, repent and believe in Jesus Christ. They would have spent some time teaching these new believers, urging them to continue in the faith despite difficulties and opposition. They may even have appointed elders in the church at Derbe, as they did in other churches on their return journey.

2. Disciples strengthened and elders appointed

Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch (14:21). Surely this was a risky thing to do after so recently being thrown out of these places! Some suggest that new magistrates had been appointed in these towns but there is no evidence of this. What is stated is that they went back to these places to 'strengthen the souls of the disciples'- in other words to teach in the church or in homes rather than preach in public places. We are told that in each of these places a church had been established. The believers were getting together to worship the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What did Paul and Barnabas say to them to strengthen their souls? They encouraged them to remain in the faith saying, 'we must through many hardships enter the kingdom of God' (14:22). They did not promise them health, wealth and happiness. They did not preach the prosperity gospel. What they promised was hardship and ongoing persecution; the people had seen what happened to Paul. Seeing Paul and Barnabas suffer for the faith would have made an impact upon them when they first believed. A belief that one is willing to suffer and die for points to the truth of that belief. Seeing this, along with the signs and wonders done by the missionaries, confirmed to them the message these men preached. Now, as believers, they were walking the same path. Larkin writes, "Today, if authentic Christianity is to be propagated and survive, it will be because we have said no to any 'gospel' that promises glory without suffering, and yes to the way of the cross, which leads to a crown."

The kingdom of God was a central feature of gospel preaching (14:22). Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God, as we read about in the four gospels. These were not yet in the written form that we have today, but much of Jesus' teaching was beginning to circulate within the church. The kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus- he is the King of kings. His kingdom is not of this world; it is a kingdom within you as a believer. We enter the kingdom of God when we believe in Jesus, and we will see his kingdom come in its glorious fullness when Jesus returns. The believer lives by faith, by hope and by love. The believers hope, a sure and certain hope, is in the return of Jesus, and the new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness (2Tim 4:18, 2Peter 3:13).

The church in Jerusalem chose and appointed seven men as deacons (6:5-6), but here in Acts 14:23 is the first mention of elders in the church. Even so, elders in the Jerusalem church are referred to in the next chapter (15:2); the Greek word is '*presbuteros*' meaning an older person and/or designated leader. The missionaries appointed elders in every church on this return visit. There is no indication of them being elected, although most churches appoint elders after they are elected by the congregation- as with the deacons in Acts 6.

That elders were appointed so quickly is somewhat of a shock to us Presbyterians! We must examine a man's life and doctrine before making him an elder in the church, but sometimes we take too long in doing this. The churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch were very young, but they still needed leadership. God raised up men whom Paul and Barnabas appointed as elders. 'With prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they believed' (14:23). These elders would not depend on the missionaries, who were leaving. They would not depend on their own strength. They were to serve the Lord in the church in the strength given by the Lord. Note the plural 'elders' in verse 23; we

hold to the plurality of elders. We require three elders, including the minister, in order to hold a session meeting.

Leaving Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas left the south Galatian plateau to return to the southern coast of what today is Turkey. They came to Perga in the province of Pamphylia. They had not preached the gospel in Perga when entering this region but did so on their return to this coastal town- it was here that John Mark left the mission. From Perga they retraced their steps to Attalia and then set sail for their home church at Antioch in Syria.

3. Debrief at Antioch

Some preachers do not want to be accountable to elders or bishops; they go off and start their own church. Some missionaries are the same. They may have sufficient funds to go off and start their own mission work in Africa or Asia- although often they start an orphanage and then appeal for funds. Even if they get money from other people they do not want to be accountable to anyone. We do not find preachers or missionaries like this in the NT.

Paul and Barnabas were sent out through the church in Antioch, and at the end of the mission they returned to this church for a debriefing. When we were called to the mission field we did not return home till after three years; in the previous generation it was after five years. Nowadays many missionaries return home every year. Travel is much quicker and cheaper today, but there is also a changing attitude towards mission. Even so, Paul and Barnabas did not stay long in any one place, despite Luke saying they stayed 'a long time' in Iconium (14:3). They were probably back in their home church after twelve months. Similarly their stay in their home church was probably about a year; a 'long time' as recorded by Luke (14:28).

When Paul and Barnabas were called to mission by the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commended them to the grace of God by prayer and laying on of hands. Then they sent them away. They were not given a list of places to go; the missionaries were led by the Holy Spirit, often being forced to leave a place because of threats against them. We must conclude that the Holy Spirit led them to return home when they did. They returned home having completed the work they were called to do (14:26). The missionary's task must always be to train up local believers to take over leadership of the work they begin. The sense of completion expressed by Paul and Barnabas no doubt related to the appointing of elders in every church.

Paul and Barnabas probably first met with the church leaders for a debriefing, and then with the whole congregation. They 'reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles' (14:27). Looking back over the mission, Paul and Barnabas saw the hand of the Lord guiding, empowering and protecting them each step of the way. They did not return with stories of how much they had suffered. They returned with stories of Gentiles being saved. They were sent off into the Gentile world, a world of idol worshippers who knew nothing about Jesus, about the cross and the resurrection. The Gentiles listened to the gospel and many believed in Jesus Christ. 'As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed' (13:48).

God had opened the door to the Gentiles and the Gentiles were rushing in, into the church. They entered by grace alone through faith alone. They were not required to perform any rituals, do any good works or keep any law. They were saved by repenting of their sin and by believing in Jesus Christ. We know that false teachers and Judaizers would soon show up, telling them that faith alone was not sufficient. The teaching of Paul and Barnabas, and the appointment of elders, would prove invaluable when these false teachers came. Paul, of course, continued to keep in touch, as with his letter to the Galatians.

Still today, false teachers soon show up. They walk the streets knocking on doors but their special target is new believers and infant churches. Will you stand firm in the faith? To do so you need to know who you believe and what you believe. You need to grow in your love and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to be praying, even as others pray for you. You need to be a faithful member of a church which teaches the Bible, and accept the leadership of that church.

Council in Jerusalem- controversy

Acts 15:1-12

Paul and Barnabas returned from the first mission undertaken by the church. They were called and sent by the church in Antioch and they returned, rejoicing that God had 'opened the door of faith to the Gentiles' (14:27). They rejoiced despite being persecuted and thrown out of most towns they visited. The church was growing despite persecution from those who rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church now faced a bigger threat than that of persecution; it faced a threat from within, a threat to the gospel itself. It was not the threat of persecution or even martyrdom but the threat of losing the truth of the gospel. It was a threat to continuing witness to the Gentiles and to the end of the earth (1:8); but more than this a grave danger to the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Seeing this threat, the apostle Paul brought the matter before the leaders of the church in Jerusalem- although Paul himself did not play a major role in this council.

Another threat to the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone arose in the sixteenth century. Martin Luther drew attention to the threat but was unable to get the church to consider the matter in the way it did in the first century. The church leaders simply tried to silence Luther. Threats to the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone continue today. Attempts to add works or rituals or traditions or 'prophets' to the gospel continue today. It is important then for us to understand what was at stake here in the NT church and learn from the way in which this matter of doctrine was dealt with.

1. Controversy

The NT church began in Jerusalem. When Peter preached repentance and belief in Jesus Christ on the Day of Pentecost thousands believed and were baptized. Most of these, like the apostles, were Jews. They continued attending the temple, along with unbelieving Jews. The nature of their worship in the temple is not clear, although it seems they met separately in one of the temple courts. Priests and Pharisees believed in Jesus and joined the church, although most Pharisees opposed these followers of Jesus, just as they opposed Jesus himself. Even so, the Christians continued on with the Jewish customs of circumcision and strict rules about food that they had been taught. They had not been challenged to make a distinction between principles and customs, or between essentials and non-essentials in the matter of salvation.

The apostle Peter was confronted with this distinction when he was called to the house of a Gentile called Cornelius. Circumcised Jews were not permitted to eat with uncircumcised Gentiles, but what about Christians? Peter was a Christian Jew. Cornelius wanted to hear what God had commanded Peter to tell. As Peter spoke about Jesus, the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius just as he did upon the apostles at Pentecost. Peter's concern about eating with a Gentile was nothing compared to this revelation- that a Gentile was saved, and that without being circumcised or first becoming a Jew. Peter had to explain this to the church in Jerusalem. It seems they were satisfied for the moment- they were silent at least (11:18). A few years later Paul was called by Barnabas to help with ministry in the church at Antioch. This church began among diaspora Jews but many Greeks also heard the gospel and believed in Jesus. There is no mention of these Gentiles being circumcised. After a year, a prophet from Jerusalem spoke of an impending famine in the land. The Jerusalem church was poor and persecuted, so Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem with funds for famine relief (Acts

11:30). At this time it seems, the matter of Gentiles entering the church without being circumcised came up at meetings between Paul and the elders of the Jerusalem church.

This was Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, the first being in Acts 9:26. As such, it is the visit described in Galatians 2:1- although some scholars maintain the visit in Galatians is the one recorded by Luke here in Acts 15. Acts does not mention Titus; besides, if Paul is describing the Jerusalem council why did he not mention the concluding letter? He tells of meeting James, Peter and John, who 'seemed to be pillars of the church', but all they asked of him was to 'remember the poor' (Gal 2:9, 10), not to abstain from unclean foods and sexual immorality (15:29). Paul wrote this letter (Galatians) to the churches that he and Barnabas planted in South Galatia because Judaizers had started infiltrating and telling them that they had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. Not long after this the matter came to a head with the calling of this church council in Jerusalem. We could call it the first presbytery meeting in the church, although presbytery meetings today have no apostles, just elders.

The controversy came to head when certain men came down from Judea and taught the brothers, 'unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved' (15:1). These men came from the church but were not authorised by the church (15:24). They were self-appointed guardians of the church, but not guardians of the truth. They were men we are calling Judaizers. They were saying that to be saved, believing in Jesus Christ was not sufficient. They taught that to be saved everyone must be circumcised and must keep the Law of Moses. We are not surprised to find that in Jerusalem some from the sect/party of the Pharisees were saying the same thing (15:5). The Pharisees were legalists who, as Jews, thought that by keeping the law they would become righteous before God. They thought that this was how they and anyone else would be saved. Some Pharisees believed in Jesus but did not abandon their old ways. Old ways die hard. They were in effect, syncretistic, bringing teachings of their old religion into the church; a bit like Christians in Africa mixing polygamy and other pagan practices with their Christianity.

These ex-Pharisees were not only bringing in old customs but were demanding everyone else in the church obey them. Some were God-given customs, and Jesus did say that he had not come to destroy the law; what he said was that he came to fulfil the law. The Law of Moses is fulfilled in Jesus. The Law of Moses leads us to Jesus but law-keeping is not, and never was, the way of salvation. The Jews had a great advantage in having the law, but it was not the law that saved them, or anyone else. It is 'by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God' (Eph 2:8).

2. Council

When the Judaizers came to Antioch preaching circumcision Paul and Barnabas were forced to confront them. Barnabas was actually sent to Antioch from the church in Jerusalem years earlier. Paul was a converted Pharisee. Still these 'certain men', these heavies from church headquarters, thought they could impose their ideas upon this flourishing church. There was 'no small dissension and dispute'; in other words there was heated debate between them (15:2). 'They' as in the church, decided that 'Paul and Barnabas and certain others should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question' (15:2). It was a very serious matter, a matter fundamental to the gospel. Paul wrote of this teaching as a perverted gospel, a different gospel, a gospel without the power to save (Gal 1:6).

Paul and Barnabas travelled overland down the Phoenician coast and through Samaria. As they went they visited churches on the way, telling of the conversion of the Gentiles. These churches had no problem with the Gentiles not being circumcised; they rejoiced with Paul and Barnabas in this wonderful growth of the church. It was only the church in Jerusalem that had a problem with the Gentiles not becoming Jews first. Still today there are churches which say that to become a Christian you must agree to the rules of our church. Some 'churches', like the Mormons, demand allegiance to words written by some leader or so-called prophet. Even evangelical churches start making extra demands as part of church membership. Peter said, 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved' (15:11). Paul said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved' (17:31). The Lord himself taught them this truth.

When Paul and Barnabas reached Jerusalem they were received by the church, including the apostles and elders. The church listened to their report of the church in Antioch, and the mission the Holy Spirit called them to undertake in Galatia- 'all that God had done with them' (15:4). Even so, some from the 'Pharisee wing' of the church spoke against them accepting Gentiles without making them get circumcised (15:5). The matter that Paul and Barnabas had come about was raised in the meeting of the church. To consider this matter a meeting of the apostles and elders was called; it seems to have been open to the church (15:12).

How many and who was present in this council? Of the original twelve apostles only ten remained- Judas was gone and James had been martyred. Only Peter, their leader, spoke. We do not know the number of elders in the Jerusalem church; only James, the half-brother of Jesus spoke, but Silas and Barsabbas were also present (15:22). Barnabas was present but he, along with Paul, was representing the church in Antioch. James apparently chaired the meeting. He had become the leader or chief administrator of the church in Jerusalem.

When the meeting began it seems everyone present got the opportunity to speak on the matter- namely the demand that Gentile believers be required to undergo circumcision and keep the Law of Moses. 'There had been much dispute' (15:7), but Luke does not tell us what each one said. It is important in such meetings that members be allowed to express their view. We do not see a meeting with one man speaking all the time. We do not see a meeting in which members are told to sit down even before they speak. Yes, we need to learn from this meeting. We also note that no one got up to say they had an answer from the Lord. In the end James spoke from Scripture, and the letter expressed leading by the Holy Spirit (15:28) but not the leading of one man only. I have seen one person get up in a meeting and say, 'this is what the Spirit has told me' - and that was the end of the meeting! I have also seen a person get up and say, 'I know more than anyone else here'.

After there had been much discussion and debate, Peter got up to speak. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke, before James drew the meeting to a close. We hope to look at their contributions next time. For now we close having learnt of the importance of elders and church councils- that they are conducted under the leading of the Holy Spirit. We might also anticipate the outcome of the meeting and be thankful that the truth we hold, namely salvation by grace alone through faith alone, was upheld in this church council.

Council in Jerusalem- conclusion

Acts 15:6-35

The Jerusalem council, as reported in Acts 15, was called because of a crisis in the church. The church had faced severe persecution over the two decades since Pentecost. Stephen was martyred and the believers were scattered. The apostles were beaten and put in prison, and James was martyred. But the church continued to grow. Paul and Barnabas were instrumental in reaching out to the Gentiles. With Gentiles flocking into the church Jews became jealous; they opposed and persecuted Paul and Barnabas. The last thing the church might have expected was internal division but such a threat loomed large as some Christian Jews started demanding all Christian Gentiles be circumcised.

This threat was not simply that of division; it was a threat to the gospel itself. So half way through the Book of Acts, Luke records this first general assembly of the church, an assembly called to determine the essentials, as distinct from the non- essentials, of the gospel. In saying non-essentials we mean what cannot be demanded, and what in fact nullifies the gospel by the very demand itself. The closing words of the Bible pronounce a curse on anyone 'adding to these things' (Rev 22:18). The matter before this council was this serious. Harsh words were spoken before the council met- things probably got personal (15:2). The apostle Paul and elder James did not always see eye to eye (Gal 2:12). But in the council everyone humbled themselves before the Lord and allowed the Holy Spirit to lead them in their deliberations (15:28). After a period of open debate, Peter stood up to address the meeting, reminding them of his experience at the house of Cornelius. Then Paul and Barnabas spoke, before James made his concluding comments. In closing the meeting they decided to write a letter and send it to the church in Antioch.

1. Contributions from Peter, and Paul and Barnabas

After a time of debate, the apostle Peter stood up to speak. If anyone was in position to pull rank in this meeting it was Peter, the bold and forthright, inner-circle apostle. But he addressed the meeting, 'Men and brethren' (15:7). He related his experience at the house of Cornelius a 'good while ago' or some ten years previously. God sent him to share the gospel with these Gentiles, and they believed, and they received the Holy Spirit. No one could deny that 'God, who knows the heart' touched the hearts of these Gentiles, 'purifying their hearts by faith' (15:9). 'Who was I to withstand God', Peter said at the time (11:17).

Addressing the Judaizers, Peter said the law was a yoke or burden that even they as Jews were not able to bear (15:10). The law made demands which they could not uphold, so why were they putting this 'yoke on the neck of disciples' from a Gentile background. No one was ever saved, or ever will be saved, by law-keeping. To suggest such a thing is to test God; it is to withstand God; it is to deny the grace of Jesus Christ. Peter concluded by saying, 'we believe', that is, we who hold the truth of the gospel, 'we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved in the same manner as they' (15:11). The Gentiles with Cornelius, the Gentiles in Antioch, and the Gentiles in Galatia had been saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. They heard the gospel, repented and believed; nothing more and nothing less was required. They were saved by grace alone through faith alone.

It is interesting how Peter said, 'we shall be saved just as they', and not, 'they will be saved just like us'. While salvation of from the Jew first (Rom 1:16), the Jew is saved by grace alone through faith

alone just like the Gentile. The Jew has no automatic right and no special place because of circumcision or because they were given the law. Similarly, water baptism or belonging to a Christian family never saved anyone. It is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that you or anyone was, and is, saved.

Peter spoke politely but firmly to these Judaizers; he knew all about them. They were clever fellows; they were quick thinkers and quick on their feet. It is wonder they were not interjecting as Peter spoke. Peter had fallen victim to their cleverness once before. Paul writes of how such men, men who 'came from James', came to Antioch and persuaded Peter to sit and eat with the Jews, separate from the Gentiles believers (Gal 2:12) Paul confronted Peter, calling him a hypocrite for behaving like this when he had previously been happy to eat with Gentiles. Peter learned the hard way of how men slithered into churches promoting dangerous doctrines.

When Peter sat down, Paul and Barnabas took the floor to tell how the Lord had worked through them in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. They spoke of the many miracles and wonders God had worked through them (15:12). Miracles in themselves do not prove the hand of God- counterfeit miracles are not uncommon- but the outcome of the signs and wonders ministry of Paul and Barnabas was the salvation of many, and the establishment of the church. Moreover, the missionaries had risked their lives in preaching the gospel (15:26). We know all this from the previous chapters, so Luke's record of what Paul and Barnabas said in the council is brief.

2. Conclusion from James

When Paul and Barnabas had finished speaking, apparently without interruption, James, who appears to have been chairing the meeting, spoke. His role was to draw a conclusion from what the meeting had heard, a conclusion substantiated by Scripture. The words of Scripture will always have something to say on a matter of doctrine or practice in the church, and these words must be adhered to above the words of any man.

James was probably the eldest of the half-brothers of Jesus (Mat 13:55). At first he did not go along with what Jesus was saying and doing, but he later saw the risen Jesus (1Cor 15:7) and believed. He became prominent as leader of the Jerusalem church. The little we know about James points to him being a strict Jew. He was highly regarded in a church of almost exclusively Jewish-background believers. Years after this council, when Paul visited Jerusalem, James and his colleagues urged Paul to go along with a Jewish ritual because lots of Jews who believed were still zealous for the law (21:20).

What James would say as he concluded the Jerusalem council was not at all certain despite the clarity and force Peter's speech and the speech of Paul and Barnabas. The members of the council listened carefully; James urged them to listen to him (15:13). He recalled Peter's address, calling him by his original Jewish name, Simeon. What could he say but that, 'God had visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name' (15:14). He could not dismiss Peter's testimony. Nor could he dismiss the testimony of Paul and Barnabas but he does not mention them.

James said that Peter's experience agreed with the words of the prophets, specifically words found in Amos. Amos prophesied of impending judgment upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel. His prophecy ends with word of a remnant being restored after God's judgment, and of Gentiles being called by

God's name (15:17, Amos 9:12). Everyone knew that the Jews were the chosen people of God, but here was the prophet saying Gentiles would also become the people of God. James concluded that what Peter saw at the house of Cornelius was Gentiles becoming children of God, Gentiles entering the kingdom of God. James may have been somewhat legalistic, but still he listened to the words of Scripture and submitted to them saying, 'Known from eternity are the works of God' (15:18).

'Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God' (15:18 ESV). James concluded the council with the ruling that Gentiles who believe should not be troubled with Jewish demands for circumcision. There were no dissenting voices (15:22). If James was at all sympathetic to the view of the Judaizers before the meeting, he was swayed by the testimony of Peter and Paul and Barnabas, by Scripture, and by the Holy Spirit. The gospel of grace does not demand circumcision or keeping of the Law of Moses. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, even if that faith is not alone and 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:20). Justification is one thing and sanctification another. Let us not confuse these two doctrines.

3. Compromise?

While James' conclusion regarding the essentials and non-essentials of the gospel were clear, he appended four matters regarding the manner in which Gentile believers should live. What are we to make of these matters? What would Paul have said about them? We keep in mind the strong views expressed within this meeting, and the threat to the unity of the church, as well as the threat to the gospel. Compromise helps to maintain unity, but it must not be compromise of the truth of the gospel. What sort of compromise was James suggesting? It is interesting that he did not specifically mention circumcision in his ruling when this was the demand that triggered the council.

The matters James raised here at the end were non-essentials. But was he trying to mollify the legalists, or was he simply promoting fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. The matter of sexual immorality was obvious, although some Gentiles came from grossly immoral backgrounds of adultery, homosexuality and incest. Paul would have welcomed this 'necessity'. The other necessities related to Jewish food laws. What did Paul have to say about these? While the church in Antioch was encouraged by the letter (15:31) there is no evidence that Paul promoted these 'necessities'. Even when writing about food offered to idols Paul did not mention this letter. What he said about this matter is that an idol is nothing and 'food does not commend us to God (1Cor 8:8). Eating such food becomes a sin only if you join in pagan worship or offend someone else's conscience.

4. Conveying the conclusion

The members of the council, with the approval of the whole church, agreed to draft a letter to send to the church in Antioch. Church members from Jerusalem and Antioch seem to have been observers at this meeting. The church chose two elders, Judas called Barsabas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch for the purpose of presenting the letter to the church there. In doing this the letter would have been more effective in healing the rift between these two churches. When they arrived at Antioch they gathered the whole church together and read the letter. The church 'rejoiced over its encouragement' (15:31). Letters can be rather cold and formal; being read by the person or persons who signed the letter can change the whole situation. As with Barnabas beforehand, these two men proved to excellent peacemakers, as well as teachers. They are referred to as 'prophets'

who 'encouraged and strengthened' the folk in the church at Antioch with many words (15:32). They stayed on for a time before returning to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, within a missionary-minded and growing church, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.

The conclusion of the Jerusalem council was written down in the form of a letter as mentioned. The contents of this letter are provided by Luke. The repetition involved reaffirms the momentous nature of this decision- a bit like the telling of Paul's conversion three times, and Peter's retelling of his visit to the house of Cornelius for a third time here in this council. The letter is from 'the apostles, the elders and the brethren' present at the council, and it is to the brethren in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia (15:23); Antioch was in Syria and Cilicia was a neighbouring province.

The letter made clear that the Judaizers who came to Antioch from Jerusalem saying, 'you must be circumcised and keep the law' had no official authority. Even so, the matter was dealt with by the council, which was unanimous in its decision to have Judas and Silas convey the decision of the council. Paul and Barnabas are commended as 'beloved' brothers who risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:26). The council, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, did not support the teaching of the Judaizers; it decided not to burden Gentile believers with Jewish customs. Its only recommendation or requirement was that they abstain from 'unclean foods' and from sexual immorality (15:29). These were not principles or essentials to the faith but practices to be adopted by those who are saved.

Discerning what things are essential and what are non-essential to salvation has been a challenge to the church down through history. Even before the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the church had to deal with challenges to the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. This was done in the council of Nicaea (AD325). The Athanasian Creed from the fourth century contains a clear and concise statement of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, both of which are essential for salvation. Because old heresies have a habit of re-emerging, we should remember the teaching set out in these ancient creeds, as well as the doctrines of grace recovered in the Reformation. It was these very doctrines of grace that were under threat in the first ever church council, the council in Jerusalem.

A second mission trip begins

Acts 15:35-16:5

A huge split in the infant church was avoided at the Jerusalem council (c. AD49). The issue at stake was the gospel itself, the principle of salvation by grace alone. A party in the church, mainly of converted Pharisees, said that Gentile converts had to be circumcised before they could be saved and join the church. Much to the relief of Gentile believers, this demand was dismissed. The church at Antioch rejoiced when they heard of this decision. The principle of salvation by grace alone was preserved- for now!

The church is not an institution as such, despite what we see around us today; it is an organism, a body of believers. People from all backgrounds come together to worship Jesus and witness the gospel. Jew and Gentile had nothing to do with each other before they heard the gospel and believed. Overcoming traditional ways was not easy, as Paul discovered at Antioch. Judaizers who came from James persuaded Peter and Barnabas to start eating separately from Gentile believers; Paul had to rebuke them for their hypocrisy (Gal 2:13,14). Although a split in the church was avoided at the Jerusalem council, personal clashes were not. Feelings ran high and harsh words were exchanged before and during the meeting. Yet, in the grace of God, and with a wise choice of men like Silas and Judas Barsabas, peace and unity prevailed.

Nevertheless, we read of a serious falling out between Paul and Barnabas not long after this council. The matter was not related to the council; it was about a man called John Mark. Paul asked Barnabas to join him in revisiting the churches established during their first mission. But these two leaders in the church had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways. Paul took Silas, and then enlisted Timothy on his team, as he took the letter from the Jerusalem council to the churches in Galatia.

1. Division over John Mark

That Luke includes this unpleasant incident in his record of the Acts of the Apostles shows his concern for historical accuracy (Luke 1:1-4). He does not gloss over incidents that reflect badly on the church. As an inspired writer, he writes for the edification of the people of God, both yesterday and today. The diversity of personalities within the church makes clashes of personalities hard to avoid, but, as we see in this incident with Paul and Barnabas, the mission of the church can and must go on.

In reporting this division Luke does not apportion blame; he simply states that these two men had a sharp disagreement and parted ways. We find it hard not to take sides but we try to resist doing so. Paul and Barnabas had very different personalities but they had worked together for years. The reason for their disagreement was not really a clash of personalities; it was about a young man called Mark. Some scholars think that Barnabas, and especially Mark, were sympathetic to the Judaizers. But if this was the case why does Paul ask Barnabas to go with him? (15:36).

You will remember that Mark set out with them on their first mission but left to return home to Jerusalem when they reached Pamphylia- Paul certainly remembered! No reason was given then, and none is given now. We took note of speculation about Paul's health and his need to get away from the coast, of Mark getting upset that Paul took over leadership of the mission, and of Mark simply getting homesick. Whatever the reason, Paul was not impressed. He felt Mark had failed at the first post, as

we say. So when Barnabas went to get his young cousin to join them on this second trip Paul said, 'No'.

Mission work is tough and demanding. It is not for doubters or anyone with less than total commitment to the task- and ministry is the same. Barnabas was ready to give Mark a second opportunity. In fact he insisted saying, 'Yes, we must take Mark with us'. Barnabas was a people person; he was an encourager. He saw Mark's potential, which Paul also came to see at a later time; when in prison in Rome, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark with him 'because he is useful to me' (2Tim 4:11). That Barnabas insisted so strongly is somewhat surprising; he obviously felt Paul was being too harsh and judgmental.

The Lord is his providence overruled in this dispute such that two missions came about: Barnabas took Mark and went one way, while Paul chose Silas and went the other (15:39, 40). The Lord is able to bring good out of evil, but this is no reason to condone the dispute. Calling this a 'happy solution', as Marshall does, seems to be going a bit far. Barnabas took Mark and sailed off to Cyprus; we hear no more of this mission and no more of Barnabas (apart from 1Cor 9:6). Paul called Silas back from Jerusalem and together they set off to visit the churches in Galatia. The church accepted this division and commissioned Paul and Silas for this mission; they commended them to the grace of the Lord (15:40).

This division between Paul and Barnabas came about when Paul decided to 'visit the brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing' (15:36). There is no mention of being called or sent out by the Holy Spirit- but it is difficult to see this as a factor in the dispute between them. Paul did not think of mission work being completed with the establishment of a church. These churches had been under attack from Judaizers and Paul wanted to see how they were doing. Even so, it was not until he and Silas got to Troas that he received a call from the Holy Spirit for his second mission trip. We must remember that the work of mission is at the call of the Lord by his Spirit. We 'pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest field' (Mat 9:38).

2. Decision of the Jerusalem council delivered

Paul and Silas set off overland to visit the churches of Galatia. They went north through Syria and then turned west to Paul's home town in Cilicia. Along the way they found churches that must have been established from Antioch, and in Tarsus by Paul himself. Their strengthening of these churches, Gentile churches, would have included sharing of the letter from the Jerusalem council. Eventually they reached Derbe, the city in which Paul and Barnabas ended the first mission. They continued west to Lystra and north to Iconium (16:1).

As they visited these churches, they told them how the apostles and elders had met in Jerusalem and made certain rulings for the churches (16:4). In the year or two that had elapsed since Paul's previous visit, Judaizers had infiltrated these churches with their demands for Gentile believers to be circumcised; so the rulings would have been most welcome. Indeed, 'the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in number daily' (16:5). These words mark a milestone in the growth of the

NT church. We recall similar words after Pentecost, after the death of Ananias and Sapphira, and after the death of Herod.

The gospel was spreading, and churches were growing, just as the risen Jesus had said would happen when his apostles received the Holy Spirit (1:8). Before his death Jesus told Peter, 'I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (Mat 16; 18). Despite severe persecution, despite threats to the truth of the gospel and despite personal divisions, the church was still growing. It is encouraging for us to hear this even today. We have been through a period of attacks upon the Bible as the word of God, with an associated questioning of the doctrines of grace. We may be facing a time of persecution. Certainly the church in many parts of the world is undergoing a time of persecution. But the church will prevail. We will prevail as we trust in the Lord and all his promises.

3. Disciple Timothy joins Paul and Silas

If Paul was upset after his sharp disagreement with Barnabas, he would have been encouraged to find the churches in Lystra and Iconium continuing in the faith. He was particularly encouraged to find a young disciple called Timothy in the church, a man not yet twenty years old it would seem. It is always encouraging to see young people growing in the faith and ready to join in ministry. We must make a point of encouraging such people just as Paul encouraged Timothy by taking him into the mission of the church. Timothy was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium; these two places were just 30km apart.

In taking Timothy onto the missions team Paul did a strange thing- 'he took him and circumcised him' (16:3). How could Paul do this after all he said about people demanding Gentile believers be circumcised? If circumcision was not essential to salvation why have this fellow circumcised? Was Paul being inconsistent? The answer is, No. Timothy's situation was special, as set out here in 16:1-3.

Firstly, Timothy was from a mixed marriage; his mother was Jewish and his father a Greek- and probably deceased. His mother heard the gospel from Paul and Barnabas and believed, as did his grandmother (2Tim 1:5). Timothy either heard the gospel from Paul or from his mother, or also believed. He received the Holy Spirit, which Paul later reminded him was a spirit of power and love and of a sound mind, because Timothy was somewhat timid. Some ten years later Paul could point to Timothy as one who put the interests of others, and especially the interests of Christ Jesus, before his own interests (Phil 2). He regarded Timothy as a faithful young man, a man he was confident would carry on the work of the gospel when Paul was absent. Being the son of Jewish woman Timothy should have been circumcised, even if his father was a Greek. This matter seems to have been overlooked, maybe because the Jewish population in Lystra was so small and lacked leadership. Being uncircumcised might have led some to think he was illegitimate.

The second reason for having Timothy circumcised was because Paul wanted to take him along on the mission. Paul usually began preaching in synagogues, and then moved into Gentile circles. But if Timothy was not circumcised he would not have been allowed into the synagogue, even though he was a Jew. To avoid such a situation within Jewish circles Paul decided to circumcise Timothy- 'because of the Jews who were in that region' (16:3). He did it as a matter of expediency. Timothy was a not a Gentile; his circumcision had nothing to do with being saved, but was cultural in nature.

We note that it was also helpful, if not intended, that Silas was a Roman citizen like Paul. God was working all things together for his own purposes in the mission he was about to call Paul to undertake.

Because most Hindu people do not eat meat, a friend of ours considered it expedient not to eat meat when he went to live in a Hindu community and minister the gospel to them. Some Hindus think that to become a Christian you have to eat meat. Some even think that the Lord's Supper is about eating meat. So this missionary made it clear that believing in Jesus has nothing to do with eating or not eating meat.

The apostle Paul was a liberated believer- which is different to being a 'liberal Christian'. He could eat meat or not eat meat. He could circumcise a young Jew or not circumcise him. These were outward things. Jesus said it was not things that go into the body that defile a person but what comes out (Mat 15:17, 18). Paul was ready to become all things to all men that he might be the means of saving some (1Cor 9:21). He did not cling to his traditions or to his culture. Missionaries have not always been discerning in this regard. They have imposed their own culture upon believers from a different culture. The gospel and the church transcends culture. Culture can continue in the church as long as it is transformed by the gospel, and is not made a requirement for joining the church.

The gospel gets to Europe

Acts 16:6-15

Paul's second missionary journey really starts with a vision in which a man pleaded with him to 'come over to Macedonia and help us' (16:9). His first missionary journey began with Paul and Barnabas being specifically called by the Holy Spirit; they were in a prayer meeting at the time. This second call, again a call from the Lord, came while Paul and Silas were actually seeking to preach the gospel in Asia Minor. The Lord calls us to ministry when we are actively seeking his will through prayer and ministry.

The first question any cross-cultural mission agency will ask an applicant is, 'What ministry are you currently involved in within your church?' What does this say about a church which has no active missionaries and no involvement in mission? It is a bit like the old saying, 'If you want to get a job done, ask the person who is the busiest'. In some ways this is what happened to us. I was working in the government and decided to start a Bible correspondence course. We went to a mission's conference and later offered to go to the mission field. The director of the mission agency was far from encouraging, saying that if you are not doing well in your current job then don't apply. Our enthusiasm waned. More of how the Lord guided us a bit later.

After a sharp disagreement, Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Paul chose Silas and set out to revisit the churches established during the first mission to Galatia. Paul asked a young believer in Lystra to join them. Today we pick up this trio heading west along the Via Sebaste. The call to 'come over to Macedonia' will be our first point, the city of Philippi the next, and the conversion of Lydia our third point.

1. Call to Macedonia

The call to, 'come over to Macedonia and help us' came after a number of road blocks or 'closed doors' as far as this mission was concerned. The Holy Spirit stopped them from heading west into Asia, and again stopped them going north into Bithynia (16:6, 7). Despite these setbacks they did not consider going back home. They pressed on down the narrow path the Holy Spirit left open.

Pisidian Antioch was close to the geographic centre of Asia Minor, or Turkey as it is now. It was on the main east-west road, the Via Sebaste. It seems Paul was heading west on this road towards Ephesus. They had barely begun, or maybe not even begun, when the Holy Spirit said 'No'; 'they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in Asia (16:6- the Roman province of Asia bordered Galatia to the west). What was the nature of this 'being kept from'? Noting that Silas was a prophet, some think it was a word of prophesy. It may have been a vision or, on the other hand, something circumstantial. What is clear is that they were alert and obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit. So instead of heading west they went north along the Asia-Galatia border.

To the north was the region of Bithynia, but again the Spirit did not allow them to enter this region. Again, there is no mention of the means by which the Holy Spirit stopped them, but again this door was closed, as we say. Missionaries today also face closed doors, often because of political powers or because war makes a region unsafe. Even so, missionaries do risk their lives to take the gospel to

people who have not heard of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Lord's servants in this way.

So Paul's team went around the northern part of Asia called Mysia, and down to the coastal city of Troas. This city was just 15km from the ancient city of Troy. Troas was an important port city on the Aegean Sea, connecting through to Macedonia and to the Black Sea. It was here in Troas that Paul had a night vision. It was a vision not a dream; he was probably praying not sleeping. Peter had a vision in the middle of the day, as well as direction by the Holy Spirit to go to Cornelius, who also had a vision in which the Lord told him to send for Peter. We do not know who this man of Macedonia was; some ask how Paul recognised the man as such but he said, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'. As we will see, his first convert there was a woman; later the jailer in Philippi believed.

The plea from the man in the vision was to 'help us'. For a preacher like Paul this meant, 'help us to be saved- spiritually saved'. One door closes and another opens- or in this case two doors closed and then one opens. Paul did not keep this revelation to himself. He shared it with Silas and Timothy, and immediately sought to go to Macedonia, 'concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel' to the people there (16:10). This was pioneering mission, of course; this was the gospel of Jesus Christ entering Europe for the first time. It would take another hundred years to reach the shores of England, but this is the route by which the gospel came to most of us.

I mentioned how we were somewhat put off in our first move towards mission. I continued in my job, and even started looking at other opportunities. But one day the Lord got me back on track, as it were. I was intrigued to find a younger colleague of mine, who is currently in mission, had had a similar experience to me- as he shared during our last trip to India. He, like me, had a strange but severe illness that brought him back into the Lord's will for him to be a missionary. I say 'strange' because it was not diagnosed. So it was that with this 'prompting' from the Lord that I, together with my wife, reapplied to the mission agency, and the rest is history. I am not saying every sickness is a 'prompting' from the Lord; I have been sick many times before and since without changing my situation in life.

2. City of Philippi

Did you notice a change in the manner in which this book is written here in verse 10- a change in the pronouns used? Use of the third person turns to the first person, the first person plural as in 'we' and 'us'. Since Luke is the writer, this points to him joining the mission team here in Troas. Just where and when Luke was converted we are not told; maybe Paul shared the gospel him here in Troas. We know Luke as a doctor or physician. So Luke went with Paul and company to Philippi; he stayed on in that city when Paul and company left. It is interesting that the mission in Philippi gets more extensive coverage than any other mission in this book.

Paul and Silas, with Timothy and now Luke, set sail from Troas on the first ship they could find (16:11). The route took them first to the island of Samothrace, an island marked by high mountains. The next day they set out and arrived at the city of Neapolis on the Macedonian coast; today's Kavala. They must have had the wind behind them to have reached so quickly. They certainly had the wind of the Holy Spirit moving their hearts as they responded to the call of the Lord to preach the gospel in

Macedonia! They moved up and away from the coast to Philippi, the leading or main city of this region of Macedonia (16:12).

Philippi was 'a colony', as in a Roman colony (16:12). It was named after King Phillip II, the father of Alexander the Great. It was situated on the highway from Rome to the east- the Via Egnatia. It was on a rich agricultural plain, which also had gold mines in the surrounding mountains. The city grew rapidly after the Romans set it up as a place for army veterans. Larkin writes, 'Bearing witness in Philippi was the closest thing to preaching in Rome without actually being there'.

The church that was established in Philippi was very kind to the apostle Paul, sending him gifts when he was in prison in Rome. The book of 'Philippians' is a letter Paul wrote to thank this church for their gift. Paul had come over to Macedonia to help them by giving them the gospel. They later had opportunity to help him in other ways. This is how it should be in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Conversion of Lydia

Some missionaries have to labour in the gospel for years before they see their first convert. It is interesting to read about first converts in a city or a region. Timothy was one of the first converts in Lystra. In Tonga, Peter Vi was one of the first converts; he took the gospel to the island of Ha'apai. The first convert in Macedonia was a woman called Lydia. She was converted on the first Sabbath day the apostle Paul spent in Philippi.

Lydia was either single or a widow. She was a business woman, a dealer in purple dye or purple clothes (16:14). She was from Thyatira, a city Paul may have visited if he had continued west from Pisidian Antioch. But Lydia would not have been there at the time. In the providence of God she heard the gospel while abroad. Did the Lord hear her prayers, as he did those of Cornelius in Caesarea? People often ask how God will judge those who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel. Jesus said that those who seek him will find him. The sovereign God will ensure that anyone seeking the truth will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The soul of every individual is precious to God.

Philippi was a Roman colony and as such had a very small Jewish population. People who did not worship idols were regarded as atheists by the Romans. Ten Jewish men were required to constitute a synagogue but there was no synagogue in Philippi. On the Sabbath day Jews and God-fearers like Lydia went to the riverside outside the city to worship. Here they would not be disturbed, and there was water for ritual washings. So Paul and his companions went to this place of prayer on their first Sabbath in Philippi (16:13). They found a few women gathered to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They would have been reading the OT. The missionaries spoke to the women, no doubt explaining the fulfilment of what they read in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah of God. And then a wonderful thing happened. Listen to what happened to one of the women, a God-fearer called Lydia. 'The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken to her by Paul' (16:14). This was not open heart surgery to replace a worn out heart valve! This was not surgery to give this woman a few more years of life! This was a radical change taking place in the soul of this woman. This change gave her new life, eternal life. This was a change powered by the Spirit of God through the word spoken to her. 'If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation' (2Cor 5:17). Lydia became a

new person that day. She did not change her name but some people do when they are born again of the Spirit of God.

Do you remember a day like this in your life? If not, may today be that day, the day when the Lord opens your heart to respond to the things spoken to you? All you have to do is confess your sin and 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household' (16:31).

Lydia believed and was baptized, maybe there and then in the river. And her household was baptized with her. They may have come to join in the worship. Whether these were children, relatives or servants we are not told, but the covenant promise of God extended to all in her house- as with the Philippian jailer, and with the covenant sign of circumcision given to Abraham some two thousand years before.

My wife and I ended up spending thirteen years in India. After being called by the Lord we were guided through the mission agency and friends who knew us well, to a place where we could minister according to our gifts and abilities. With three young children in an old bungalow, we needed help in the house. One day I asked a village woman cutting grass to sell if she would come and help us with the cooking and cleaning. Thankfully she agreed. We told her about Jesus and prayed. One day, just like Lydia, the Lord opened her heart and she believed. We sometimes think that if she was the only fruit of our time in India it was not in vain. There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. Actually, we continue to hear of children from village Sunday schools, now grown up, who believe in Jesus.

Lydia's heart was opened by the Lord. She became a new creation in Christ Jesus. As such she begged Paul and his companions to come and stay at her house; it may have been a large house- the door at least was large! Her house seems to have become the meeting place for the Christians in this city. The church grew, even during the short time Paul was there. Soon there were elders and deacons (Phil 1:1). This church continued to help Paul, and encourage him in bringing the gospel to the end of the earth.

Trouble in Philippi

Acts 16:16-24

If you like a quiet, comfortable, even boring life, then being a missionary is not for you! When Jesus sent out the Twelve he told them to take nothing for the journey; they were to rely on the hospitality of the people. When he sent out the seventy, two by two, he said he was sending them as lambs among wolves. They went, and they were amazed that, 'even the demons are subject to us in your name' (Luke 10:3, 17). Missionaries are on the frontline; comforts are few and troubles are plenty, but there are also triumphs and victories over Satan and his agents.

In Philippi Paul and Silas saw immediate fruit from their preaching, in the salvation of Lydia and her household. But further victories, and further growth of the church would come at personal cost. Paul and Silas would be severely beaten and thrown into prison. Missionaries must be ready to face deprivation and suffering because, as Paul learnt, 'when I am weak then I am strong' (2Cor 12:10). This is not only true of missionaries of course; it is true for all who take up their cross to follow Christ.

The remainder of Paul's time here in Philippi was eventful, to say the least. We do not know how long he stayed, apart from the mention of 'many days' in verse 18. What we know is that they were asked to leave by the authorities, and they did so. In their remaining time we see confrontation with a slave girl, a girl with a 'Python spirit', and we see Paul and Silas being beaten and thrown into prison.

1. Python spirit

Paul and Silas, along with Timothy and Luke, went to stay in Lydia's house. Each day, it seems, they went to the place of prayer. They would have been praying for this city and all the lost souls in it. They did not have the attitude that Jonah had towards the pagans in Nineveh. In the middle of the last century, missionaries sat on the border of Nepal praying for the door to be open so they could take the gospel to the lost souls of that nation. Today in India, Christians hold prayer vigils outside the gates of some college campuses because they are not allowed to hold meetings inside.

While going to the place of prayer each day, Paul and Silas repeatedly came across a 'slave girl with a spirit of divination' (16:16). Jesus came across numerous demon possessed people. He had power to cast out evil spirits, and he did so. Those he set free from this bondage became his disciples. Demon possession seemed to be more prevalent in Gentile regions, as with the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5). Paul was in a Gentile city, a city full of idols - there were very few Jews in Philippi.

In ancient Greece a place called Delphi was famous for the Oracle of Delphi. This Oracle, which was guarded by a serpent, Python, was supposed to tell the future. After the god 'Apollo' had slain Python, the Oracle served him. Since the slave girl in Philippi could tell people's fortunes it was thought she possessed this 'Python spirit', as Luke writes here in verse 16; translated, 'spirit of divination'. She would speak in a detached way, a bit like a ventriloquist. Some men took this girl in and exploited her fortune-telling ability for monetary gain.

Have you ever lived in a pagan society like that of Philippi? You don't have to go far these days! We have a 'mind, body, spirit' festival right here in Sydney. People get desperate to know their future; they grasp at every opportunity to find out the future. We may not have men sitting on the roadside

with a parrot and some cards in a cage, but we do have horoscopes in most magazines. You don't have to look far to find a clairvoyant or fortune teller. An amazing number of people are taken in by these things. Not that such things should be taken lightly. We must not go along just for a laugh. We must not dabble with demon powers. We stay away from these evil things and practices.

The apostle Paul did not have his fortune told by this slave girl in Philippi. He tried to stay away from her, but she kept following him. She followed 'Paul and us... for many days', but they ignored her it seems (16:17). Eventually Paul got fed up and confronted this girl with the demon. Not only was she following the missionaries, she was calling out saying, 'These men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to us the way of salvation' (16:17). 'What is wrong with such words' you might ask? What she was saying was true, was it not? Well, yes, and no.

Firstly, do not be surprised that the demon knew about God and knew the gospel message. Demons are clever. They make it their business to know their enemy. James writes, 'You believe there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!' (James 2:19). So much for all those who say they believe in God and think they are going to heaven. So much for those who say, 'I don't have to go to church or read my Bible to be a Christian'. The devil goes along with those sentiments. This slave girl seemed to be saying the right words. She knew how to be saved- or the demon did anyway- but Paul was not fooled for a moment. Knowing what is true and believing what is true are totally different.

Secondly, the term, 'Most High God', is not really specific for the God of Abraham, the Father of Jesus Christ. It is a title used by demons but not by Jews or Christians in the NT (Mark 5:7). In the OT we find this title used when Abraham met Melchizedek, the king of Salem. When Abraham used this title he added 'the Lord' or 'Yahweh' (Gen 14:22). 'Most High God' can mean different things to different people, just like the term 'God'. To the polytheistic pagans in Philippi there were many 'highest gods', so this term could apply to whatever deity they considered supreme.

Belief in a supreme being is quite common; some call this being 'god', others 'Allah', others 'Brahma' and so on. Because Allah is the Arabic word for God, people keep asking if Christians can call God 'Allah'. Clearly, the Muslims use of 'Allah' does not refer to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, so this name should not be used. We use the name Jesus to avoid any such confusion- even if it causes difficulties in the Muslim mind. The slave girl did not use the name, 'Jesus'; although a demon possessed man Jesus met clearly recognised Jesus as the Son of the Most High God (Mark 1:24, 5:7).

This brings us to a third point regarding the words of the slave girl. Paul clearly recognised the words as those of the 'Python spirit', not the girl herself. He got so disturbed that one day he turned around and commanded the spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her; and it did so 'that very hour'(16:18). Was it that Paul did not want an evil spirit advertising their mission? Or was it that he felt sorry for the girl, who was in bondage to this evil spirit, as well as to her human masters? Whatever his motivation, he did a mighty work in the name of Jesus, a work which Jesus did on numerous occasions, as we have seen. He demonstrated that Jesus Christ is more powerful than evil spirits and the gods of the pagans. The name of Jesus is above all names. Do you know the power of

Jesus' name? Do you love this name? If so, do you pray in the name of Jesus, do you praise in the name of Jesus, and do you talk in the name of Jesus?

In the name of Jesus this slave girl was set free from the evil spirit that possessed her. Her masters could no longer profit from her fortune telling. But the outcome for the girl was that she believed and followed Jesus, just like the people Jesus delivered from such terrible bondage. The church in Philippi was growing.

2. Prison for Paul and Silas

We might have thought everyone would have been happy that this poor, spirit-tortured girl was now in her right mind. She certainly was! But her masters were not at all happy. All they cared about was the profit they made for her; and their profit-making 'machine' was now gone (16:19). The gospel always has the effect of disrupting the business of some. In Ephesus it disrupted the business of Demetrius who crafted and sold idols. During the evangelical revival in England the business of pubs and brothels was disrupted. May we see more such disruption of business in pubs and clubs, especially in the insidious business of gambling that is so widespread in our society?

The owners of the slave girl were furious. They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them off to the authorities (16:19). Philippi was a Roman colony. Two officials, who liked to be called 'Praetors', were the authorities in this city- we can call them 'magistrates'. They were responsible for maintaining law and order in the city. They had policemen, called 'lictors', who carried weapons, as in rods, for the purpose of beating criminals. There was also a jailer to keep prisoners securely locked away. In this colony there was two classes of people - citizens (of Rome) and non-citizens- with different laws for each class. Paul and Silas were treated as non-citizens.

The slave girl's owners accused Paul and Silas of being Jews and of 'troubling our city by teaching customs not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice' (16:20, 21). They gave no details. Jews were generally despised for being 'atheists' but were legally allowed to practice their religion. How did these men know Paul and Silas were Jews? Did they know about their place of prayer? As for troubling the city, what evidence did they have for this accusation? To get their complaint heard they resorted to racial and religious differences, a well-used method of stirring people up when there is no real evidence. Jesus was condemned on the trumped-up charge of being a religious threat to the peace. Mob hysteria is always helpful when making baseless allegations (16:22).

Paul and Silas were denied a proper hearing. The magistrates condemned them, had them beaten with rods, and then thrown into prison. This was one of three times that Paul was beaten with rods (2Cor 11:25). Five times he received lashes from the Jews. Neither of these was pleasant! In the prison the jailer took them to the maximum security section and locked their feet into stocks, things designed to inflict pain. Being missionaries suddenly became costly- for Silas at least. Paul had faced violent opposition from the Jews on his first mission. What would happen to these men now? Was this the end of their mission? It was not their mission of course- it was the Lord's work, and the Lord is powerful to save.

If you are serving the Lord in some capacity in the church, do remember that it is Christ's church, and you are serving Christ in his church. You should not be looking for earthly reward, or self- satisfaction. You may not get beaten or imprisoned like Paul and Silas, but you will face setbacks and disappointments as you serve the Lord. You may face unkind words and criticism. You may face people leaving the church or Sunday school or small group. In such situations you may be tempted to give up. Before you do, remember it is the Lord's work you are doing, and that with the Lord nothing is impossible. You are not working for your own glory. Your 'job satisfaction' is not measured in worldly terms. You are the Lord's servant and you must press on, looking to the Lord and to his commendation- 'well done good and faithful servant'.

Triumph in Philippi

Acts 16:25-40

Satan is never happy to lose one of his people, one of his slaves. When the slave girl in Philippi was set free from Satan's grasp, he got Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison, with the permission of God. This beating was no 'tap on the wrist'; they could barely stand up. In the dungeon of this prison they had their feet fastened in stocks; some think this was a form of torture. These men had every reason to feel sorry for themselves, and to wonder at what they were doing, and what they would do next. But these were no ordinary men; they were servants of the Lord, called to preach Christ the Lord.

I have shared how my family was called to serve the Lord in India. Missionaries set out with high expectations. Even short-termers, of whom we see many these days, go with great expectations. Some from our church hope to go on a mission awareness tour soon. Some have visions of helping lots of people in the few weeks they are on the mission field; I have to point out that it is an awareness tour, and the one benefiting most will be them. So my family set out all those years ago with high expectations; and the first year on the mission field was the worst of my life! We struggled to live without hot water, without gas and electricity much of the time, and without a supermarket. On our first Christmas someone brought us a live chicken. We had no gas to cook with so put it in our electric fry pan. The electricity failed- and all this with three small children. If it had not been for that call from the Lord we would not have stayed. As you know, we came to love the place and the people. I am aware that what we suffered was nothing compared to some missionaries who faced debilitating disease, and even death of loved ones. But they stayed on- why? Because of the call of the Lord, and a love for lost souls.

Paul and Silas had trouble, but, as the Bible says, 'All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28). What good was God going to bring out of the suffering of Paul and Silas? In the passage before us we will firstly look at Paul and Silas singing hymns, the salvation of the jailer, and then the security or legitimacy gained for the church.

1. Singing hymns

Despite bleeding backs and the pain of having their feet locked in stocks, Paul and Silas were rejoicing. Some think they could not sleep because of the pain, but it was also that Paul had already learnt to be content in whatever state he was in, and indeed to rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4,11). When Peter and the other apostles were beaten with lashes by the Jews, they 'rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name' (Acts 5:41). How do believers rejoice? They praised the Lord! Man can beat the body but not the spirit. The spirit of Paul and Silas rejoiced by 'praying and singing hymns to God' (16:25). They did not sit in their cell moaning or complaining of the injustice done to them. What the rest of the prisoners heard was rejoicing; they heard these men praying and singing psalms. They were doing this at midnight when the earthquake struck, but were probably doing it since the time they were locked up. If the prisoners heard them, the jailer probably heard them also.

What were Paul and Silas praying for? Were they praying to be released? If so the earthquake was a powerful answer to their prayer. Were they praying for the salvation of fellow prisoners- salvation

from sin and death, not from the prison? At midnight the foundations of the prison suddenly shook violently. Prison doors flew open and 'everyone's bonds were unfastened' (16:26 ESV). People debate as to whether chains just fell from wall sockets or from off their feet, but the word does not necessarily mean 'chains'- Paul and Silas were in wooden stocks. An earthquake is a natural phenomenon, although we call it an 'act of God'. In this case it definitely was an act of God.

God's intervention went beyond the earthquake. The prison doors flew open, and bonds were loosed, but the prisoners did not escape-Why? Were they still listening to Paul and Silas praising God? When the jailer appeared as a silhouette in the doorway, Paul said to him, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here' (16:28). Just how many of the prisoners were saved we are not told because the focus is on the jailer, but something strange and wonderful was going on in the prison that night.

The jailer was probably an ex-soldier, feared by the prisoners. He was tough, and brutal if necessary. He was a man who took his duties seriously. If any prisoners escaped he was responsible; indeed, he would get the punishment set down for the prisoner (cf. Acts 27:42). If all the prisoners in the jail had escaped, as the jailer presumed, he thought it more honourable to kill himself than to face the ignominy of a court martial and execution.

2. Salvation of the jailer

The jailer was woken by the earthquake. He ran to check on the prison. Even in the darkness (maybe moonlight) he could see the prison doors were all open. Assuming that all the prisoners had fled, he took out his sword or dagger to kill himself. Suddenly he heard a voice coming from inside the prison. Paul, who had seen him in the doorway about to kill himself, shouted for him to stop: 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here' (16:28). Then the strangest thing happened.

In the next city the missionaries visited they were accused of turning the world upside down (17:7). Well, things were being turned upside down here in the prison at Philippi. The jailer, this tough Roman guard who without mercy had thrown Paul and Silas into prison, 'called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas '(16:29). He was pleading for mercy. He asked them the most profound and important question that any human being can ask: 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' (16:30). He would have been dead if Paul had not called out, and if he had not heard that voice.

Imagine that! Someone could die, literally die and go to hell, if they did not hear you tell them how to be saved. It is not just someone about to commit suicide- of whom there are way too many these days. Have you told everyone around you how to be saved? All will die one day, and after death comes the judgment- right? What is the end of those who do not believe in Jesus? You cannot make anyone believe, of course, but you can make sure they hear about Jesus. Sing it out dear friend; shout out this name!

The other day I saw a small aeroplane writing 'JESUS' in the sky over our city. Some years ago a man wrote 'ETERNITY' on footpaths around our city. We have put tracts in hundreds of letter boxes around the suburbs. The name of Jesus is being made known, and we need to keep on in this task. We also have the task of personally witnessing this most wonderful name, the only name given under heaven

among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). In the nursing home we sing the praises of God such that kitchen staff, nursing staff and all the residents can hear the name of Jesus.

The Philippian jailer may not have heard the slave girl saying that Paul and Silas were telling the way of salvation, but he was surely aware of what happened to her. Everyone in this pagan and superstitious society was somewhat afraid of these men with power to cast out evil spirits. The jailer probably heard Paul and Silas singing and praying in their cell before he went off duty. Then the earthquake. Then Paul calling out, 'Don't harm yourself'. The Lord was not only shaking the foundations of the prison; he was shaking this pagan man to the core.

Do you know what it means to be shaken to the core? Listen and learn from the Philippian jailer. Watch him running to Paul and Silas, and listen to him asking, 'What must I do to be saved?' He was afraid- he had almost killed himself. He was afraid of these men who were not like other men. They were praising God when they should have been cursing. Then there was this casting out of evil spirits he heard about. He wanted to be saved from evil, from sin and from death. He wanted what Paul and Silas had- peace, peace with God.

To the most profound and important question ever asked, comes the truest, most gracious and simplest of answers: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household' (16:31). The missionaries had no time to dialogue or get into a theological argument. He wanted an answer, and he wanted it now, at midnight in the prison. The gospel is not complicated; little children can believe in Jesus. The gospel is set forth in just one verse back in John's gospel: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life' (John 3:16). Paul gives an even more condensed version: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ'- note the essential person, 'Jesus', and the essential response, 'believe'.

The jailer asked, 'what must I do?' He was told that what he had to do was believe, nothing more and nothing less. He had, of course, humbled himself before Paul and Silas, a sign of repentance and humbling himself before the Lord. He had probably heard the name of Jesus, either in relation to the slave girl's exorcism, or from Paul and Silas' praises, as already mentioned. If he had not heard it before, he heard the name of Jesus now; no one can be saved without hearing and believing in that name.

The last words of the answer are interesting: 'you and your household' (16:31). We live in an increasingly individualistic society; we tend to preach the gospel in an individualistic way. But in the Bible we see this focus on the household- Lydia and her household, and now the jailer and his household. Joshua also said, 'as for me and my household we will serve the Lord' (Josh 24:15). Is it simply that, 'as a matter of course', when the head of the household believes the rest will hear and believe, as Marshall writes? Is it not that God is a covenant God, and that God deals with families in a special way, a covenant way. How else can we explain this, 'you and your household'? It does not mean that children are saved without personally believing. It does not mean they are saved by baptism. But it does mean something. It is a precious and wonderful truth of Scripture; God's covenant promise to families or households.

The jailer took Paul and Silas to his house where they spoke the gospel to all present (16:32). They all believed and were baptized. While the jailer washed the wounds of Paul and Silas, they baptized him and his family. Chrysostom famously commented, 'He washed and was washed, he washed them from their stripes, and was himself washed from his sins'. The jailer became a new creation in Christ Jesus, just like Lydia. His whole life changed; his prisoners become his friends; he set food before them rather than setting their feet in stocks. The singing and praising that was heard in the prison before midnight was now heard in the jailer's house after midnight (16:34).

3. Security for the church

What a glorious night, with the jailer and his family believing in Jesus Christ and praising God along with two of his prisoners! What would happen the next day? The jailer apparently kept his job, although, as a believer, he would have joined the church which met at Lydia's house. A business woman, a slave girl, and a jailer came together to worship the Lord. Such a gathering was unheard of in those days. Overnight the magistrates, for some reason, had a change of mind about locking up Paul and Silas. They sent their police with a message for the jailer to release these men (16:35). The jailer must have been pleased. He could officially release the men who were instrumental in his salvation. 'Go in peace' he told them (16:36). But Paul and Silas did not go. They told the police that they were Roman citizens, and as such should not be beaten, and not locked up without a proper trial. This set alarms bells ringing, especially when the message got back to the magistrates. Why did Paul make this protest now and not just quietly leave?

Paul demanded that the magistrates come personally to release them, and presumably apologise (16:37). The officials had broken Roman law and would have been in hot water if news got to Rome. They quickly came and ushered Paul and Silas out of prison, and pleaded with them to leave town—they were in enough trouble as it was. Paul and Silas complied with their request, but not before greeting the church at Lydia's house and encouraging them to continue in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (16:4).

What has all this got to do with the security or legitimacy of the church in Philippi? Under Roman law only certain religions were legitimate; Judaism was one. Paul and Silas were accused of teaching customs 'not lawful for us Romans' (16:21). This accusation was not substantiated. By making the magistrates come and release them Paul was showing them, and the city, that they were not Jewish vagabonds, but were in fact law-abiding Roman citizens. Their teaching was not illegal, so the church should not be harassed or persecuted after they left. Paul was not about personal vindication; he was thinking of the church and its future in this pagan city of Philippi.

Mission in Thessalonica and Berea

Acts 17:1-15

When Jesus came into this world he came to a people that God had prepared for his coming. Jesus came to his own, although his own did not receive him (John 1:11). To these people, the Jews, God gave the Law, the Prophets and the promises. Everything that God gave them under the Old Covenant pointed forward to Christ. The Jews were expecting Messiah, a king who, like David, would deliver them from their enemies. In the time of Jesus and the apostle Paul, Rome was occupying Palestine so Rome was the enemy. If Jesus was Messiah they expected him to deliver them from the Romans. All such hope died when Jesus was put to death on the cross. In fact, it was jealous Jewish leaders who put Jesus to death; he had exposed their hypocrisy, and the crowds were following him. News of the resurrection was unsettling but by spreading lies the Jews kept a lid on this this. The outcome was that temple worship and synagogue worship continued unchanged- until the apostles started preaching Jesus the Messiah. News of what was happening in Jerusalem may have reached distant synagogues like those in Macedonia, but beliefs and practices remained the same. They kept looking for Messiah to come.

Paul, Silas and Timothy left Philippi after being asked by the magistrates to do so. Luke remained behind to support the church- references to 'we' cease at this point (16:17). They continued west along the Egnatian Way to Amphipolis, and after spending the night there went on to Apollonia. Again they just transited and the next day reached Thessalonica (17:1).

1. Jesus preached in Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the capital city of the province of Macedonia. It was a port city, a transport hub for produce from the hinterland of this province. The missionaries must have seen it as a strategic place for reaching this part of the world with the gospel. Besides, there was a Jewish synagogue in this city, so they could begin their ministry here- as was their custom. As an educated Jew, Paul may have been invited to take the reading when they went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He spoke or 'reasoned with them from the Scriptures' for three consecutive Sabbaths (17:2).

Details of what he preached in the synagogue are scant. In fact, all Luke tells us is that he 'reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead' (17:2-3). Their Scripture was just the OT. Every Sabbath someone read from the OT and explained what the passage meant. Much of the OT is historical, looking back to Abraham, Moses and the Law, and the kings. But the Prophets looked forward in telling of a coming Messiah. You will recall that Jesus himself read from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth and said, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21).

What OT passages do you think Paul 'reasoned' from here in the synagogue at Thessalonica? We are not told, but we can imagine him explaining parts of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 53 where the suffering servant of the Lord or Messiah is clearly portrayed. We could glance back to Acts 13 and what Paul preached in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. From Isaiah 55, Psalm 2 and Psalm 16 he explained that although Messiah was a descendant of David he was also the Son of God, and that although he would die, he would rise again. Jesus of Nazareth, and only Jesus, fitted what was written in the Scriptures about Messiah. 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ' said Paul (17:3).

Having proved that Jesus is the Christ, Paul would have explained that he did not come as a political deliverer. From the same Scriptures he spoke about forgiveness of sin and being justified before God (13:38-39). Paul may even have warned them against rejecting this message in the way their forefathers rejected the word God spoke through the prophets (13:40-41). Rejecting the gospel of Jesus has consequences. It is the same today. Jesus is not one among many in the market place of religions. Paul will soon enter such a market place, not to present Jesus as another way but as **the** way, because he is the one God has ordained as judge of the whole world (17:31).

Here in Thessalonica God had prepared the hearts of many to receive the gospel and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews were prepared through their culture and religion, but not necessarily their hearts- just 'some of them were persuaded' (17:4). So-called God-fearers, Greeks who were attracted to the monotheism and morality of Judaism, responded most positively to Paul's preaching. Such people were not 'culturally bound' we might say. Unlike the Jews, they were attracted to the teaching not the traditions. Culture and traditions are not necessarily bad things- we all have our culture and traditions- but we must not let such things prevent us from hearing and understanding the gospel, as happened and continues to happen with the Jews, and other ethno-religious groups.

Leaving an ethno-religious group is not easy. Jews who believed in Jesus were, and continue to be, persecuted by those who refuse to believe, be they family, friends or rabbis. Those who preach the gospel, leading to the conversion of a family or community member will be the main target of hostility, as Paul was at Thessalonica.

2. Jewish opposition

The Jews who did not believe got upset when some of their fellow Jews were persuaded by Paul's preaching to confess their sin and believe in Jesus Christ. 'What about our traditions' they would have said'; 'what that fellow preaches sounds convincing but we cannot go changing our religious traditions'. Actually, it was more than this. The Jewish leaders became jealous when the people 'cast their lot' with Paul and Silas (17:5). The Greek word can mean 'zealous', in which case their zeal was seriously misdirected.

Jealousy is a powerful emotion, and one that usually leads to self-harm or harm to others. 'When desire has conceived it gives birth to sin' (James 1:15). These jealous Jews went to the place where thugs and evil men hang out and got them fired up for a riot. These wicked men were ready to riot about anything; on this day it was the Jews who wanted a riot. So off they went as a mob to the house of Jason, to 'bust a few heads' as it were. Jason, one of the Jews who believed in Jesus, must have given Paul and Silas a room in his house.

One thing we learnt about India was the danger of the 'instant crowd', as I called it. If there was a road accident for example, a crowd would gather in no time. If tempers flared and a fight broke out the crowd would get involved. It was not uncommon for someone to get hurt or killed. We learnt to stay away from such situations. We have our own road rage of course, and also professional rabble rousers, or as they like to be called 'activists'. You will find the same people protesting about a tree being cut down, about dogs being killed and about homosexual rights.

The Jews led the noisy, violent mob through the city of Thessalonica and to the house of Jason. They wanted to get hold of Paul and Silas, and drag them off to the authorities. The word '*demos*' translated 'people' in verse 5 probably refers to a people's court- the NIV marginal reading is 'the assembly of the people'. They could not find Paul or Silas - had Jason taken them to a hiding place? Undeterred, the mob grabbed Jason and some brethren with him and dragged them off to the rulers of the city or '*politarchs*'- like the magistrates or '*strategos*' of Philippi.

What accusations were brought against Paul and Silas- or Jason as their proxy? 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also' (17:6). Hardly a specific charge- and a somewhat ironic one at that; the Jews leading a riotous mob through the city were the ones disturbing the peace. Paul and Silas were simply preaching in the synagogue. This charge is quite instructive, and indeed flattering for Paul and Silas. It appeared that the gospel they preached was making a huge impact around the world. It was, of course, an exaggeration designed to get these men into trouble with the authorities.

Furthermore, we can turn this charge on its head, as it were, and say that the gospel turns the world right side up! It is sin that turns the world upside down- a truth seen no less today than it was in the ancient world. When corrupt and violent men, when drunkards and drug addicts, hear the gospel and believe in Jesus, is their life really turned upside down? Is it not that they become what God intended them to be? What about the Gadarene demoniac? Did Jesus turn his world upside down? No! He sat at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind when he was set free demons and from sin.

The Roman leaders at that time were facing some unrest. Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in AD 49; he did this because of disturbances in the Jewish community at the instigation of 'Chrestus', according to the historian Suetonius. In the Roman Empire the Emperor was king, and even god. Even mention of another king was treason. The Jews wanted Jesus charged with treason when they accused him of saying he is the Christ, a king (Luke 23:2). Roman ears were alert to rival kings so these Jews in Thessalonica accused Paul and Silas of saying there is another king- Jesus (17:7). If they had spoken of Jesus as king it was as king of heaven, not an earthly kingdom. Paul was probably careful not to be misunderstood in this regard; he rarely refers to Jesus as king or to the kingdom of God.

The rulers of the city were troubled by this accusation, but not sufficiently enough to go searching for Paul and Silas, or even to imprison Jason. It was impossible to verify the charges without being able to examine Paul directly- and the Jews failed to present the accused. Jason and the brothers were allowed to go, but not before posting a bond. This bond most likely included two things: firstly, the guarantee that there would be no more disturbances, and secondly, that Paul and Silas not show their face in the city again- maybe for the term of the magistrate. This bond was probably all of Jason's property. There is no report of Paul ever returning to Thessalonica- although he wrote them two letters (1Thess 2:18).

3. Jews search the Scriptures

After Jason posted bond, Paul and Silas left Thessalonica the same night. They continued down the road to Berea where they again went to the synagogue to worship. This synagogue in Berea is famous

because the Jews there were unlike those in any other synagogue; they were more noble, as in more open-minded and less prejudiced (17:10). These Jews did not get jealous and make wild accusations against Paul. What they did was listen and examine what they said in the light of the Scriptures. They searched the Scriptures daily to see if what they said was true (17:11). How noble! How commendable! Is this what you do when you hear a sermon?

Judaism and Christianity are known as religions of the book. Jews could not start preaching their own ideas- unless they were false teachers, and the people could not read. Their teaching could always be checked against the written word of God. It is the same with Christianity. Preaching in the church can and should be checked against the written word of God. False teaching proliferated in the Church of Rome when the people were told not to read the Bible for themselves. Any faithful preacher or teacher will welcome his listeners searching the Scriptures to see if what he says accords with what is written. If anyone starts saying 'just believe me', or 'It is true because I say so', then you know he is heading the way of a cult leader. So, like the Bereans, do search the Scriptures to see that what the preacher is saying is true, and do the same before you start criticising the preacher.

In Berea many, not just some, Jews believed, and many God-fearers, and prominent Greek women and men also believed (17:12). There was no opposition to the gospel in Berea until Jews from Thessalonica came and made trouble again (17:13). They wanted to get hold of Paul, so the church folk sent him away, 'to go to the sea', but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (17:14). The brothers escorted Paul to Athens. When he gave them a note for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens ASAP, this brothers returned to Berea.

Another two churches established, making it three places of worship and witness in Macedonia, and in the hostile world of the Roman Empire. Paul was driven out of all three places in an effort by Satan and his agents to stifle to spread of the gospel. But Satan's plan backfired because Paul simply went to the next town to preach and plant another church. This is the challenge for us today. Are we ready to preach the gospel and plant churches with the same vigour and commitment seen here in the early church?

Paul in Athens

Acts 17:16-21

A mission team of four men, Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke, entered Macedonia in the year AD50 or 51. There was no synagogue in Philippi but through their witness a church was established. Three of the men moved on to Thessalonica, where the Jews from the synagogue got jealous, created a stir and got the three missionaries thrown out of town. In Berea the Jews listened to the gospel and many believed, but Jews from Thessalonica came and created another stir. Paul was taken by friends to the coast and on to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea. Did he plan to go to Athens, the city from which the Greeks once ruled the ancient world? He was no longer in the province of Macedonia; Athens was in Achaia. Whatever his plans about Athens he did not plan on being there alone. He had instructed his escorts to send Silas and Timothy as soon as possible.

1. Athens

The Greeks ruled the ancient world for around three centuries before the rise of the Romans, who conquered Athens in 146BC; Athens was their capital city. The Romans allowed Athens some autonomy; they gave it the status of a free city within their empire. The Greeks were interested in language and literature, in science and philosophy. The Greek language was like English today. Philosophers like Socrates and Plato are still studied today; Athens was their home. Aristotle made Athens his home, along with Epicurus and Zeno, the men whose philosophies were followed by many in Athens and the ancient world. Paul came across some exponents of these rival philosophies when he went to the 'Agora' or market place in Athens (17:18).

Paul found the city of Athens to be full of idols (17:16). Paul was not in Athens as a tourist. He did not find the idols interesting; in fact they disturbed or upset him. He had seen idols before but maybe not so many in one place. Athens was a centre of culture and philosophy, and also a centre of religion and idolatry. You might think philosophical people would have nothing to do with idolatry, but you would be wrong. Philosophers can be quite superstitious, and in their superstition turn to idols. They have nothing against idols as such, even if they think they are the domain of poor and uneducated people.

Paul was not a philosopher; he was a believer in the true God, Yahweh. He knew the Ten Commandments; he knew that there were no other gods, and he also knew that worship of idols or images was forbidden by God. Worship of idols is foolish; it is destructive to the soul, and also offensive to God. God deserves and demands all glory be given to him. So Paul was not impressed by the idols in Athens. They provoked his spirit with concern for the glory of God, and the lost souls of this city.

Hinduism is a religion in which idol worship abounds- although there is a philosophical Hinduism. In India you will find idols all over the place. I visited some temples but found them most unattractive, not to mention dirty. A Christian friend refused to go near a Hindu temple. When the earthquake hit Nepal I was sorry for the loss of life and the homes destroyed but not for their ancient temple that was severely damaged. Hindu idols are usually grotesque forms of animals or humans. Yet idols are idols whether they look grotesque or not. Our society has plenty of idols which we might consider beautiful.

We see idols outside some churches, we see idols in showrooms and in homes. What do people around us worship? Many worship things made by man, be it fancy cars, fancy houses, things with screens, etc. Others worship things made by God: trees, the ocean, the sun, the human body, etc. The essence of idolatry is the worship of created things rather than the creator himself (Rom 1: 25). Since man is the peak of God's creation, being made in the image of God, it is to be expected that man will worship himself- and this is exactly what we see in the philosophies that Paul encountered, and what we encounter today in secular humanism. Humanism, which often leads to narcissism, seems more sensible and sophisticated than worshipping idols of wood or stone, but it is still idolatry and offensive to God.

F.F. Bruce quotes two English poets as he describes the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers mentioned here in Acts 17 (17:18). Interestingly, both poets speak of, 'whatever gods may be'. Even atheists say, 'there is probably no god'. Modern man is no different to ancient Greeks in his ignorance of God's existence and God's works. The ancients admitted ignorance as to the origin of man and the universe. Modern man, with his Big Bang theory and theory of evolution, thinks he has found the answer, but these theories are no answer at all. The only philosophical outcome, and indeed the very purpose of these theories, is to remove God from his position as creator- note these are philosophies not science.

For Epicureans the chief end of life was pleasure or the avoidance of pain. They went after things pleasing to the palate, to the flesh and to the eyes- although not hedonists. They said that 'whatever gods there may be' they took no interest in man, so man takes no interest in the gods. Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Although such people fear death they can make funerals into parties!

For Stoics, the chief end of life is being master of one's own destiny. The English poet, W.E. Henley, puts it in this way: 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul', 'and I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul'. The Stoic tries to be indifferent to pain or pleasure. In face of adversity they 'keep a stiff upper lip' with a 'grin and bear it' attitude. Stoics try to be morally upright and dutiful; they are also very proud men and women.

The Christian life is nothing like that of the Epicurean or the Stoic. For the true Christian the chief end of man is the glory of God: 'man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever' (Shorter Catechism Q 1). Epicurean and Stoic philosophies are alive and well today. We see them in people we know; but may we not see them in ourselves! As a believer, Jesus is the captain of your soul, not you. As a believer your pleasure comes from obeying God's commands, not satisfying the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1John 2:16).

The apostle Paul came across these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the public square in Athens. But his first port of call in this city was the Jewish synagogue- as was his custom. On his first Sabbath in Athens he went to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews and God-fearers (17:17). Luke does not tell us the outcome of his ministry in the synagogue, presumably because it was the same as elsewhere, with some believing and some not; Athens was not a place for making a riot. Paul moved on to Corinth, where Silas and Timothy re-joined him, and we hear no more about the church in Athens. There were a number who believed after Paul's address to the Areopagus (17:34), so presumably a church was established in Athens.

2. Areopagus

When I was a student in this city, the Domain was a place where people would go on Sunday afternoon to listen to whoever came along with their 'soapbox'. Communists, Maoists, Socialists, Atheists, Feminists, Hedonists and Hare Krishna's, as well as Christians, would stand on their soapbox and start talking. Some would listen and some would heckle the speaker on the soapbox. There were philosophies and religions for all. The public square in Athens must have been something like this. Paul went along each day and 'reasoned' with the people there. He may not have had a soapbox but he gathered a few interested people as he spoke about Jesus and the resurrection (17:18). Luke tells us that the Athenians were eager to spruik their philosophies, as well as listen to the ideas of others. This was what they spent their whole time doing (17:21).

I do not know where the public square is in our city today. Maybe it has been absorbed into the ABC's Q&A program or social media, although I am not sure that there is the readiness to listen to different philosophies as their once was. Students seem to be preoccupied with working to support their studies. On the other hand, there are those who get fired up about the environment, animal rights, the climate and homosexuality- human and animal rights is the philosophy of a vocal group. When Paul spoke about Jesus and the resurrection, the people of Athens wanted to hear what he had to say. If you mention the name 'Jesus' today you get 'booed' off the stage. Religion, we are told, has no place in the public square, as if humanism and worshipping created things is not a religious belief system.

The Areopagus or Mars Hill was a locality in Athens, but the term came to refer to the council of men that met in this place. Originally it was a council with political, social and religious powers over this democratic city-state, but in the time of Paul its only power was in the area of religion and morals. So when Paul started talking about Jesus and the resurrection in the market place the people brought him before the Areopagus. He was not under arrest but was simply taken there to explain the philosophy or the gods he was talking about. The Athenians were curious; they wanted to hear what Paul was proclaiming about another god (17:18). Some scholars think that in addition to the name of Jesus, the Greeks took the word 'resurrection' as being the name of another god or goddess also.

While some were interested to hear about this foreign god or gods, others were less impressed; they started calling Paul a babbler, or literally a 'seed-picker'. They accused him of picking up scraps of knowledge here and there and proclaiming this as some new philosophy- this was commonly done it seems. Luke indicates that Paul was not the first to come to this place with new ideas and new gods. 'For all the Athenians and foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but to tell or to hear some new thing' (17:21). When people have nothing useful to do and/or when they are spiritually lost and searching for truth, they are ready to listen to any and every idea they hear- 'whatever tickles their fancy' we say. Some focus on food, ready to adopt the latest diet with a religious fervour. Others look wider into philosophies and religions, and grab hold of whatever is in fashion- Buddhism for example. They reject the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is not new, but they end up listening to some 'seed picker' as the Athenians would say.

The Athenians prided themselves in their philosophies and their noble attitude towards new things- not that this prevented them from mocking some ideas (17:32). They did not chase Paul out of town but brought him to the Areopagus saying, 'may we hear what this new doctrine is of which you speak' (17:19).

Paul had stepped into the public square proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection. The Lord was now giving him an opportunity to preach the gospel before the supreme council of religion and morals in the cultural capital of the world. Are you ready to make known Jesus and the resurrection in the councils and courts of our land? First of all, are you ready to proclaim the gospel in the public square; have you written to any politicians or any newspapers in the name of Jesus Christ? Remember, when you do step out in faith as Paul did, the Lord will give you words to say, as he did to the apostle Paul (Luke 21:15).

Paul addresses the Areopagus

Acts 17:22-34

Paul's address to a gathering of the educated elite in Athens is one of the most studied portions of the Bible; at least in missionary circles. Here we find the apostle preaching to people who did not know the Bible. He was not in a synagogue preaching to Jews and explaining how Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophets- as in Acts 13:16-41. The people of Athens were not familiar with the Bible, apart from some God-fearers who went to the synagogue. Athens was the centre of the world when it came to philosophy and religion. Paul encountered the prevailing philosophies in the market place; he came across Epicurean and Stoic philosophers as he preached Jesus and the resurrection (17:18). They invited him to speak further on his 'new doctrine' in a meeting of the city council for culture and religion. How would Paul approach this gathering of intellectuals? Would he open the Bible and begin with Abraham or Moses? Would he begin with Jesus, with the cross and the resurrection?

In light of 1Corinthians 2:2 some think Paul later regretted referring to pagan poets in this apologetic address, rather than sticking to the Bible. But Paul's address was thoroughly Biblical. He began at the beginning of the Bible because he could not assume his listeners understood God as creator and sustainer of the world. Many missionaries have learnt by experience that this truth must be established before preaching the gospel. It is an essential part of the gospel. We do not want people taking on Jesus as another of their gods. We live in a Judeo-Christian society that has had the Bible for generations, but still we cannot assume the Biblical doctrine of creation is understood or believed. In fact, it has been undermined by the teaching of evolution, effectively sidelining Jesus to the status of another god alongside science. This is what we see with some preachers saying all religions are true and that Jesus is just another way to God.

The apostle Paul maintained the truth and authority of the Bible from beginning to end, and so must we. Paul's address or sermon in the Areopagus has much to teach us today. We will first notice his introduction, then his central message with four sub-points, then his conclusion and finally the people's response.

1. Introduction

Words of introduction are most important in any sermon, none more so than this one-off sermon to an unknown audience. It is important to establish a point of contact with the audience. If Paul had started talking about Moses or David he would have lost his audience immediately. He could have talked about the weather, reminding them that God sends rain and fruitful harvests, as he did at Lystra (14:17), but in walking around Athens, and seeing all their idols, he assessed the people as being very religious, and superstitious.

People who worship various gods are eager not to offend any of these gods. They have days to worship each and every god, and ways to worship these gods; to some they sacrifice a chicken, to others they offer milk, and to others flowers. The people of Athens were smart; they considered the possibility of a god that they did not know. So they erected an altar to 'the unknown god' (17:23). Although no such altar has yet been dug up, historians refer to such an inscription. Anyway, Paul saw this inscription, and with God-given wisdom and words told the Areopagus he was going to make this 'unknown god' known to them.

What a great point of contact! What a perfect launching pad for bringing the gospel to this particular audience. Don Richardson, a missionary who served in West Papua last century, writes of finding a point of contact with the tribal people in his book, 'Peace Child'. In India, whenever we inaugurated a village tube well we would introduce Jesus as the 'water of life' as we preached from John 4. It is important to learn about our audience and look for points of contact that may help in conveying the gospel. This does not make up for not knowing the gospel itself. Above all, remember that the Lord gives us words to say.

2. Proclaiming the unknown God

In proclaiming the unknown God and the gospel, Paul makes the following four points:

Firstly, God the creator.

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). That is how the Bible begins and that is where we must begin if we have listeners who have not heard the Bible, or who have been duped by some other idea about the beginning of the world. 'God made the world and everything in it' said Paul (17:24). As creator, God is not part of the creation- this rules out pantheism. God does not dwell in temples made by human hands. Even the Jews started thinking like this, as Stephen told them in no uncertain terms (Acts 7:48). Even some Christians think like this also. I was listening to a preacher in one of our cities cathedrals condemning people who thought this ornate building was a temple- since it had a 'sanctuary' and an 'altar' they might be forgiven!

God created the heavens and the earth, and he created every living thing. He made human beings and breathed into us the breath of life (Gen 2:7). This makes him Lord or sovereign ruler over all. The Stoic philosophers were essentially pantheistic; God was present in the creation as the world-soul. Some tried to represent or 'contain' God in man-made idols, which they worshipped; but such representations and such worship offends God. God gives life to all things. He does not need anything from man. God is self-sufficient (cf. Ps 50:7-15). The Epicureans held that 'whatever gods may be' are way out there and take no interest in our lives. Paul told them that God created everything and continues as sovereign ruler over all.

Secondly, God the sustainer.

The idea that God made the world and left it to run of its own accord is still around. In fact, there are more agnostics than there are atheists. Both are in error because God is not dead, nor is he lost. He is vitally involved in sustaining his world. He sustains the breath of every living thing, in what some call a continuous creation. As Job said, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away' (Job 1:21). Paul writes of Jesus that, 'by him all things were created ... and he is before all things and in him all things consist or hold together' (Col 1:16-17).

God rules over his creation, sending rain upon the just and the unjust (Mat 6:45, Acts 14:17). Man's attempt to remove God as creator, with the theory of evolution, is being followed by attempts to remove him as the sustainer and giver of life, breath and all things (17:25). As our Shorter Catechism states in Q8, 'God executes his decrees in the works of creation and providence'. Furthermore, 'His works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing of all his

creatures and all their actions' (SC Q 11). The claims of some advocates of man-made climate change deny this truth.

Thirdly, God the ordainer.

Paul was a Jew; one of many Jews in Athens. Most people in the city were Greeks, but there were also Romans. There may have been people from Africa and Asia also. Everyone knew of different races of people and different nations. How did all this come about? How come some were white and some were black? How come they lived in their own people groups? God not only made every race but also ordained where they should live (17:26). The reference to pre-appointed times probably refers to the times during which nations rule. The Greeks once ruled the world but now it was the Romans. Who would be next? King Nebuchadnezzar learned from Daniel that God rules the nations. Pilate learned this from Jesus when he said to Pilate, 'You could have no power at all against me unless it had been given you from above' (John 19:11). Such philosophy appeared reasonable to the Areopagus, even if it does not fit with modern day evolutionary theory. If God made all things and sustains all things, it follows that he could rule over the nations, and determine the rise and fall of world powers and the extent of their rule. The facts of history are not against such an explanation. God is the God of history. He is the God of history and of science.

Fourthly, Groping for God.

God is not way out there, uninterested in this world, as the Epicureans believed. Nor is he part of this world he created. He is active in sustaining all things, giving life and breath and providing for his creatures. He made from one man, Adam, the people of all the nations, 'that they should seek the Lord' (17:27). We know from the Bible that when God made Adam he had fellowship with him (Gen 2:8). Adam was to obey God and be blessed by God. Then sin entered the world, and Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden. Sin separated man from God. Sin blinded man to God's power and love. God is still there- it is just that man has been blinded by sin. This seems to be the background of what Paul says here in verse 27. We should be seeking the Lord, and if we do we will find Him (Mat 6:7), but with sinful hearts we are reduced to groping in the dark. In the end it is God who sent his Son 'to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

Before taking this point to its conclusion, Paul refers to Greek poets to support his point about God being 'not far from each one of us'. A Cretan poet called Epimenides wrote, 'for in him we live and move and have our being', and another called Aratus wrote about Zeus, 'For we are also his offspring' (17:28). Paul must have studied these Greek poets, even though pagan men. When we say they support Paul's argument we are not saying they were talking about the same things. As one commentator says, 'Paul was disinfecting and rebaptising the poet's words for his own purpose'. By 'offspring of God' he meant that man was made in the image of God and is responsible to honour God as creator and sustainer. Paul was maintaining his audience. Even so, we do need to be careful in using the language of pagans. Sometimes their language is designed to avoid the truth or whitewash important truths.

3. Conclusion

God's eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen in the creation, so those who fail to worship God have no excuse (Rom 1:20). Even people without the Bible, like the men of Athens, have no

excuse for not seeking God. Being the offspring of God means we cannot think of God as a lump of gold, silver or stone, shaped into some form by an artisan (17:29). How foolish! Yet that is what Paul saw in Athens, and it is what we see in many places today; people worshipping inanimate things made by man. The men of Athens saw no problem, and even educated people today see no problem with making things and worshipping those things. But Paul condemned such ignorance and declared that God would not overlook such ignorance any longer. Paul's words were effectively words of judgment - turn from this ignorance that offends God or face the wrath of God.

'God now commands all men everywhere to repent' (17:30). Calling upon the elite of Athens to repent may have been bold, but Paul was compelled to speak the truth. God created all men, even the rich and famous, and calls all to repent. Paul does not say repent of sin but repent of ignorant worship of idols. It is the blindness of sin that leads to such ignorance. Paul does not get to speak about the cross and forgiveness of sin, but repentance is the first step towards faith in Jesus.

Paul called upon these men to repent because the time of God's overlooking such ignorance has come to an end. It has come to an end because Jesus, the Son of God and the light of the world, has come into the world. Not only has Jesus come but he has risen from the dead and returned to heaven. He is there now, ready to return in judgment. There is no time to procrastinate. God had appointed a day, and he had ordained the man by whom he will judge the world in righteousness (17:31). Paul proclaimed this message with confidence because God assured the world of this truth by raising Jesus from the dead. It seems strange that Paul does not mention the name of Jesus, although the people had heard him preaching Jesus and the resurrection back in the market place- for this reason he was brought to this meeting (17:18).

Paul was painting the big picture, answering the big questions posed by philosophers; where do we come from, and what is the meaning of life? He introduced these people to the sovereign, creator God who is also a personal God who calls upon everyone to repent and worship him alone. He is the God who will judge the world in righteous by the man called Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus was central to the gospel Paul preached, and still is, despite liberal theology. Paul was not free to deny the resurrection even though it meant his audience began mocking at this point.

4. Response

The Epicureans rejected any notion of immortality of the soul or resurrection. Like many in the western world today, they were materialists- we are made of chemicals and atoms which disperse when we die. They mocked Paul (17:32). Stoics, who believed in the immortality of the soul said, 'We will hear you again on this matter'. There is no record of Paul getting another hearing in Athens and some think he was not given a licence to preach- but we cannot say this for certain.

On the positive side, and remembering that when we preach the gospel responses are in God's hand, some who heard did repent and believe in Jesus. Some joined Paul, in particular a man called Dionysius and a woman called Damaris. Women were not part of the Areopagus but somehow she heard Paul and believed. And there were others. Paul's preaching was not a failure, despite what some say. The word was preached and, as always, it accomplished what God purposed. For every soul that is saved there is rejoicing in heaven. Let there be rejoicing here on earth also.

Paul in Corinth

Acts 18:1-11

After preaching the gospel to pagans in the Areopagus at Athens, Paul 'departed from among them' (17:33). His address to this audience began with the creation and ended with the appointed day when God will judge the world in righteousness. Jesus of Nazareth, who God raised from the dead, is the ordained judge. All people must repent and worship the God of creation and judgment. All must believe in Jesus who was crucified and buried but rose from the dead.

Paul was mocked by some in the Areopagus but was not threatened or chased out of town. He left Athens of his own accord to go to Corinth. 'After these things' gives no indication of the time Paul spent in Athens (18:1); many think it was just a few weeks. By contrast, we are told that he spent eighteen months in Corinth. Paul may have wanted to move on to Corinth because it was the provincial capital. While in Corinth he received divine confirmation of being called to minister in this city.

In examining this account and seeking to learn from it, I propose three points: firstly, Corinth and its people; secondly, synagogue sidelined; and thirdly, certainty of God's presence and protection.

1. Corinth and its people

Corinth was a Greek city but not like Athens. It was a commercial city and also the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It was strategically situated above the narrow neck of land or isthmus that separates mainland Greece from its southern peninsula called Peloponnese. Apparently Nero attempted to cut a canal along the 6km length of this isthmus, but it was not until the 1800's that a canal was dug. In Roman times small ships were actually hauled across this isthmus on wheels, while the cargo of larger ships was unloaded and carried from one side to the other.

Transport across this isthmus brought lots of business to Corinth. It was a trading city and centre of commerce. It was a cosmopolitan city, the home for people from many different places. It had a synagogue which Paul attended when he came to Corinth. But there was a downside to being a trading city. Sailors and traders in the city were fond of prostitutes. The presence of the temple of Aphrodite, with its thousand or more temple prostitutes, did not help the reputation of the city. In fact, its reputation for gross sexual immorality gave rise to the term, 'corinthianise' meaning to engage in sexual immorality. Pervasive and perverse sexual immorality was a challenge to Christians living in this city- see Paul's letters to the Corinthians- just as pervasive adultery and homosexuality are a challenge to Christians today.

2. Synagogue sidelined

Paul would have gone to the synagogue in Corinth to worship on the Sabbath. It was probably there that he met a fellow Jew by the name of Aquila. He was from the district of Pontus, just to the north of where Paul was from. Aquila and his wife Priscilla (or Prisca) had recently come to Corinth from Rome. They were expelled from Rome, like all Jews, by Emperor Claudius in AD49. The historian Suetonius writes of this expulsion edict being given because the Jews in Rome were rioting 'at the instigation of Chrestus'. It is thought that 'Chrestus' was 'Christos' or Christ. We know from reading this book of Acts how ready the Jews were to riot when the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached. One

of the other apostles may have taken the gospel to Rome, although Jews from Rome were at Pentecost so would have taken the gospel to this city on their return.

Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla because not only were they fellow Jews, but they shared the same skill as tentmakers or leather workers. The term 'tentmaker' has been adopted in mission circles to refer to missionaries who work in a business while preaching the gospel in a cross-cultural situation. We had a friend who came to India from Canada and set up a branch of his business making conveyor belts. 'Tentmakers' may be the only people allowed into some countries.

The apostle Paul was tent making to support himself; his money had run out. It seems that when Silas and Timothy came they brought funds from churches in Macedonia, and with this support Paul could preach full time. As a missionary, Paul was careful not to burden people by asking for a preaching or lecture fee- a common practice in that day. But he did accept support and gifts from established churches, and taught that ruling elders should be supported by their congregation (1Tim 5:18). There are circumstances where ministers of the gospel become tentmakers, but this is not the norm according to the Bible.

Even while working with Aquila as a tentmaker, Paul was in the synagogue every Sabbath explaining to Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and persuading them to repent and believe in Jesus and be saved. He was doing his when Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia. Paul must have been delighted to see these brothers again, although he may not have been as discouraged as some commentators make out; some say that after failing in Athens, coming to Corinth alone and running out of money Paul was quite discouraged, even depressed. Paul did not want to be ministering alone, but he would have seen Aquila and Priscilla as God's provision for the moment.

How did Silas and Timothy know Paul was in Corinth? Did they go to Athens first - it was from Athens that he sent for them to join him (17:15). It may be that Timothy, at least, came to Athens while Paul was there and that Paul sent him back to Thessalonica because of some trouble there (1Thess 3:1,2). They both came from Macedonia to join Paul here in Corinth. They came with good news and with gifts from the churches. Compelled by the Spirit, Paul threw himself into ministry to the Jews, telling them that Jesus is the Christ (18:5). Until this point, his ministry in the synagogue had not been actively opposed- nor had it brought any converts. This was about to change, as he might have expected.

The Jews started opposing Paul and blaspheming- either Paul's name or the Lord's name (18:6); judging by Paul's reaction it was probably the latter. Paul could not listen to blasphemy regarding the name of Jesus so he left; he left after ritually shaking his coat against them. I say 'ritually' because Jesus told his disciples to shake the dirt off their shoes against any town in Israel that did not receive them, as a symbol of divine judgment upon them (Luke 10:11-12). Paul shook out his garment saying, 'Your blood be on your own heads' (18:6). Preaching the gospel demands love and great patience, but there may be circumstances in which we have to shake the dust off our shoes as a sign of God's judgment, and leave.

Paul walked out of the synagogue in Corinth leaving the Jews and going to the Gentiles. He did not have to go far. A God-fearer welcomed Paul into his house, which was next door to the synagogue (18:7). The man called Justus, or Titius Justus, or Gaius Titius Justus (Rom 16:23), must have believed after hearing Paul preaching in the synagogue. It was not long before others joined the meeting in his house. When the ruler of the synagogue did so it must have sent shock waves through the synagogue—and delight to Paul and the church. Crispus believed on the Lord with all his household, and they were baptized (18:8, cf. 1Cor 1:14).

Many Corinthians joined the church after hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus. Knowing what happened in most other places where he preached, Paul must have been waiting for the Jews to go beyond ridicule and blasphemy, and launch a violent attack. After what had happened before, he could not be confident that the Roman authorities would protect him. Paul must have felt vulnerable, even afraid.

If you or I are attacked by a person or a gang we go to the police and trust we will receive justice. This is not the case for many Christians today. They dare not go to the police if they are attacked, or their church is burnt down, because the authorities hate Christians. The best they can hope for is that the police will turn a blind eye and not arrest them for disturbing the peace. As the church in Corinth grew, Paul knew there would be trouble from the Jews and he could not be confident that the Roman authorities would deal with him justly.

3. Certainty of God's protection

Knowing the fears that Paul had, the Lord in his mercy spoke to Paul in a night vision (18:9). This was not the first vision of the risen Jesus that Paul had been given. At his conversion he saw a blinding light and heard the risen Jesus speak to him. He had also had a night vision from the Lord when he was called into Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). In fact, that was the most recent vision and call Paul had. He had moved on from Macedonia to Achaia, to Athens and Corinth. Paul was ministering according to the call to bear God's name to the Gentiles, but a more specific call was reassuring. He did not doubt God's presence with him here in Corinth, but hearing the Lord's voice in this vision strengthened him greatly.

The coming of Silas and Timothy was a blessing but this word from the Lord was an even greater blessing. The Lord gave Paul three instructions, along with three promises. The Lord who knows and determines the future revealed some of that future to Paul, and the part he was to play in that future. Are these instructions relevant to us today? Can we take hold of these promises today? Let us look at what the Lord said to Paul.

'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent' (18:9). Paul had reason to be afraid, as indicated; who would help him if the Jews went on the rampage? The Lord told him not to be afraid because, 'I am with you' (18:10). This is the same promise Jesus gave before his death: 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Mat 28:20). This is a promise for every child of God seeking to witness the name of Jesus. Missionaries should not go out alone; human partnership is important. But they must also remember that the Lord is with them. This promise was very real to us on many occasions while on the mission field.

We can set out the instructions and the promises given to Paul as follows (see Larkin)

Do not be afraid/ I am with you

Keeping on speaking/ No one is going to harm you

Do not be silent/I have many people in this city

Persecution will come when we are preaching the gospel and witnesses the name of Jesus. If we fear persecution we will stop speaking; we will go silent. The Lord told Paul to keep speaking because he would protect him from harm. For a man who had been stoned and beaten and locked up, this promise meant something. If it does not mean anything to us today maybe we should ask why? Pray that it is not because we are keeping silent about our faith in Jesus. Are we really out there witnessing the name of Jesus as we should be? We may soon be forced to declare whose we are and whom we serve. Silence will no longer be an option!

'For I have many people in this city' (18:11). This is a clear statement of the truth of divine election yet few commentators see this. Some speak of the proconsul as being one of the Lord's people. The Lord of course, moved him to make the decision that he made but this is not what these words mean. Others speak of the Lord's foreknowledge, but the words refer to predestination, just like the reference to 'those appointed to eternal life' in Pisidian Antioch (13:48).

The Lord had his elect in the city of Corinth in the first century- and that despite the wickedness of this city. He was calling Paul to bring the gospel to these people because 'faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God' (Rom 10:17). Not all would be saved- just the elect. Paul did not know who these were so he preached to as many people as he could. He preached for a year and a half and the Lord blessed the word preached and brought in his chosen people in Corinth. May the Lord bless the word preached in our city and bring in his chosen people today. You are hearing the word preached; may the Lord bless it unto you today.

Gallio's ruling

Acts 18:12-22

The city of Corinth was a provincial capital and a major trading city in the ancient world. It was a cosmopolitan city, famous for commerce- and corruption. The apostle Paul arrived in this city in the year AD50, most probably, and stayed for at least eighteen months. His time there was challenging and eventful. It was a time of personal blessing- the risen Jesus spoke to Paul in a vision, a time of church growth, and a time when the government made a momentous decision regarding the legal status of the church. Paul arrived in Corinth alone and out of funds. Some suggest he was quite discouraged but there is no evidence of this, apart from the Lord telling him not to be afraid (18:9). He had reason to be afraid of Jews who opposed the gospel- they had beaten and stoned him before. But the Lord graciously reassured Paul of his presence, of his protection and of the fact that he had many elect in this city who needed to hear the gospel.

Paul was leading the church that met in the house of Justus, next door to the synagogue. The ruler of the synagogue believed and joined them. Many others, both Jew and Gentile must have joined them. Although no numbers are given, we can say this because opposition from the Jews continued and came to a head after some eight to nine months. Luke mentions the passing of time but not specific dates. We mention dates because of an inscription found at Delphi in Greece giving the dates when Gallio became proconsul of Achaia (18:12). As we look at the remainder of Paul's time in Corinth we will look at Gallio's ruling on church/state relations, and then Paul's return to Antioch via Cenchrea, Ephesus and Jerusalem.

Before taking up these points we should note that while in Corinth, Paul continued to pray for the churches back in Macedonia. Silas and Timothy came from these churches with news and with funds, and Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians while in Corinth, the earliest of the books of the NT. We note two others books in the NT that are letters written to the church in Corinth after Paul left. These letters help us understand the type of people who lived in this city, and how the Lord graciously saved them from gross wickedness; some of them were sexually immoral, adulterers, homosexuals, idolaters, thieves, and drunkards (1Cor 6:9-11). Corinth was not unlike the city in which we live! God has his elect in our city just as he had his elect in Corinth, so let us, like Paul be active in bringing the gospel to these people.

1. Ruling on church and state

Who was Gallio? He was the proconsul appointed by the Roman senate to rule the province of Achaia (18:12). He was the son of a Spanish orator but was adopted by a prominent family in Rome. His brother, Seneca, became a famous Stoic philosopher. Gallio was said to be a charming fellow. He took up his appointment in Corinth in July 51. The Jews thought that with a new, inexperienced proconsul in town it was an ideal time to launch an attack upon Paul. So they came together and brought Paul before the imperial court or '*bema*'. There is no mention of violence or a riot; the Jews may have been careful after what happened in Rome with Claudius expelling all the Jews from the city.

Gallio was on the judgment seat ready to hear the charges the Jews would bring against Paul. They charged Paul with, 'persuading men to worship God contrary to the law' (18:13). Back in their

synagogue they no doubt charged him with breaking Jewish law by preaching Jesus as the promised Messiah. But would a Gentile understand such a charge? More likely they were charging Paul with breaking Roman law by preaching another religion. Not all religions were legal under Roman law, but Judaism was. They did not, like the Jews at Thessalonica and other places, accuse Jesus of preaching Jesus as another king. Was this because the Lord was protecting Paul according to what he spoke in the vision? Was the Lord restraining the Jews; was he causing confusion? The Lord was certainly moving the heart of the proconsul.

Paul was ready to defend himself against the charge of the Jews. He preached Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jewish hope. He saw himself as a fulfilled Jew not as the leader of a new sect. But Paul did not get to make a defence. Before he could open his mouth Gallio dismissed the case (18:14-15). They had no evidence and made no accusation of any wicked or violent crime being committed by Paul, so he had no case to answer. Their accusation related to worshipping God, a matter on which Gallio was not prepared to make any judgment. He would have been aware of what happened in Rome with the Jews rioting over the name 'Chrestus' or Christ. If they wanted to argue among themselves about names or words then that was for them to sort out (18:15). Of course, if they wanted to riot about such matters he would be obliged to keep the peace- probably by expelling them from the city.

And so Gallio 'drove them from the judgment seat' (18:16). The Jews were taken aback by the swift dismissal of their case. They probably started contending with the proconsul- this would explain his driving them from his court, which also explains what happened after this. When 'they' grabbed hold of the ruler of the synagogue and started beating him, Gallio turned a blind eye (18:17). The NKJV says 'all the Greeks' grabbed Sosthenes, but other versions simply have 'they all' turned on him. It is possible, but unlikely, that the Jews turned on the synagogue ruler; he later became a believer and joined the church (1Cor 1:1). More likely it was the Greeks who started beating Sosthenes, not because of anti-Semitism but because of reluctance to leave the court when their case was dismissed.

The decision made that day by Gallio had far-reaching effects for the church. He, in effect, declared Christianity to be a legal religion within the Roman Empire. Although churches were being established separate from the synagogues, Gallio declared that they were one and the same religion. This was a precedent, a ruling which gave the church protection under Roman law for at least a decade. The Jews could no longer accuse the Christians of being a sect or illegal religion.

This ruling by Gallio has had implications for church-state relations ever since. Such relations continue as a contentious issue within the church and outside the church. There is other teaching in the Bible related to this issue, such as Romans 13 and 1Timothy 2. Some churches have the head of state as the head of their church, while other churches are completely independent. As the civil ruler, Gallio refused to get involved in the affairs of the church. This is the position maintained in our Confession; 'The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments' (WCF XXIII). The civil magistrate is responsible for maintaining law and order but not regulating matters of belief and doctrine. We maintain freedom of religion in our constitution. On the other hand, the church is not to become a political body seeking to rule in civil matters- as happened when Constantine was Emperor. It is not to become the government having the 'power of the sword' (Rom 13:4). Many civil rulers want to rule over the church- even some elected to our parliament. Let them

pay heed to this ruling of Gallio and let us be in prayer for the members of our Government. The Lord can overrule just as he did through Gallio.

2. Return to Antioch

If Gallio's decision was eight or nine months after Paul arrived in Corinth then he spent another nine or ten months in this city- into the year AD52. When Luke writes in verse 18 that Paul 'remained many days', he may be referring to this period of eighteen months, or maybe to an additional period. In the end, Paul decided to leave Corinth and return to his home church in Syria. Aquila and Priscilla decided to go with him. They would set up a new branch of their business in Ephesus. They went down to Cenchrea to get a ship to Ephesus.

At Cenchrea Paul had his hair cut off, 'because of a vow he had taken' (18:18). This was a common Jewish practice; the Nazirite vow meant not cutting your hair and not drinking wine, often for a period of three months. Paul probably did this as a vow of thanksgiving for the Lord's protecting him in Corinth- now he was leaving he ended his vow. Some suggest he was going to Jerusalem to offer up his cut hair (cf. Acts 21:24, Numb 6), but Luke makes no mention of this. According to our Bible (NKJV), Paul was going to Jerusalem to keep the feast- the Passover (18:21). It was also his practice to go up to Jerusalem at the end of each mission tour to report to the 'mother' church. Luke does not make a big thing of this vow and nor should we- grammatically is might even refer to Aquila.

They came to Ephesus, the provincial capital of Asia Minor. Paul would spend his next extended period of ministry in Ephesus but that time was not now. He went to the synagogue at Ephesus and 'reasoned with the Jews'; but even though they asked him to stay he did not consent (18:19, 20). Aquila and Priscilla stayed, and later met with a Jew from North Africa called Apollos. Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem, because of changing weather conditions that affected sailing, or because of Passover, or both. He was also eager to return to his church after some three years in the road. While setting sail from Ephesus he told his friends he would be back, 'God willing' (18:21).

Paul arrived at Caesarea and went up and greeted the church- almost certainly the Jerusalem church. He then went down to Antioch where he would have reported on his second mission tour. He had set out with Silas, and took Timothy onto the team at Lystra. The men must have remained in Corinth, or gone back to Macedonia, because they are not referred to after Paul left Corinth. Paul had a lot to report to his home church in Antioch. We can imagine them listening intently to all that the Lord had done through Paul and Silas in extending the kingdom of God. The ministry was not easy- no ministry of the gospel ever is! He faced opposition from the Jews in every place but some believed, along with God-fearing Gentiles and pagans. These believers formed the nucleus of a church in each place.

As Paul preached the gospel, the Lord blessed the preached word and brought in his elect in each place. Just as at Pisidian Antioch where 'as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed' (13:48), so at Corinth the Lord had 'many people' (18:10). Gospel ministry is never done without a calling from the Lord, and the ongoing presence of the Lord. Apparent failures are not a reason to change methods of ministry or places. The Lord told Paul to keep speaking, and Paul told Timothy to preach the word in season and out of season even though people turn their ears away from the truth (2Tim 4:2-4). This is the task of an evangelist. This is our task.

Paul's third mission

Acts 18:23-19:7

The first mission of the church was by Paul and Barnabas. They were sent out by the church at Antioch after the Holy Spirit spoke in a prayer meeting. That mission was to Cyprus and the province of Galatia, including the region of Phrygia. On the second mission, Paul took Silas and set out to visit the places he had been with Barnabas on the first mission. He pressed on to the west but was stopped from going to Ephesus before being called to go to Macedonia. This mission ended after 3-4 years with his return to Antioch. He had a stopover in Ephesus on the way home; Aquila and Priscilla stayed on in Ephesus. When Paul left Ephesus he told the Jews he would return, 'God willing', as soon as possible (18:21).

After spending 'some time' in Antioch, Paul set off for Ephesus, so it seems (18:23). Luke gives no detail about this home visit, about a call, about the church or even about mission partners. Maybe Paul did not see this as a new mission journey but most Bible teachers refer to verse 23 as the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. While Paul was in Antioch, and while he was travelling through Galatia and Phrygia strengthening the disciples in the churches, things were happening at Ephesus. A man called Apollos appears on the scene. So let us look at this interlude under the subheading, 'Meanwhile at Ephesus'. Our other subheading will be, 'Missing the Spirit'.

1. Meanwhile at Ephesus

A certain Jew named Apollos showed up in Ephesus after Paul left. He came from Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was a huge city, second only to Rome. Two of its six suburbs were entirely Jewish. Alexandria was home to the Jewish philosopher, Philo. It was where the OT was translated into Greek. It was where Apollos was born and educated. What brought Apollos to Ephesus we are not told but Ephesus was a major trading city in the Empire. It was a port city with roads leading into the rich hinterland of Asia Minor. Development in this hinterland caused the harbour to silt up, so by the time of Paul trade was decreasing.

The other attraction of Ephesus was its temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. This temple was that of the Greek goddess Artemis (or Diana in Latin). This was a huge temple covering an area the size of a football field. It had its temple prostitutes, like the temple for Aphrodite in Corinth. Artemis was a fertility goddess, depicted as a many-breasted woman. The actual idol was a black stone of unknown origin but claimed to have fallen from heaven (19:35); it may have been a meteorite.

There was also a Jewish synagogue in Ephesus which Paul had already visited and been favourably received. Apollos came to the synagogue and, having been educated in the Scriptures and maybe in oratory, he spoke with eloquence and boldness. He was 'fervent in spirit and spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord' (18:25). Many versions have, 'taught accurately the things of Jesus'; even if Apollos knew about Jesus he did not know the essence of the gospel, the cross and the resurrection. He knew only John's baptism which was based on repentance not the finished work of Christ.

It was only at Pentecost, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples that they understood the gospel, the good news that Jesus died as our atonement for sin. John preached repentance and practised a baptism of repentance, but the apostles could now preach repentance and the forgiveness of sin. They could now baptize in the name of the Holy Spirit; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. John spoke about one coming after him, one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, but Apollos did not know this prophecy had been fulfilled. If he was like the other disciples at Ephesus he had not even heard about the Holy Spirit (19:2). He may have heard about Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Judea but even the apostles did not understand and believe in Jesus until the Spirit came upon them. It was then that they preached repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Apollos was a powerful preacher but it was in his own power that he preached. He was reaching the minds of people but not the heart because he himself had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Aquila and Priscilla, who had been taught the fullness of the gospel by Paul in Corinth, were able to take Apollos aside and explain to him the way of God more accurately. They did not confront him in public; they probably took him to their home to teach these truths and pray with him. Apollos it seems, was humble enough to listen to these simple leather workers.

Knowing the Scriptures as he did, Apollos, like Paul, saw how Jesus fulfilled all the OT prophecies about the Messiah. It was like a new dawn for this young man. He now taught with the fervour and power of the Holy Spirit. The Jews in Ephesus were blessed. When he desired to move on to Achaia the brethren in Ephesus gave him a letter of recommendation (18:27). He made quite an impact in Corinth also, picking up where Paul left off. He encouraged the believers and also took on the Jews in public debate, showing them from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (18:28). Was Apollos more effective in dealing with the Jews than Paul? He did not set out to get a personal following but sadly this is what happened to some extent, with some in Corinth saying, 'I am of Paul' and others, 'I am of Apollos' (1Cor 1:12). Paul describes the ministry as, 'I planted, Apollos watered and God gave the increase' (1Cor 3:6), and Apollo no doubt saw his ministry in Corinth in the same way.

2. Missing the Spirit

Apollos was not the only one in Ephesus to know only the baptism of John. When the apostle Paul arrived back in Ephesus he found a group of men who had received only the baptism of John; they had never heard of the Holy Spirit. Were these men in the same fellowship as Apollos? Had Apollos taught them? We are not told but they shared the same lack of knowledge about the Holy Spirit.

Paul had come overland from Antioch, 'having passed through the upper regions' (19:1). This time he was not stopped by the Holy Spirit (see 16:6). By the time he reached Ephesus, Apollos had gone to Corinth. Paul met twelve or so disciples who had an incomplete knowledge of the gospel. They did not know about Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit to all who believe. Down in Samaria there were believers who had not received the Holy Spirit, who had only been baptized in the Lord Jesus; Peter and John laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (8:16-17). They were more advanced than the men in Ephesus who only knew the baptism of John but were still lacking in their knowledge of the gospel.

What is full baptism? It is baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke about such baptism (Mat 28:19) but it was some time before the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost, and even more time before this baptism became widely known. If Paul came to Ephesus in AD52 it was just twelve years since Pentecost. The apostles were focused on witnessing in Judea and Samaria in those early years, as commanded by Jesus (1:8), so it is not surprising that places like Alexandria and Ephesus had not heard about Pentecost or grasped its significance.

When Paul questioned these disciples about receiving the Holy Spirit when they believed they told him they had never heard of the Holy Spirit (19:2 notice 'when you believed' not 'after you believed'). Clearly their faith was deficient and they were not regenerate, but they are called 'disciples'; we must keep in mind the unique context and not use this incident to argue for a two-stage conversion theology, as some do. They had not heard about the Holy Spirit so Paul explained to them that Jesus was the one John said was coming after him and that when Jesus returned to his Father he sent the Holy Spirit (19:4). When they heard the full gospel they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, presumably by Paul (19:5). At the same time Paul laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit, and 'they spoke with tongues and prophesied' (19:6).

It is not written that those in Samaria spoke in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit, although it was the case with those in the household of Cornelius, and here at Ephesus. Speaking in tongues was a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, but clearly not the only sign. Paul lists many fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, and in 1Corinthians 13 indicates that speaking in tongues without having love means nothing. 'Do all speak in tongues?' he asks in a rhetorical question (1Cor 12:30).

This incident at Ephesus does not support the teaching of the Pentecostal church that baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second blessing or baptism. These men had never heard of the Holy Spirit. If anyone today is baptized without hearing about the Holy Spirit they have not heard the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations, 'baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' Anyone baptising without reference to the Holy Spirit is not obeying this command of Jesus. Moreover, we must not see this as Paul re-baptising these men, but as these men being baptized into Christ once and for all.

We live in post-Pentecost days. The baptism we practice is a single baptism in the name of the Triune God. To practice a second baptism of the Holy Spirit is not Biblical. There were just twelve men in Ephesus upon whom the Holy Spirit came after they believed. There is no mention of other believers in Ephesus, or in Corinth, receiving a second baptism of the Holy Spirit. Men like Crispus heard the gospel, believed and were baptized (18:8). The Philippian jailer believed and was baptized (16:33).

Some try to compare the situation of these twelve men at Ephesus with so-called nominal Christians today. But nominal Christians have heard the gospel, including the truth of the Holy Spirit. What they lack is faith, not knowledge of the Holy Spirit. For sure, they need the Holy Spirit to give them this faith, and they may be close to the kingdom, but nominal Christians are not saved. There is no being half in and half out of heaven. There is no second baptism for 'super' Christians.

Miracles and magic

Acts 19:8-20

The Jews in Thessalonica accused Paul and Silas of turning the world upside down through the preaching of Christ (17:6). If this was not exactly true of their preaching in Thessalonica or Philippi it certainly was at Ephesus. Ephesus competed with Corinth for the title of 'most pagan city in the Roman world'. Ephesus had the temple of Artemis or Diana with its religious prostitute's; idolatry and immorality go hand in hand. Idolatry and superstition go hand in hand. The people of Ephesus were into the occult in a big way. Magicians, sorcerers, clairvoyants, and the like were attracted to this city. But when the gospel was preached and people believed in Jesus, lives were changed. We read of books on magic to the value of \$10m being burnt. We read of craftsmen who made idols and religious trinkets losing trade. Ephesus was being shaken by the gospel. The gospel was turning this city upside down- or from Paul's perspective, right side up. Take note that Paul said nothing about these pagan practices; he simply preached the gospel.

I wonder what effect a revival would have in our city; in the churches of our city. Think of all the carved images, gold crucifixes and religious trinkets that would be thrown out of churches and homes. I recall a Hindu lady throwing idols out of her house when she believed in Jesus. Think of all the horoscopes and the pornography that would be burnt, along with books on evolution. What would be thrown out of your house if you really believed in Jesus?

The apostle Paul came to Ephesus on his third mission; he stayed in this city some three years (20:31), longer than in any other place. This was his last major mission. As with other cities, he first went to the Jews to tell them that the promised Messiah had come. Our first point will be Paul's moving out of the synagogue, followed by 'miracles' and then 'magic' as our second and third points.

1. Move from the synagogue

Ephesus was a port city with access to the hinterland of Asia Minor- before it silted up. As a city of commerce it attracted Jews, who built a synagogue. Paul had visited this synagogue while on his way home from Corinth, and was well received (18:20). Returning less than a year later, he went back to the synagogue and spoke boldly about the kingdom of God, the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus (Mark 1:15). Reasoning from the Scriptures, he explained that Jesus is the Messiah. He preached the gospel of grace, repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ (20:21).

Some Jews believed in Jesus but others were hardened (19:9). How terrible it is when men and women become hardened to the gospel of grace. It is difficult to understand this response but it is one of the biggest problems we face in preaching the gospel today. Some Jews became obstructive and abusive. Some spoke evil of the Way during worship services. When this started Paul knew it was time to leave the synagogue, as he did at Corinth. The Jews had heard the gospel; as for those who rejected it, their 'blood was on their own heads' (18:6).

After three months Paul left the synagogue with the disciples. He took the church to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Who was Tyrannus? It is thought he was a philosopher or orator. Who paid the rent? Scholars argue about such details. Paul may have had the place rent free because, according to one

Greek manuscript, he held his meetings between 11am and 4pm. The practice of taking a siesta goes way back in that part of the world. When Tyrannus finished his classes at 11am he gave Paul use of his hall. Paul worked in tent making early in the morning (20:34). The believers and others gathered to listen to Paul during the heat of the day. Paul may have visited homes in the evenings (20:20).

For two years the apostle kept on preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and calling people to repent and believe in Jesus. With him were Aquila and Priscilla, as well as Timothy and Erastus (19:22). Luke tells us that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus (19:10). Roads radiated out from Ephesus just as they do from the city of Sydney. Along these roads were towns like Colossae, Laodicea, Pergamum and Smyrna. Paul wrote a letter to the Colossians in which he indicated that they had not seen him and that he had only heard of their faith. It seems new believers who heard Paul preaching in the lecture hall took the gospel to these outlying places. Many years later the apostle John had contact with seven churches in Asia (Rev 2 and 3). After Paul left the synagogue it seems the Jews left him alone. Indeed, many Jews believed, along with Greeks or Gentiles (19:10, 18).

2. Miracles

Like the other apostles, Paul was empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform 'signs and wonders and mighty deeds' (2Cor 12:12, Rom 15:19). He healed a lame man at Lystra and cast an evil spirit out of a girl at Philippi. Those miracles were signs affirming the power of Jesus in the preaching of the gospel, to pagans in particular. Pagans prayed to other gods for good harvests, for healing, for deliverance from curses and evil spirits. When they heard the gospel and saw the power of Jesus demonstrated in miracles, many believed. They needed a lot of teaching in order to understand that Jesus is not like their man-made gods but is the almighty creator, and is also gracious and compassionate. Jesus is a personal saviour and Lord. Paul taught these things, as well as the righteous demands of this holy God, as he met with the disciples daily in the school of Tyrannus.

While working as a tentmaker and teaching 'God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul' (19:11). The miracles were not initiated by Paul; he may not have been aware of what was going on. It was a bit like people looking to be healed through Peter's shadow (5:15). It was also like the sick lady coming to touch the hem of Jesus' coat (Luke 8:43f). What happened with Paul was that sweat cloths he wore around his head and his waist were being taken and used to heal sick and demon-possessed people. Some tennis fans manage to catch the sweat bands that big-name players hurl into the crowd after a match. I don't know what they do with these but I am sure they don't use them to heal people.

Paul was known as the man who preached Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus who died and rose from the dead. The pagans in Ephesus wanted a god who was powerful. Listening to Paul they turned to the God he preached, namely Jesus. This God was more powerful than their own gods. In what some describe as a 'power encounter' Jesus came out on top. In working these miracles God was graciously affirming the gospel preached by the apostle Paul. There was the danger however, that they would take the name of Jesus and use it as they did the names of their many different gods. We see this happening in the following verses. We saw it with the pagans in Lystra when they started worshipping Paul and Barnabas.

Even so, these signs and wonders demonstrated the superior, indeed supreme, power of God in the physical world, making the people listen to what this supreme God had to say about the spiritual world. Medical missionaries often treat patients brought to them after witchdoctors or pagan priests have failed. I can testify to a Hindu being converted after hearing prayers in the name of Jesus and receiving proper medical treatment for her sick child.

We believe what is written here in the word of God with regard to these cloths being used to heal people but we do not see it repeated or taught as a practice to be adopted by the church. Televangelists who post out handkerchiefs they have prayed over to people who send money in the mail cannot use this text to support such practices. Why? Firstly, as just stated, Paul did not conduct this as his ministry and secondly, it was not done for money. We must understand the difference between miracles and magic, a difference some Jews in Ephesus failed to understand and some preachers today also fail to understand.

3. Magic

All manner of occult practices were pedalled in Ephesus. The city was like a huge, ongoing, 'mind, body and spirit' festival. It was a bit like walking down the main street of Glebe or Newtown. Among those involved in such practices were some itinerant Jewish exorcists. These men took no notice of the prohibition of divination and sorcery in the Mosaic Law (Deut 19:10). A man called Sceva made out he was a Jewish chief priest, and his seven sons assisted him in his exorcism business (19:13, 14). They may have done this in the name of Yahweh, with limited success; if this name worked without fail they would not have been looking for another name.

The Jews held that God's name was too holy to utter. The idea of a secret, unutterable or unpronounceable name fitted right into the pagan culture of Ephesus. A lot of divination and sorcery was about names that were powerful, and secrecy added to the mystique. We sometimes hear children playing 'Abra cadabra'. Mumbo jumbo names were dreamt up and preserved with great secrecy. Some documents called the 'Ephesian letters', containing spells and magical formulae have been discovered, despite the mass burning of such books recorded here in Acts (19:19).

The Jewish exorcists decided to use the name of Jesus while attempting to cast out evil spirits. 'We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches' they said to the evil spirit (19:13). When the sons of Sceva used the name of Jesus in their magic it backfired. The demon answered, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?' (19:15). What a shock! They were exposed as charlatans. They were dabbling in something beyond their knowledge and power to control. Not only was their ritual exposed, but the man with the demon pounced on them and beat them. They fled from his house naked and bleeding (19:16). They not only had 'egg on their face', as we say, but had lots of bruises on their bodies.

This encounter, this 'power encounter' if you like, became the talk of the town. It would seem that nothing like this had happened before. These deeply superstitious people were shaken to the core. Using the name of Jesus almost got these Jewish exorcists killed. Both Jews and Greeks were overcome with fear. They decided to be more careful in using the name of Jesus. How come Paul used

this name all the time in his preaching and nothing happened to him? Paul, of course, knew Jesus as his personal saviour and Lord.

Being a disciple of Jesus means knowing not just the name but the person of Jesus. It means becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus- the old has gone and the new has come (2Cor 5:17). When the Hindu lady believed in Jesus she threw out every last one of the idols from her house. Many believers in Ephesus did not do this. Note that it was believers who were shaken by this incident; it was believers who came confessing and bringing their books on magic (19:18). They believed in Jesus and were baptized but did not leave their old ways; they were syncretistic. Syncretism is a huge problem in the church today.

What happened after this incident in Ephesus was like a revival. Members of the church came confessing their sin and throwing their books on magic into the bonfire. They had held onto these just in case Christianity did not work. If Jesus did not have the power to answer their prayer then these old names and rituals might come in handy. I have seen this happen, seen Christians go off to Hindu priests after praying to Jesus! Have you left your old ways and become a new creation in Christ Jesus? Have you surrendered yourself and all you have completely to Jesus?

An old hymn says, 'I surrender all, all to Jesus I surrender'- it is not heard much these days- I wonder why? It is not unusual for people to surrender only certain things to Jesus. They will not let Jesus touch their job or their bank account. Some even refuse to give a tithe to the Lord; remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. Do you have anything that you have not surrendered to the Lord, any old ways or secret sins that you are clinging to?

Following this revival in Ephesus the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed (19:20). When the name of the Lord is honoured and revered, when people truly fear the Lord and worship him, when people surrender all they are and all they have to Jesus, the witness of the church will be authentic and powerful, and will bear fruit to the glory of God.

Pagans riot in Ephesus

Acts 19:21-41

The first-century city of Ephesus was very different to the western city in which we live, but not unlike some cities that can still be found. Cities with numerous temples, and streets lined with shops selling idols and items for offering to the gods, are still prevalent in Asia. Years ago I was in the city of Jabalpur in India, a city famous for soap stone or fake marble. A pastor took me to visit a man who earned a living by carving images of Hindu gods from this soft stone. This man sometimes came to the church but sadly had not yet left this business. Hindus bought these images for their homes and workplaces. Tourists bought them as souvenirs.

In Ephesus, men and women who believed in Jesus stopped buying such things. Before long, those who made silver images of the local goddess saw their sales declining. When the gospel of Jesus Christ changes lives, certain professions and businesses will be negatively impacted- or should be. What professions or business would be impacted in our society? What will happen when the gods of sensuality and sex, of money and materialism, are no longer worshipped?

The apostle Paul spent two years preaching in Ephesus, and teaching daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Before this he taught for three months in the synagogue. The incident with the sons of Sceva brought fear to the heart of many citizens, both Jews and Greeks. They became serious about their faith. They burned their books on magic and no doubt destroyed the idols they had hidden away. The infant church was cleansed and revived, making its witness authentic and powerful. 'So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed' (19:20).

The apostle Paul thought about moving on from this city. The church had been established and elders appointed. 'Paul purposed in the Spirit' that after visiting the churches of Macedonia and Achaia and returning to Jerusalem he would set out for Rome (19:21). He speaks of this as a divine necessity, a leading of the Holy Spirit. He had completed the mission he was called to undertake in the region of Turkey and Greece. He was aware of the risen Lord's command to his disciples to be witnesses to the end of the earth (1:8). As far as the Roman world was concerned Spain was the next place to evangelise (Rom 15:24). Paul was going to 'see Rome' and make this his new base; the church was already established in Rome.

Leaving Ephesus Paul planned to visit the churches of Macedonia. He sent two of his colleagues, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to prepare for these visits. From his letter to the Corinthian church we learnt about a collection being made 'for the saints' in Jerusalem (1Cor 16:1-3). Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and may even have visited Corinth during his three years in Ephesus (2Cor 2:1). He probably sent Timothy and Erastus ahead to see that the collection was ready. Timothy joined Paul on the second mission and was one of Paul's most trusted partners in mission (1Cor 4:17, Phil 2:20-22). This Erastus is thought to be a different fellow to the one who was city treasurer at Corinth (Rom 16:23).

Apart from the initial opposition of the Jews, the church in Ephesus 'grew mightily' without opposition for a couple more years. Paul had been driven out of Thessalonica and Berea by the Jews, and asked to leave Philippi by the authorities after a local pagan complained. In Corinth the Jews accused Paul of

preaching an illegal religion but the Roman proconsul dismissed the case. Christianity was declared legal under Roman law.

In this book Luke is outlining the taking of the gospel to the ends of the earth. He is also making the point to Theophilus that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not some political or revolutionary cause but a way of faith and worship for law-abiding citizens. Luke is presenting an apologetic of the Christian faith. This is not to say that the gospel does not impact society.

In the early 1700's England was 'a moral quagmire and spiritual cesspool'; gambling and drunkenness were rife and newborns were exposed on the streets. Whitfield and Wesley began preaching and living the gospel; people changed and society was impacted for good. Ephesus was a city of moral depravity because of idolatry. The growth of the church impacted the economy of the city because much of the economy was based on idolatry. This impact came to a head with a silversmith fomenting a riot. We will review Luke's account under the headings: 'craftsmen stirred to act', 'crowd riots', and 'city clerk quells the riot'.

1. Craftsmen stirred to act

Demetrius was a silversmith. He made silver shrines of Diana or Artemis, a goddess worshipped by Greeks and Romans. In the temple of Diana in Ephesus was a strangely-shaped rock which may have had its origin as a meteorite- they claimed this rock 'fell down from heaven' (19:35). With imagination this rock appeared as a multi-breasted woman. As such it was regarded as the image of the mother goddess of Asia Minor, the goddess of fertility. Special festivals were held in honour of this goddess. F.F. Bruce suggested that it was at such a festival in AD55 that this trouble described by Luke broke out.

Demetrius belonged to a guild of silversmiths; he may have been the president of the guild. When he saw his business starting to decline he called the guild together and told them that this fellow Paul was to blame because he was telling people that 'they are not gods that are made with hands' (19:25, 26). Paul preached the God who made the whole world and everything in it. He preached a God who is not a lump of wood or stone shaped by men, a God who does not dwell in temples made by men (17:29). The Jews did not believe in other gods or the making of idols either, but unlike the Jews, Paul preached Jesus, the Son of God who died and rose from the dead, Jesus who is the way of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike, Jesus who is the appointed judge of all people. Gentiles were turning from idols to worship the true and living God, the God who is Spirit, not a piece of wood or stone.

Demetrius did not stop to consider the message Paul preached. He was not concerned about his soul, just his belly (Phil 3:19). His only concern was his business and his pocket. 'This trade of ours is in danger of falling into disrepute' he told his colleagues (19:27). Demetrius was smart enough to know that he and his friends losing their jobs was not going to get people stirred up. He needed to show that the religion and culture of the city was under attack. He told them that the temple of Diana was under threat and that the goddess worshipped by people across Asia and in the whole world was in danger of being defamed and destroyed (19:27). The gospel was affecting his trade no doubt, but his claim about the temple was exaggerated- not that Paul or the believers would be sorry to see the temple deserted or destroyed.

The exaggerated claim that everyone was worshipping this goddess is not unlike claims made by some groups and by a lot of advertising today. When rational and reasoned arguments cannot be advanced enemies of the gospel resort to opinion polls and statistics- not the truth. When scientific facts do not support their argument people start quoting what 'the majority' says. Like Demetrius, many are protecting their jobs or status when they run to the media or into the street protesting the preaching of the gospel.

There is nothing like religion or politics to get people stirred up, even today. Look at what happens when Muslims perceive that their prophet is being maligned or blasphemed. We see riots break out on the other side of the world. Riots break out in India if someone kills a cow that is sacred to the Hindus. Religious sentiments are often aroused in party politics. Demetrius was concerned about his pocket but used religious sentiment to stir up opposition against those who threatened his livelihood. Larkin comments that, 'Any Christianity worth its salt will be a challenge to the pocketbook, the flag and the shrine'.

2. Crowd riots

When the guild members heard Demetrius say that their great goddess was threatened they ran onto the street shouting, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' (19:28). Soon people from across the city were racing to join the crowd. They had no idea what the fuss was about (19:32) but joined in the riot. The crowd rushed into the stadium, having grabbed two of Paul's fellow believers on the way; Gaius who was from Derbe and Aristarchus from Thessalonica (20:4). The relics of this stadium or theatre can be seen today. It was at the end of the road that led from the harbour; it could hold 25,000 people.

When Paul heard what was happening he wanted to 'go into the people', presumably to address them (19:30). But he was the only one who thought this was a good idea. Did he plan to assert his Roman citizenship, or claim his rights under Roman law? Whatever his intentions, the disciples stopped him from going. Not only the disciples but some city officials or 'Asiarchs' sent messages pleading for Paul not to venture into the theatre (19:31). Who were these city officials? Some leading men of the city may have believed, although they are only referred to as 'friends'. Even so, it shows that Paul was well regarded by some of the city's leaders. 'Asiarchs' were elected to the governing assembly of the citizens. They were responsible to the Roman proconsul through the city clerk.

The rioting crowd packed the theatre shouting, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' - although some were shouting other things it seems. According to Luke, most did not even know why they were there (19:32). In the rush and the crush of people the Jews pushed Alexander to the front. The Jews were worried the crowd might turn on them, smashing their shops and beating them. Alexander waved to the crowd hoping they would listen to him make a defence (19:33). He wanted to distance himself and the Jews from what Paul and his companions were saying. He wanted to exonerate the Jews and blame the Christians. But the angry mob was in no mood to listen to a Jew pointing out differences between Jews and Christians. Neither worshipped their goddess. All Alexander did was stir the crowd further, such that they shouted for about two hours, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' (19:34).

When people get excited they love to shout. Crowd behaviour is studied by psychologists and sociologists. What happens at a football match or religious festival to make people trample people to death? In India we learned to stay clear of chanting crowds because mob mentality sometimes lead to people getting killed. As believers we get excited but instead of shouting slogans we lift out voices in praise to God. Some people shout from the sidelines of a game but make no noise when they come to worship God.

The mob at Ephesus kept on chanting. Thankfully they did not tear Alexander to pieces, or the two believers they had grabbed. It was good they did not know why they were there! They just screamed until they were hoarse. Demetrius provoked the riot but it seems he had nothing to say and did not accuse anyone, although he was no doubt pleased to hear the screaming.

3. City clerk quells the riot

The city clerk heard the rioting crowd. He knew how the Romans went about quelling riots; he wanted to avoid such an outcome. When the clerk stepped forward the crowd quieted down- out of respect or exhaustion or both. He assured them that Diana and her temple were not in danger as claimed by Demetrius because everyone knows that the Ephesians are 'the temple keepers of the great Artemis and of the sacred stone that fell down from the sky' (19:35 ESV). It is interesting that Demetrius used the same 'statistic', the whole world worships Diana, but to the opposite effect. The same use, or misuse, of statistics and polls continues today. It is also interesting that while the 'whole world worshipped' this goddess, there are none who do so today. One day all the gods and all the kingdoms of this world will be gone and only the kingdom of God and King Jesus will remain.

The clerk pleaded for the people to abide by the law. If Demetrius and his mates had a specific allegation to bring against Paul then they should do so before a court presided over by the proconsul (cf. Gallio at Corinth). The clerk refers to 'proconsuls' in general because the city may have been without a proconsul at this time. If they did not get satisfaction in the judiciary they could bring the matter the legislature or 'lawful assembly'. The crowd heeded the clerk and dispersed. They did not want the Romans coming down on them.

And so the believers were once again vindicated. Luke wants his readers to understand that believers are law-abiding citizens, to the extent that civil law does not conflict with God's holy law. This is how the gospel advances and God is glorified; God's people meeting together to worship Him, to learn how they are to live as God's people and to encourage one another in doing so. Who knows what effect God's people would have in this city if we lived the transformed lives that the Bible teaches us to live, and the Holy Spirit will help us to live.

Encouragement and final teaching

Acts 20:1-12

The apostle Paul was looking to visit Rome on what would be his fourth mission. He planned to make Rome his base for taking the gospel further west, to Spain (19:21, Rom 15:24). Paul had been called by the Lord to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles (9:15, 20:24). He was God's instrument in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

As a missionary Paul was not just focussed on baptising people but on establishing churches with a plurality of elders. Some missionaries today think their task is complete when they have baptized someone. But without proper shepherding, teaching and encouragement, those baptized may fall away. Furthermore, having established churches Paul returned when he could to encourage and give further teaching to these churches. He also wrote letters and prayed for these churches.

The first six verses of Acts 20 cover a lot of places and a considerable period of time, possibly a year. Paul's time at Ephesus had an eventful end with Demetrius stirring the city to riot against Paul and his colleagues for telling people that idols are not really gods. This incident shows the extent to which the gospel penetrated this pagan society. But the Lord preserved Paul, and the gospel was vindicated when the city clerk dismissed Demetrius and the crowd for not following due process of the law. Paul went through with his plan to visit Macedonia and Greece soon after this riot. He gathered the church at Ephesus to say farewell and departed for Macedonia (20:1). He had already sent Timothy and Erastus ahead (19:22).

1. Through Macedonia and Greece

In a single verse Luke tells us that after leaving Ephesus Paul went through Macedonia and came to Greece (20:2). Importantly, he also tells us that Paul 'encouraged them with many words' (20:2). Who are 'them'? It is the various churches in Macedonia. Paul visited the churches established during his second mission. He would have spoken to them in their meetings, encouraging them from the Scriptures. These were places Paul was chased out of by the Jews. The believers, no doubt, faced ongoing persecution but they were steadfast in the faith. Paul encouraged them with further teaching.

It is the words of Scripture that give us strength in times of difficulty, in times of trial and temptation. We dare not depend on ourselves in such times, or on worldly means of medication and meditation with things like yoga. We must turn to the Lord in prayer and meditate on his word. The Lord also encourages us through each other. As we meet together to worship the Lord we are encouraging one another are we not? I hope so!

While in Ephesus Paul wrote to the church at Corinth- the letter we call First Corinthians. From this letter we learn of various troubles in the church at Corinth. There was division over leaders- Paul, Apollos and Peter. There was immorality -a man had his father's wife. There was gluttony at the meal associated with the Lord's Supper, and other problems. Titus, who strangely is not mentioned at all by Luke, maybe because he was Luke's brother, had gone to Corinth and Paul was waiting for him to return with news from this church. After leaving Ephesus Paul went to Troas; he was anxious to find Titus (2Cor 2:13). He had opportunity to minister at Troas but left for Macedonia looking for Titus. It is

thought he found Titus at Philippi, and that he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians at this time (2Cor 7:13).

From Philippi Paul would have gone to Thessalonica and Berea collecting the givings of these churches towards the church in Jerusalem; the folks there were suffering from another famine (cf. 11:29). Paul was eager to remember the poor, especially in the church (Gal 2:10 and 6:10). He was especially keen for the Gentile churches to remember the 'mother church' and for the 'mother church' in Jerusalem to accept all these Gentile churches. As it turned out, Paul was attacked by the Jews when he got to Jerusalem with this gift (21:31).

The brothers mentioned by name in verse 4 were probably representatives from the different churches entrusted with delivering this gift. Great care must be taken when collecting money for the Lord's work; it seems even Paul was accused by some of pocketing this money, while at the other end it could be misused (cf. 6:1). Before reaching Greece, as in Athens and Corinth, Paul may have followed the Egnatian Way west and ministered at least to the border of the Roman province of Illyricum (Rom 15:19).

During the winter months of December, January and February, sailing in the Mediterranean ceased. Paul spent these three months in Corinth, during which time he wrote his letter to the Romans. We can reflect on this letter when we ask what things Paul was teaching in the churches at this time. Gaius, whose full name was Gaius Titus Justus, hosted Paul in Corinth (18:7, Rom 16:23). Timothy was with him, as was Sopater or Sosipater, a fellow Jew from Berea (20:4, Rom 16:21). The others listed here in verse 4 may have reached Corinth after Paul wrote to the Romans. Aristarchus and Secundus may have come with the collection from Thessalonica. The others were from Asia so may have been travelling with Paul; Timothy, who was from Lystra, certainly was. Gaius was from Derbe; Tychicus and Trophimus were from Ephesus. Tychicus was a 'beloved brother' who later carried Paul's letters from Rome to Ephesus and Colossae.

At the end of the winter, in AD 56-57 according to most scholars, Paul left Corinth to go Jerusalem. He planned to sail from Cenchræ and be back in Jerusalem for Passover. But he changed this plan after hearing that the Jews were plotting to kill him (20:3). They would have been watching the ports where Jews were boarding ships, maybe special pilgrim ships, heading for Palestine. Being on the same ship as men trying to kill you is not a good situation. Paul decided to change plans and take the overland route back through Macedonia. This meant he would not make it in time for Passover. He spent Passover, or 'the Days of Unleavened Bread' in Philippi instead (20:6) and tried to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost (20:16).

Luke must have been in Philippi because the writer changes back to the first person plural here in verse 5- after leaving off saying 'we' and 'us' in Acts 16:17. Luke sailed with Paul from Philippi, or the port town of Neapolis, to Troas after Passover. It took five days rather than the two days it took going in the opposite direction (16:11). Paul had sent most of his team ahead to wait for him and Luke at Troas (20:5). They may still have been attempting to foil Jewish plots to kill Paul.

2. Teaching in Troas

Paul and his party stayed in Troas seven days (20:6). At the end of this time, that is on the first day of the week, 'the disciples came together to break bread' (20:7). This is the first clear reference to Sunday becoming the day on which Christians met for worship. The Jews, of course, worshipped on Saturday, the seventh day. But as our Confession rightly states, the day we are to keep holy to the Lord 'from the resurrection of Christ was changed to the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day' (Westminster Confession of Faith XXI.8). The resurrection of Jesus had such an impact on the teaching and life of the early church that they kept Sunday as their holy day or Sabbath, not Saturday like the Jews, and not Friday, which has been adopted by Muslims.

Since Sunday was a working day in that society the Christians met early in the morning, and then again in the evening. We have extra- Biblical evidence for this practice in a letter written to the Emperor Trajan by Pliny in c. AD112 about the Christians in Bithynia; Pliny also wrote of farmers who brought fodder into the city for 'temple victims' being in danger of being ruined because of these Christians. In the evening on the Lord's Day the Christians shared in a meal and in the Lord's Supper.

Paul and his travelling companions met with the church in Troas on this Sunday evening to worship the Lord. Because Paul planned to leave the next day the church was eager to listen to everything Paul had to teach them. He spoke (Gk '*dialegomai*') until midnight. After midnight he continued to talk (20:11); because this is a different Greek word ('*homilew*'), Boice suggests it was more of a discussion later in the night but this is not clear from the Greek. Boice further comments, 'The fact that Paul had so much to say reminds us of the importance of the gospel message for Christianity. Whenever Christians have lost that emphasis, whenever they have begun to think of worship as chiefly entertainment or that what is accomplished in worship is essentially an emotional response that can be worked up by singing certain hymns or choruses... the church has always been weakened'. Worship in Troas would have included prayer and singing of Psalms, but what Luke emphasises is the preaching and the sacraments, and it was not a ten minute sermon!

After the day's work the people there in the third story room would have been tired, but they remained attentive- except for a young man called Eutychus. The room was crowded so he ended up sitting on the window sill. Luke tells us that there were many lamps, oil burning lamps, in the room (20:8). The flickering of these lamps would have had a hypnotic effect on this young man. Eutychus fell asleep and fell out of the window. The people ran down to find him dead on the pavement (20:9). Luke the physician may have been one of those who 'took him up dead'.

Paul ran down and fell on the young man in a manner reminiscent of Elijah and Elisha (1Kings 17:21, 2Kings 4:34-35). He took Eutychus in his arms saying, 'Don't be alarmed, he's alive!' (20:10 NIV). They brought the young man back into the meeting and were greatly comforted (20:12). This is the last recorded 'signs and wonder' done at the hand of the apostle Paul. The church was 'comforted' but their focus was on the word being preached by the apostle Paul, and on the sacraments. It was past midnight when they broke bread together and had their fellowship meal (20:11). And still Paul kept talking; he talked or conversed right through until daybreak. With the breaking of day it was time for Paul to leave the church in Troas and continue on his trip to Jerusalem.

So what do you think about the church at Troas? Would you like to have been there listening to the apostle Paul? Is this the sort of church you want to belong to? What were the marks of this church? The greatest desire of the people was to learn more about the Way, about the life, death, resurrection and return of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were blessed to have the apostle in their midst and did not want to waste any time doing other things or even sleeping when they could listen to the word of the Lord. You can have your sleep, but what about other things that keep you from listening to God's word?

Secondly, they were blessed in remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Note that this came after hearing the gospel preached, a practice followed in Reformed churches like ours. Thirdly, they enjoyed a fellowship meal together. Through this fellowship they encouraged one another. And finally, they witnessed a mighty work of the Lord in the raising of Eutychus from the dead. We continue to see God working mightily in our midst, making alive those who were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1).

Paul calls for elders from Ephesus

Acts 20:13-27

After three years of ministry in Ephesus the apostle Paul went across to Macedonia and Greece to visit the churches established during his second mission. After spending the winter in Corinth he planned to go to Jerusalem for Passover. But he became aware of a plot by the Jews to kill him so he went back overland to Philippi and across to Troas. After a week in Troas he set out again for Jerusalem, now hoping to reach Jerusalem before Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. We pick him up as he leaves Troas with a number of travelling companions. The Gentile churches had made a collection for the famine-affected church in Jerusalem and these men were carrying this money. We presume that Paul continued to have a bounty on his head set by the Jews.

When they get near Ephesus, Paul calls the elders from this church to meet him. He opens his heart to these brothers in Christ as he exhorts them to live faithful lives and shepherd the church of Christ. Some liken what he shares with these elders to what he writes in his letters, some of which had been written by this time. Within Luke's account however, this is a unique insight into the heart of this servant of the Lord. Paul's address to these elders falls broadly into two parts: the first part is a reflection on his life and ministry; the second is his exhortation to shepherd the church of God. Today we are looking at the first part under the subheadings: Troas to Miletus, testimony-life, testimony-witness, and testimony-future.

1. Troas to Miletus

It is interesting to follow Paul's journey on a map. I imagine it is even more interesting to actually visit these places, although they are much different today. Paul's companions left Troas by ship, sailing around the peninsula to Assos. Paul decided to walk directly south, a distance just half what they would sail, to meet up at Assos. Maybe he wanted to spend more time in Troas, or maybe he was still foiling attempts by the Jews to get him. With his group carrying quite a sum of money he would also have been alert to robbers.

Everything went to plan and Paul boarded the ship at Assos. They sailed to Mitylene on the east coast of the large Aegean island of Lesbos. It was too dangerous sailing by night in these waters; they hopped from port to port by day. From Mitylene they sailed to a place opposite Chios, and the next day to Samos on another island. They had crossed the bay leading to Ephesus. The next day they pressed on to Miletus, a mainland port 50 km south of Ephesus. With the ship unloading and loading cargo it would be there a few days, so Paul called for the elders of the church at Ephesus to come and meet him. Paul could have gone up to Ephesus but he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem and would have been delayed if he started visiting families in Ephesus. He could better use his time instructing and encouraging the church leaders.

Paul had immense energy, and as an apostle had apostolic authority. But he was still a man. He could not do everything himself. He had colleagues like Timothy, and in the churches he appointed elders to shepherd the flock- maybe at Ephesus elders were elected by the church rather than appointed by the apostle. Paul was not a one-man-band like some church leaders today. He wanted the church to continue after he left so he appointed leaders to be overseers in the church (20:17, 28).

Apart from deacons (1Tim 3:8), these were the only leaders or office bearers in the church. Moreover, there was no hierarchy among the elders; it was collegiate leadership. Today it is popular to have a leadership team, not of elders or deacons but of all manner of men and women in the church. This is especially the case in larger churches, but still it has to be asked, are they following a business model rather than this Biblical model of leadership.

2. Testimony- life

To the church at Thessalonica Paul wrote. 'We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives because you had become so dear to us (1Thess 2:8). To the Corinthians he wrote, 'Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ' (1Cor 11:1). His ministry was one of works and words, of life and witness. He practised what he preached. Paul had many opponents outside the church. He had Jews plotting to kill him. There were Judaizers in most places who hated him telling the Gentile believers that they did not have to get circumcised. He had opponents inside the church, especially at Corinth, people saying he was not a legitimate apostle, that he was a poor preacher, or that he was preaching for profit- what about the collection he was taking up?

Paul was completely open and transparent as he spoke to the elders at Ephesus, just as he was when he wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter to them, and in other letters. Marshall reckons 'he was not so much responding to actual accusations as using his own life as an example to the leaders'. The first thing he wanted these elders to notice was his humility. Humility is the opposite of pride. Tears are not usually a sign of pride, although for some people tears flow easily, too easily. Paul admits to many tears and trials during his ministry among them (20:19). His tears were not for himself but for the flock.

Paul prayed earnestly for each one (so he writes in his letters), and he warned them to confess their sin and return to the Lord. We should read verse 26 in this context- 'I am innocent of the blood of all men'. He was speaking metaphorically, speaking not of physical blood but spiritual blood or life (see Ezek 33:4). Preachers and elders have a solemn responsibility for people's souls, as do parents for their children. Paul knew the love of Christ for himself, that he was a persecutor of the Christians before God in his grace turned him around. Those who know the love of Christ will show the love of Christ to those around them, especially brothers and sisters in Christ.

How could anyone think that Paul was preaching for fame or fortune? He was threatened almost daily, not to mention the dangers he faced in shipwrecks, robbery and exposure to the elements. He was stoned, he was beaten with rods three times and with lashes five times (2Cor 11:24, 25). He saw the inside of many prison cells. Paul knew what Jesus meant when he said to, 'take up your cross and follow me'. Paul did not ask these elders to do anything that he had not done. He could say with humility, 'Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ'.

In terms of living among them, Paul was ready to work with his hands and support himself. When he came to Ephesus he would have found Aquila and Priscilla and worked with them. He did this partly to avoid the accusations of preaching for profit, partly so as not to burden the people, and partly so as to support the weak (20:35). Paul also taught that a worker deserves his wages (1Tim 4:18) so we cannot advocate, as some do, that ministers should have a job or profession besides ministering the gospel.

What we can teach is that ministers of the gospel should not be seeking fame or fortune from their ministry.

3. Testimony-witness

Paul testified before the elders of living a humble and exemplary life among them. He also testified to faithfully witnessing the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. He proclaimed to them the 'unsearchable riches of Christ' (Eph 3:8), the 'whole counsel of God' (20:27), holding back nothing that would be helpful to them (20:20). He makes a number of points about his ministry.

Firstly, he taught publicly, and from house to house (20:20). He began in the synagogue, then moved to the hall of Tyrannus. These were public meetings to which all were welcome. If Paul had taught in secret, behind closed doors, people would have been suspicious, and rightly so. A church must not close its doors to the public.

Paul also taught from house to house, maybe in the evenings. The Puritan, Richard Baxter, author of 'The Reformed Pastor', was a strong advocate of house to house teaching of the gospel. His ministry transformed 'an ignorant, rude and revelling people' to a godly, worshipping community'. Apart from preaching, he went house to house catechizing individuals and families. He writes, 'I frequently meet with those that have been my hearers for eight or ten years, who know not whether Christ be God or man, and wonder when I tell them the history of his birth, life and death as if they had never heard it before'. Times have changed and family visitation is not so easy these days, yet we might ask if the need for such teaching is not even greater today than it was in Baxter's day. The 'busyness' of families today is sometimes because of watching TV or other 'screen time'.

Secondly, Paul testified to Jews and Greeks (20:21); he did not discriminate. He did not say the gospel is for one race of people only. He did not say those following other religions should not be disturbed. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the ultimate when it comes to non-discrimination; yet, paradoxically, opponents accuse Christians of discrimination when they preach the gospel to everyone. Ministers who despise ministering to children, to the elderly, to the disabled, to any race or gender, must be questioned.

Thirdly, the apostle explains what the gospel is. Some ministers are great at preaching, at visiting and getting alongside all kinds of people, but for what purpose, we might ask, when they preach and teach liberal theology or the so-called social gospel. Paul was very clear as to what he taught, namely repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (20:21). He had received his ministry from the Lord Jesus, the ministry of testifying the gospel of the grace of God (20:24). He did not neglect physical needs- he was taking a collection to the hungry people in Jerusalem- but this was an outcome of gospel ministry. The primary purpose was calling people to repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus. Telling people they are sinners and must repent gets some people angry. The alternative is preaching a feel-good message that people do not object to, but which leaves them dead in trespasses and sins.

Fourthly, Paul preached 'the whole counsel of God' (20:27). You may have heard this phrase and wondered where it comes from and what it means. Well, it comes from Paul's address to the

Ephesian leaders. What it means is that Paul did not go telling stories or preaching his own ideas, or just his favourite portions of Scripture. The Jews avoided passages like Isaiah 53. There are preachers today who avoid words like propitiation or predestination; some avoid passages that condemn adultery and homosexuality. Expository verse by verse preaching helps ensure we preach 'the whole counsel of God'.

4. Testimony- future

Paul shares with the Ephesian elders his fears for the future- human fears. He was on his way to Jerusalem 'not knowing what will happen to me there' (20:22). In fact, the Holy Spirit had revealed to him, either through a personal or prophetic revelation, that prison and hardship awaited him in every city, including Jerusalem (20:22,23). Actually, this had been his experience up to the present and he did not expect things to change. The Spirit had warned him but also compelled him to go to Jerusalem. He would not change his plans just because he might get beaten or imprisoned, or even killed.

The only way to avoid these dangers was to stop preaching the gospel, the whole counsel of God. Rather than do this, Paul overcame his fears by trusting in the Lord and discounting his own life. The highest priority of most people is self-preservation, but for Paul there was something higher, preaching the gospel 'in season and out of season' because 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (2Tim 4:2, Rom 10:17).

Paul was sharing this with the elders that they might imitate him, and it is written in the Bible that we might imitate Paul also. The highest priority of some Christians is self-preservation; they ask why good people die while the wicked seem to prosper. They live and talk as if there is no hope after death. For others their highest priority is their family but this is the case for some unbelievers also. The highest priority for a Christian, as far as Paul was concerned, was not counting one's life dear to oneself but in serving the Lord and finishing the race. Paul was focused on 'finishing my race with joy, and the ministry' (20:24). He was motivated by this hope, by the promised heavenly reward.

Paul did not assume he would see these leaders of the church again. On the contrary, he told them they would not see his face again (20:25). Some scholars conclude from 1Timothy 1:3 that he visited Ephesus again but this is far from certain. When we say 'goodbye' to loved ones going overseas for a time we might do so with tears. When we returned to the mission field for the last time, my father shed tears as he said 'goodbye'- it was the last time I saw him alive. When we left India for the last time, tears were shed as friends prayed, 'We will meet again in heaven'.

Shepherd the church

Acts 20:28-38

Psalm 23 begins, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. This must be the best known and most loved of all the Psalms. It has been so for generations, although I wonder if was so in Israel when the Psalms were sung exclusively in public worship. In another popular Psalm the people of God are pictured as his flock, the sheep of his pasture- this is in Psalm 100. So the picture of the Lord as the shepherd feeding his sheep and protecting them from wild beasts is prominent in the OT.

Coming to the NT we find Jesus describing himself as the 'good shepherd' who 'gives his life for the sheep' (Jn 10:11). We find the writer to the Hebrews referring to Jesus, whom God brought up from the dead, as the great shepherd of the sheep (Heb 13:20), and the apostle Peter calling Jesus the chief shepherd who will appear again, bringing a crown of glory for his sheep (1Peter 5:4). Peter writes as a 'fellow elder' exhorting elders to shepherd the flock of God. If Jesus is the 'chief shepherd' elders could be called 'under-shepherds'. The apostle Paul did not use this shepherd/flock picture a great deal but he does so in his address to the elders of the church at Ephesus- maybe his city audiences were less familiar with a rural scene.

At the end of his third mission, which included three years in Ephesus and a visit across to Macedonia and Greece, Paul was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost. He had quite a number of fellow travellers carrying the 'famine collection' from their churches. He sailed past Ephesus, but with a few days waiting in Miletus he called for the elders of the church in Ephesus to come and meet him. Luke, who was traveling with Paul, gives us a detailed account of this meeting and what Paul shared with these elders.

We have looked at the first part of this address in which Paul opened his heart to these men, telling how he had lived among them and why. The second part is an exhortation to the elders. Paul had laboured tirelessly to establish this church and he wanted it to continue and grow. He was no longer able to lead this church- he would 'see their face no more' (20:25). He was handing over this responsibility to the elders. He opened his heart to them because he wanted them to follow his example, to 'imitate me, even as I imitate Christ' (1Cor 11:1). He goes on to pray for them but before this exhorts them to 'shepherd the church of God' (20:28). Our first point then is 'shepherd the church', with other points being, 'sanctification', 'support the weak' and 'sorrowful departure'.

1. Shepherd the church

The apostle urges the elders to watch themselves and all the flock, as in the congregation of this church (20:28). Of first importance is watching their own life and doctrine. Years later Paul wrote to Timothy saying the same thing- 'watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them and you will save both yourself and your hearers' (1Tim 4:16 NIV). What solemn words! What a huge responsibility Paul placed upon young Timothy and upon the elders of this church. He made them responsible to God for the spiritual wellbeing of each member of this church. Do the elders of your church understand this responsibility? Do you accept the responsibility they have been given such that you listen to them? This is not to say that none will fall away from the faith, but let this not be because of bad example, failure to pray, or failure to teach the truth. Paul had declared to them, 'I am innocent of the blood of all men' (20:26). He wanted the elders to be able to say the same thing.

Should we consider the private life of politicians when casting our vote? There is a lot of debate on this question. But there should be no debate about the private life of men ministering the gospel or leading the church. Such men are not perfect but they should not be ministering if they fail to live according to the commands of God. It is like a father teaching his children; he must set an example and not simply say, 'do as I say, not as I do'.

Paul also refers to doctrine when writing to Timothy. An elder must uphold sound doctrine as well as set an example, but he must not start 'lording it over the flock' (1Peter 5:3). Sometimes men get themselves into the eldership so they can do things their way, even making changes to doctrine. Years ago a group of men who held to the doctrine of perfection entered a church with the objective of taking it over. The first thing they did was get themselves elected as elders. Paul goes on to warn about men from within rising up and teaching perverse things (20:30).

The elders are to watch over the flock of God. They are to preach and teach the word, to rebuke when necessary, and to encourage the people (2Tim 4:2). They are to do this because 'the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' (20:28). The Greek word '*episkopos*' is translated 'overseer' or sometimes 'bishop'; *skopos* means 'to look' while *epi* means 'over'. So the overseer is to look over the congregation as a shepherd looks over his sheep. These men were called elders (*presbuteros*) in verse 17; now they are overseers or bishops. There was no hierarchy like we see today with bishops and archbishops- all elders were bishops. They were shepherds or under-shepherds, entrusted by the Holy Spirit with caring for the congregation.

The flock or church entrusted to their care was 'purchased with His own blood', or 'with the blood of his own' (20:28). It is, of course, the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God that was shed for the forgiveness of sin of each and every believer in this church. Individually they were bought with a price, and collectively they made up the church of Christ. The elder is given a solemn responsibility; he is appointed by the Spirit of God to oversee the church which is the body of Christ. Jesus spoke of any who caused a little one to stumble as worthy of having a millstone hung around his neck and thrown into the sea (Luke 17:2).

The apostle gave this solemn charge to the elders knowing that after he left 'savage wolves' would come and attack this flock (20:29). Who was he talking about? Paul had Jews after him trying to kill him. The Jews were doing everything they could to destroy the church. Some were discrediting Paul and the truth he taught, while others were prepared to be violent. Judaizers were following Paul demanding that Gentile believers be circumcised according to Mosaic Law. Paul's letter to the Galatians shows how such men were undermining the gospel of grace. In later times men came along claiming to be apostles but were in fact liars (Rev 2:2). The gospel of grace continues to be undermined today by false teaching. In some branches of the church men and women are saved in spite of the teaching they receive. We thank God that they can read the Bible and believe in Jesus despite attempts to keep the Bible from them.

While persecution from those outside the church can lead to a church scattering, as happened in the Jerusalem church, it is false doctrine from within that is most damaging to the church of God.

Consider the church prior to the Reformation. Consider the effects of liberal theology that we still see today. The decline of the church in the West has not been because of persecution. We thank God for the men who have stood against perverse or twisted teaching. Let us continue to stand against perverse things arising within the church. False teaching comes out of proud hearts, hearts seeking worldly fame or fortune. Beware of men or women who want to lead you off into their group whether it be a 'holy club' or a 'liberals club'. Remember the Bereans and search the Scriptures to find out if what is being taught is true (17:11).

2. Sanctification

In exhorting the elders to watch over themselves and the church of God Paul again reminds them of his ministry among them. For three years he taught them; he prayed with them and for them. They faced many trials, being intimidated by the Jews and then a mob riot led by the pagan Demetrius. Paul again mentions how he warned them with tears to stand firm in the face of these attacks.

The Lord upheld Paul in these trials so Paul commits the elders into same mighty hands as they take on the responsibility of being overseers in the church. He commends them 'to God and to the word of His grace' (20:32). Paul learnt that God's grace is sufficient in any and every situation (2Cor 12:9). Moreover, those who faithfully and fearlessly labour in the Lord will not labour in vain (1Cor 15:58). Paul was not calling upon the elders to do anything he had not done. He knew God does not call anyone to serve him without giving them the necessary resources.

Sanctification is a work of God's grace. It is God who keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Jesus said, 'My Father who has given them to me is greater than all; and no one will snatch them out of my Father's hands' (Jn 10:29). This is true of the flock and of the under-shepherd or elder. Sanctification means being built up in the faith, of running the race in the sure and certain hope of receiving an inheritance. Those who take care of the flock are not looking for any earthly reward. They are focussed on their heavenly reward in Christ Jesus.

3. Support for the weak

Paul was very careful not to invite accusations of preaching for profit but to show that he was focussed on his inheritance in heaven. He did not burden the church he was establishing; he worked to provide for his own needs, which no doubt were very simple. Above all, he made it known that he did not covet anyone's 'silver or gold or apparel' (20:33). His words remind us of Samuel at the coronation of King Saul when he said, 'whose donkey have I taken or whom have I cheated' (1Sam 12:3). The society in which Paul lived was focussed on worldly things, on treasures and pleasures, including fine clothes. It was like our society. Paul did not lust after the things of the world, and these elders must follow his example.

Far from accumulating worldly wealth, Paul was eager to help those in need. He wanted the elders and all the church to be looking out for the needs of others (Phil 2:4) - he was, after all, taking help to the victims of famine in Jerusalem. Paul tells them to remember the words of Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (20:35). Accounts of Jesus life and ministry may have been circulating in the churches at this time (AD57), but written accounts were not yet collected into the NT canon.

The words Paul quotes are not found in the gospels but reflect things that Jesus said as recorded in the gospels.

Remember the words of the apostle, 'Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ'. Paul was following the example of Christ. He knew how Jesus went about preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every sickness and disease among the people (Mat 9:35). Jesus spoke of the people being like sheep without a shepherd. Do you have a shepherd watching over you? Jesus is the chief shepherd, and in the church elders are appointed to shepherd you.

4. Sorrowful farewell

His exhortation ended, Paul knelt down and prayed with the elders from Ephesus (20:36). Kneeling is the usual posture for prayer in the NT. Jesus knelt and prayed in the garden. Kneeling displays humble respect; standing also displays respect and honour that is appropriate when we come into the presence of Almighty God. Just as Paul prayed for all believers in the church so he prayed for these elders (20:36 cf.21:5). Again, he was setting an example for them. Elders must be men of prayer; all in the church should be praying for one another, and with one another. No church has ever grown without earnest prayer.

The brotherly love and close fellowship in the church at Ephesus is seen in this prayer, and in the tears that flowed as they farewelled the apostle Paul. They were particularly moved to tears because of his words, 'You will see my face no more' (20:25, 38). They accompanied their spiritual father to the ship as he left for Jerusalem. They returned to Ephesus to continue the work of the apostle, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.

To Jerusalem

Acts 21:1-16

The apostle Paul was on his way to Jerusalem after more than three years of mission in Asia Minor. He went across to Macedonia and Greece and planned to sail from Corinth to Jerusalem for Passover (AD57). Learning that the Jews were plotting to kill him, he abandoned that plan and decided to return overland, as least as far as Troas. He would not make Jerusalem in time for Passover; he hoped to reach at least in time for Pentecost. He sailed past Ephesus but met the elders from this church at Miletus. He told them, 'I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city saying that chains and tribulations await me' (20:22,23).

Note that in verse 22 the NKJV has a lower case 's' for 'spirit', in contrast to other versions. In the next verse it is a capital 'S' because it is the 'Holy Spirit'. Paul's plan to go to Jerusalem is first announced in Acts 19:21 where he 'purposed in the Spirit' to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome' - this time NKJV and ESV have a capital 'S' while the NIV has, 'Paul decided to go to Jerusalem'. We spoke of a 'divine necessity', not a divine command. We keep these details in mind as we look at Acts 21 where Paul receives a number of warnings about going up to Jerusalem. Was he following God's plan or his own plan?

This question arises because when Paul got to Jerusalem he was arrested, and for the remaining seven chapters of this book Paul is a prisoner of the Romans. The Romans, in fact, rescued him from the hands of the Jews who grabbed him and tried to kill him outside the temple. We are jumping ahead. Today we will watch Paul travel from Miletus to Jerusalem and listen to the warnings he is given: 'Warning at Tyre', 'Warning at Caesarea', 'Welcome at Jerusalem' and 'Why?'

1. Warning at Tyre

After a few days at Miletus Paul and his party set sail once again, probably on the same ship. They sailed south to the island of Cos and the next day across to Rhodes, a port on an island of the same name. The next day, day three, they continued to Patara on the mainland of Asia Minor or Turkey. In this port they found a larger vessel that would take them to the open waters of the eastern Mediterranean. This would shorten their journey by some days. They sailed to the south of Cyprus, where Paul and Barnabas began their first mission. Eventually they reached Tyre on the coast of what today is Lebanon. The ship would unload its cargo in this port. Tyre was a prosperous trading city. It was originally an island that got connected to the mainland after Alexander the Great built a sea wall across to it.

Paul was not interested in the seeing sights of Tyre; he wanted to meet the believers here. Do you try to contact believers when you visit places? I hope that wherever you are on the Lord's Day you try to find a church where you can worship. Your presence will encourage the local believers, and you will be blessed in meeting them, as well as from keeping the God-given day of rest and worship. We hope to find believers in central India when our church group visits next month. After a couple of days sightseeing, the rest of the time will be visiting churches.

Paul located the church in Tyre. It had been founded, most probably, by Jewish believers escaping the persecution that broke out after the martyrdom of Stephen. Paul, or Saul as he was then, was active in this wave of persecution; but he was now a preacher of the faith rather than a persecutor of Christians. The wonderful thing about the fellowship of believers is that it extends across all races and all places in this world.

Luke was with Paul on this journey from Troas to Tyre. He writes, 'we stayed there seven days' (21:4). Paul must have told them he was on his way to Jerusalem. Just why they told him not to go up to Jerusalem is not clear, apart from them telling him 'through the Spirit' (21:4). This time the NKJV, like other versions, has a capital 'S' indicating the Holy Spirit, although the word 'holy' is not present. Maybe a prophet was involved, although it was a collective 'they' who told Paul not to go. So Paul was warned, indeed told 'through the Spirit', not to go up to Jerusalem. The believers did not press the point; they farewelled Paul as if they would not see him again. Like the Ephesian elders, they accompanied Paul and his party to the ship. They came with their wives and children and knelt on the shore to pray together as he departed (21:5, 6).

2. Warning at Caesarea

After a week at Tyre, Paul and his party sailed south to a place called Ptolemais which is the ancient Acco, across the bay from Mt Carmel (Judg 1:31). Again they visited the believers but they could only stay the day (21:7). The next day they moved on to Caesarea, the Roman's base for administering the province of Judea. This was the port that serviced Jerusalem. In Caesarea they went to stay with Phillip the evangelist. This was not the apostle Phillip but the Phillip who was elected as a deacon in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6). In fulfilling this office he distributed food to widows in the church. His gift of evangelism was revealed when he fled Jerusalem and preached Christ in Samaria. He went on to evangelise an Ethiopian near the old Philistine city of Gaza. He preached in other coastal cities before settling in Caesarea with his family.

Paul and his party found Phillip, along with his four virgin daughters, in Caesarea. Phillip would have been able to tell Luke a lot about the early days of the church in Jerusalem and maybe the current situation there. Phillip's four daughters prophesied (21:9). Prophecy is another gift of the Spirit, in this instance bestowed upon single women. In the OT we read of Deborah the prophetess judging Israel. Phillip's daughters did not prophecy anything about Paul's future but a certain prophet called Agabus did. He was from Jerusalem, and had previously been to Antioch where he prophesied a famine in Judea (11:28). As we said when looking at that passage, prophecy, as in fore-telling, was a gift of the Holy Spirit in NT times. It also enabled forth-telling or making known God's word as written in the Bible. The Bible contains all that we need to know about the future.

Agabus spoke and also acted out his prophecy regarding the apostle Paul, much as the OT prophets did. Recall Ezekiel building a mound and lying on his side for days to symbolise the siege of Jerusalem (Ezek 4). Agabus came to Paul, took his belt and proceeded to bind his own hands and feet. He said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'in this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'" (21:11 NIV). 'In the event' writes Bruce, 'Paul was delivered by the Gentiles from Jews who were compelled against their will to give him up'.

What is interesting about this prophecy is that Paul took no notice of it. He did not dispute what Agabus said- he simply took no notice. Everyone else heard it, including his travelling companions and the church folk of Caesarea. They pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem but he refused to listen. He refused to change his mind. We will ask 'why' shortly.

Before this we have the question of apparent mixed messages from the Holy Spirit. 'Apparent' because any such thing is impossible. The Holy Spirit did not tell Paul to go up and then warn him not to. Through the prophet Agabus, the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul what would happen to him in Jerusalem. This was no real surprise because, as he told the Ephesian elders, 'The Holy Spirit testifies in every city saying chains and tribulations await me' (20:23). Even so, the picture of what would happen was made clearer regarding Jerusalem. Paul's friends pleaded with him not to go, but we cannot conclude that he was disobeying a clear directive from the Lord. Boice calls it disobedience on the basis of verse 4, and points to Paul's rather obstinate personality; Calvin uses the word 'stubborn'. Others praise Paul for his courage and determination.

Paul surely deserves praise for his courage, and being ready 'not only to be bound but to die at Jerusalem from the name of Jesus' (21:13). In his defence we can also note his love for his own people the Jews, even though he was called to go to the Gentiles. And again we note his great desire to preserve unity in the church. But we can ask if his going up to Jerusalem was wise, given all the warnings- and given, with the benefit of hindsight, his visit was a disaster.

3. Welcome in Jerusalem

Hearing all the warnings and seeing the tears of some, Paul was disturbed but refused to change his mind (21:13). He resolutely set his face on going to Jerusalem. Some compare him to Jesus going up to Jerusalem knowing that he would suffer and die in this city, but Paul's situation was different. Jesus was sent into this world to die for our sins, to be crucified in the holy city, 'for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside Jerusalem' (Luke 13:33). Paul was sent to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). The Lord was not directing Paul to go, nor was he preventing him from going (cf.16:6).

With at least nine travelling companions, as well as some disciples from Caesarea, Paul set out on the road to Jerusalem. Either by foot or donkey he covered this distance of about 100km. They were welcomed to the home of Mnason, a disciple from Cyprus who was converted early on, maybe at the Pentecost of Acts 2. There in Jerusalem the brethren received them gladly (21:17). Was this the whole church or just the Hellenistic brethren? Paul would not meet the elders till the next day. It is hard to imagine the hard-line Jewish believers coming to greet Paul when they thought he was teaching Jews not to circumcise their children- Luke indicates that the congregation had not yet heard of Paul's arrival (21:22).

4. Why?

Why was Paul so insistent on going up to Jerusalem? Why did he not listen to all the warnings he was given? Most commentators praise Paul for his courage and determination. Do you feel the same? Are you concerned that we are questioning Paul about this visit? We are not questioning his courage or determination, but we do allow the possibility that Paul was making a mistake. Matthew Henry reminds us that the apostles were not above sin: 'Apostles are not free from blame in all they did. It

would be hard to defend Paul from the charge of giving too much in this matter'- the matter was agreeing to make an offering in the temple.

Paul planned to go to Jerusalem for Passover but abandoned this plan to avoid being killed by the Jews (20:3). Yet now he is ready to die at the hand of the Jews. Was it the church in Jerusalem that he must visit? He was, as we know from his letters, carrying a collection from the Gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem. What is strange is that Luke makes no mention of this, apart from Paul's own words in Acts 24:17. Bruce writes, 'Luke does not explain why Paul regarded his visit to Jerusalem as so solemnly imperative. No doubt his sense of obligation in the matter was bound up with the Gentile collection'. Was this collection a vital part of Paul's strategy to keep the Jerusalem and Gentile churches united (Rom 15:25-27)? Luke, who was travelling with Paul, did not seem to share Paul's sense of the importance of this collection. Indeed, he and Timothy were among those warning Paul not to go up (21:12).

Martin Luther, like the apostle Paul, was most concerned for church unity, but not unity at the expense of doctrine. Luther wanted the church to reform by accepting the doctrines of grace that are central to the gospel and salvation. He put his life on the line for this doctrine. Sadly, the church did not reform and he was forced to break from Rome and the authority of the pope. Paul may have lived to see the Jerusalem church, or the party bent on maintaining Jewish customs, destroyed with the destruction of the temple in AD70.

Finally, while we admire men who are determined and ready to suffer and die for the Lord Jesus, and acknowledge that such men have been pioneers of the gospel, we also teach that leaders and elders in the church be listened to. A person who comes forward demanding they be sent to a certain place as a missionary, or be given a certain ministry in the church, will be asked to seek the advice of leaders in the mission and/or the church.

Arrest in Jerusalem

Acts 21:17-36

The apostle Paul entered Jerusalem a free man; he left in chains. He was taken to Rome as a prisoner. While there is reason to believe that Paul was later released, as far as Luke is concerned Paul spent the rest of his days in custody. Paul had previously been arrested and imprisoned for preaching the gospel; the Lord intervened to deliver him. In the early days of the church in Jerusalem the apostles had been locked up for preaching Jesus but the Lord delivered them- apart from James who was killed by Herod. Paul was arrested for defiling the temple. The Bible does not record Paul's release from this arrest. What we read is how he continued to minister while in chains.

Paul went up to Jerusalem at the end of his third mission. It was his practice to do so, and he was carrying a special gift for the Jews or church there. But he received a number of warnings, including one from a prophet, that on this occasion he would be arrested if not killed in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit did not prevent him from going but nor was he clearly directed by the Holy Spirit to go. Paul says he was 'bound in the spirit' but did not know 'what will happen to me there' (20:22). Paul was undoubtedly courageous, but was he somewhat foolish in this instance?

In a sermon entitled, 'When a good man falls', Boice compared Paul to Moses, 'who began his own private liberation movement by killing an Egyptian'. We cannot say that Paul was wrong or right in going up to Jerusalem, but we do have serious concerns about what he did when he got there. I refer to him joining four men in their vow and subsequent purification. Let us consider the vow, and the violence that followed, and thirdly the intervention of the Romans.

1. Vow

The church in Jerusalem was like some churches today. In what way? It was a large and growing church but appears to have succumbed to syncretism, to taking the gospel without leaving old ways, or at least transforming old ways. In Africa many tribes practiced polygamy but when they heard the gospel and believed in Jesus what happened? Some churches allowed this practice to continue in what we call syncretism. In India Hindu society has a caste system. What happens in the church? Can a church have divisions over race or caste? Some churches continue to uphold the caste system. Indeed, many Christians today teach that a division between Jew and Gentile remains in the church.

The Jerusalem church began with the apostles taking a stand against the Jewish leaders who demanded they stop preaching Jesus. It culminated in Stephen being accused of speaking against Moses and being martyred. What did Stephen say about the temple? 'The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands' (7:48). Some twenty years later the situation had changed. The apostles had left Jerusalem and the church was led by James, the half-brother of Jesus. One scholar writes, 'The Jerusalem church was increasingly caught between its allegiance to the nation and its fraternal relationship to Paul's Gentile mission'.

Converted Pharisees formed a powerful party within the church. These were the men who demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (15:5). The Jerusalem council of Acts 15 (AD49) made the ruling that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised (21:25). The party of Pharisees

reluctantly accepted this for Gentiles but not for Jews. We might ask why another council was not called here in Acts 21 to deal with the rumours circulating about the apostle Paul (21:22).

To what extent did these Pharisees depart from Judaism and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ? They were clinging to Jewish ways when it came to eating with 'unclean' Gentiles. Paul rebuked the apostle Peter for hypocrisy in this matter (Gal 2). What would Peter have to say to Paul going into the temple where Gentiles were not allowed- under threat of death? Paul preached unity of the Spirit: one Lord, one faith, one baptism- but the Jerusalem church kept on with a separation policy. Paul had brought a sum of money from the Gentile churches in an effort to promote unity. Luke does not tell how this was received. Clearly it had little effect upon this hard-line party within the Jerusalem church.

The day after meeting 'the brethren' at the house of Mnason, Paul and his companions went to meet James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. After cordial greetings, Paul detailed 'all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry' (21:19). Paul was not boasting but humbly acknowledging it was the Lord's ministry. He may have reminded James that he was fulfilling the request of the Jerusalem church to remember the poor (Gal 2:10) as he handed over the famine collection. The response was positive- they gave glory to the Lord (21:20). It is what happens next that is questionable, not only because the plan failed but because of its very essence.

In Jerusalem practicing Jews went to the temple as they had done for generations to make blood sacrifices for sin according to the Law of Moses. Diaspora Jews had to come to Jerusalem to make sacrifices, which they did for Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Paul had missed Passover but presumably was here in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

To what extent did Jews who believed in Jesus go to the temple? Peter and John went there to pray (3:1, 5:25, 42). There is no record of them making a sacrifice in the temple. Yet here we read of James telling Paul to accompany four men who have taken a Nazirite vow as they make their offering in the temple. Paul had taken such a vow himself when he had his hair cut off at Cenchrae, but no sacrifice was made (18:18). The Nazirite vow, as outlined in Numbers chapter 6, was one of separation to the Lord. It involved separation from wine, from dead bodies and from cutting one's hair. When the days of the vow were completed the hair was cut off and a lamb brought as a sin offering (Numb 6:14). Paul was asked to pay for, and join in, such an offering (21:24).

In preaching Jesus, his followers preached the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. They said, 'Not with the blood of goats and calves but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption' (Heb 9:12). 'Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb 9:28). What was going on in Jerusalem at this time? Matthew Henry writes, 'This was a great weakness to be so fond of the shadows when the substance was come'. Calvin accuses the elders of 'too much love for their nation' and calls this vow 'superstition', and to 'have in it certain things which did not agree with the profession of faith'.

Calvin, like many others, offers some excuse in Paul's saying that to the Jews he became as a Jew that he might win the Jews' (1Cor 9:20). Was Paul seeking to win Jews in this instance? He was certainly trying to keep unity in the church, but why were believers of Jewish background going to the temple

to be purified through a sacrifice? What were they being purified from? Matthew Henry writes, 'It would be hard to defend Paul from giving too much in this matter'. Where was the Paul who rebuked Peter for simply going off to eat with the Jews? Was this conciliation or was it compromise. Circumcision was a matter of indifference to Paul, but a blood sacrifice?

Was joining this vow Paul's idea? No! It was the idea of James and the elders, an idea aimed at appeasing the thousands of Jews who believed yet were zealous for the law (21:20). Why was James trying to appease such men when Jesus declared he had come to fulfil the law, and when Paul wrote to the Romans saying, 'Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes' (Rom 10:4). 'Everyone' presumably includes Jews, yet here in Jerusalem believing Jews were still keeping the ceremonial law. Some scholars suggest that Paul was still formulating doctrine at this time but Romans, the most complete formulation of doctrine we have, was written months before.

James wanted to maintain peace and harmony but at what expense? Not only were some in the church clinging to fulfilled and obsolete laws, they were also clinging to a lie. They believed the rumour that Paul was telling Jews 'not to circumcise children nor walk according to the customs' (21:21). Paul was indifferent to circumcision because it had nothing to do with faith in Jesus (1Cor 7:19, Gal 5:6). Why could this not have been explained to the zealots? Could they not call a presbytery or general assembly and discuss the matter as previously (15:6). Instead of simply telling the truth, 'Paul was told to participate in a compromise for unity'. The scholar who wrote this also wrote, 'Paul was able to compromise for unity without sacrificing his union with Christ'. This is not exactly true because Paul did not complete the purification right. Was it the Lord who ultimately stopped him?

James wanted Paul to show that he was still a law abiding Jew, that he walked orderly and kept the law (21:24). Yet Paul taught believers to walk in the Spirit, 'to walk in love as Christ has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph 5:2). James reminded Paul of what was decided concerning Gentile believers at the Jerusalem council (21:25), but it was not apparent at that time that this meant Jews had to keep observing the law, or that Gentile believers would remain a distinct group, a second class group with the church. Peter said at that time, 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the **same** manner as they' (15:11).

2. Violence

Paul acquiesced to the plan of James, and the next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them (21:26). Paul may have needed purification because of having contact with Gentiles. He went to the temple with these four men to inform the priest of the day they would make their sacrifices, giving seven days notice. But when the seven days were almost ended 'the Lord intervened to stop Paul and the gospel being compromised' writes Boice. 'God would not allow Paul to go to the temple and present a blood sacrifice for his sins when Jesus had already died for his sins'.

Some Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple and started a riot. They had previously seen Paul with Trophimus the Ephesian in the city and assumed he brought this Gentile into the temple, beyond the court of the Gentiles. Shouting, 'Men of Israel, help!' they grabbed Paul, accusing him of defiling the temple and of preaching against Jews, the law and the temple (21:28). The city erupted as they

dragged Paul outside, shut the temple doors and started beating him to death (21:30). So much for appeasing the Jews by making a sacrifice!

It is hard to believe James would have suggested such a thing and even harder to believe Paul agreed. In the end the Lord intervened to stop Paul from taking part in a sacrifice that contradicted the gospel. To argue that Paul was showing 'cultural flexibility' in the body of Christ as Larkin does is ridiculous. What he planned played into the hands of Jews clinging to their traditions while at the same time confessing Christ- Jews wanting a foot in each camp as it were. In following Christ we must all leave the traditions of our culture, or else see these transformed by, and for, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Intervention by the Romans

God is able to use pagan rulers to fulfil his purposes- in this case to save his servant Paul. The commander of the garrison, stationed in the Fortress of Antonia, heard the commotion and saw the people rioting. He rushed down the steps with centurions and soldiers to arrest the perpetrators of the violence. When the Jews saw the soldiers coming they stopped beating Paul. Paul, the focus of the riot, was left lying there. He was arrested and bound with two chains- the commander assumed he was leading some form of rebellion. With the crowd shouting different things, the Roman commander had Paul taken back to the barracks for questioning. The mob did not let up. In their violent rage, and shouting, 'Away with him!', they tried to grab Paul away from the soldiers. The soldiers had to carry Paul up the stairs and into safety (21:35-40).

Ironically, Paul's arrest by pagans was his rescue from murderous Jews. Paul must surely have regretted going to the temple in order to appease the Jews, although he does not indicate this in later speeches. The Lord gave him strength to witness before kings and the children of Israel (9:15). Where James and members of the Jerusalem church were in all this we are not told.

In closing we note that the Lord did not speak to Paul until after he was arrested (23:11). He allowed Paul to go his own way and face the consequences, and to be influenced by what Matthew Henry calls 'fleshly wisdom' coming from James. We need to be aware of following our own way, even if it is the way of sacrifice and suffering. We can admire Paul's courage and determination but maybe in this instance it was misguided- he certainly had enough warnings. We can be comforted knowing that the Lord overrules for good, saving us from disasters both physical and spiritual, just as he did the apostle Paul.

Paul speaks to Jerusalem mob

Acts 21:37-22:23

When the apostle Paul arrived in Jerusalem he went to meet James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. James was the half-brother of Jesus; while Jesus was both human, by his mother, and divine, James was fully human. After initially rejecting Jesus' claims (Jn 7:6) he later believed and became the leader of the Jerusalem church. James told Paul about a rumour that was circulating in the city, namely that he was telling diaspora Jews not to circumcise their children or keep Jewish customs (21:21). James could have convened an assembly of the church to deal with this rumour. He may also have been able to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin to defend himself. Instead, he advised Paul to join in a purification ritual in the temple, an action that would appear to compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lord intervened to stop the sacrifice and deliver Paul from the murderous Jews. In the providence of God, Paul got to speak to thousands of Jews in Jerusalem, and later to speak to the Sanhedrin, albeit while in chains. Paul defended himself and witnessed to the gospel, although the Jews did not accept either. Still, they heard that Jesus is risen and is Lord. And as we read in Isaiah, the word of the Lord will not return void but it shall accomplish what He desires (Isa 55:11).

Roman soldiers carried Paul up the steps from the temple to the Fortress of Antonia. The mob were crying, 'Away with him!' meaning 'death to him', with some trying to grab Paul out of their hands. The Roman commander was a man called Claudius Lysias (23:26). His surname indicates he was Greek born, while Claudius was the name of the Roman Emperor. The commander was at a loss as to the reason for the uproar, apart from the cry for Paul to be killed. He assumed Paul was the Egyptian who a few years earlier led a revolt with his band of four thousand '*sicarii*' or terrorists. The Romans killed hundreds of these terrorists but their leader escaped.

When Paul spoke fluent Greek the commander got a shock; he certainly wasn't the Egyptian terrorist (21:37). Paul explained that he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. Tarsus was not some obscure place; it was a major centre of commerce and education. If Paul was an educated Jew why was this mob of Jews trying to kill him? To his surprise, Paul asked if he could speak to the crowd (21:39) - they were safely out of reach at the top of the stairs. The commander would normally have refused such a request- he did not want the crowd getting more stirred up. But he was anxious to find out what the riot was all about.

In the providence of God Paul got to speak the truth to all Jerusalem, the truth about his credentials, his conversion, his being chosen by the Lord and commissioned to go to the Gentiles. The crowd listen to his defence until he mentioned the word 'Gentiles' (22:21). The Athenians listened until he mentioned the resurrection of the dead (17:32). Mention of the resurrection also divided the Sanhedrin, but for now it was the word 'Gentiles' that would not be tolerated. What word do people refuse to listen to today? Many cover their ears and refuse to listen when the word 'sin' is mentioned - this even happens in some churches. But as you know, we have all sinned against God, and to be forgiven and saved we must confess our sin and believe in Jesus.

1. Credentials

Who was this man the commander had taken into custody? He spoke in fluent Greek. Then he spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic. The commander knew little Hebrew but the crowd became silent when Paul waved his hand and spoke their language. 'Brothers and fathers, hear my defence before you now' (22:1); the greeting was typically Jewish and respectful. The Lord gave Paul the strength not only to speak but to speak with grace to this mob wanting to kill him.

Paul began with some autobiography. The people had heard rumours about this Jew who loved Gentiles; most were ignorant of his background. Paul wanted them to know that he was not only a Jew but a zealous Jew. He was born a Jew in the city of Tarsus; his father was a Pharisee (23:6). In his youth he came to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, a renowned rabbi. As a Pharisee, Paul was strict in keeping the law and was zealous towards God (22:3).

Paul was not ashamed of his upbringing, prior his persecuting Christians. As a Jew he had many advantages when it came to receiving the Messiah, the Son of God. But by believing in Jesus he repudiated any claim to his own righteousness or righteousness which is from the Law (Phil 3:9). The Jews he was addressing made this fatal mistake, the mistake of trusting in works righteousness or salvation by good works. Millions of Jews continue to make this fatal mistake, as do millions of Gentiles, men and women who think they will get to heaven because of their good works- or even not-so-good works as long as they are not as bad as other people. We feel better about ourselves- even righteous- when we hear or read of wicked people doing terrible things. Many think as long as they don't do such wicked things they will go to heaven. But the truth, as found in the Bible, gives no comfort to such people: 'by works of the law no human being will be justified in His [God's] sight' (Rom 3:20).

Paul was Jew, a zealous Jew. He could identify with the people gathered in the square before him. His zeal led him to persecute followers of the Way unto death (22:4). Some listening shared in that zeal, zeal without knowledge, and the zeal to murder. Paul had since has his eyes opened. He wrote to Timothy saying, 'I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent man but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly, in unbelief' (1Tim 1:13). We need to be careful in either giving a testimony or listening to the testimony of another that the past life of ignorant unbelief does not take the spotlight away from the present life of grace. Paul was not glorifying his past life.

Paul went on to tell how he went to the high priest and elders to get letters he could take to the Jews way off in Damascus. These letters gave him authority to arrest and bring to Jerusalem for punishment any who dared join the sect of Christians (22:5). Paul was a man who, with the support of the priests and elders, did all he could to stamp out apostasy. Apostasy or forsaking Moses was the charge being brought against Paul (21:21). Paul's credentials as a Jew were impeccable. The city once embraced this Hebrew of Hebrews. What changed?

2. Conversion

Paul was giving his testimony for the first time, although this is not the first time we are hearing it. Luke records Paul's conversion as history in Acts 9. The accounts are the same except that Paul emphasises certain things for this hostile Jewish audience. He shines a bit more light on Ananias calling him 'a devout man according to the law' (22:12). Luke says that those travelling with Paul,

'heard a voice but saw no one' (9:7), while Paul says 'they did not hear the voice of Him that spoke to me' (22:9). They did not hear the words Jesus spoke to Paul. Paul will get another opportunity to give his testimony, this time before Romans rulers or Gentiles (Acts 26).

So, what changed? Paul had changed! He changed from being a zealous Jew to being a fulfilled Jew, and hoped all who listened to him would similarly see the light and hear the words of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul was on his way to Damascus to find and bind in chains any Jews who believed in Jesus. It was about noon when a great light shone from heaven (22:6). Paul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Paul asked, and the voice said, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting' (22:8). Paul did not see Jesus although the glorious light that blinded him was a representation of Jesus in all his glory. On the mountain Peter, James and John saw Jesus transformed into heavenly glory (Luke 9:29). The voice convinced Paul that Jesus was alive- dead men do not speak! Up to this point Paul or Saul believed the lie about the empty tomb being told by the Jewish leaders responsible for the death of Jesus.

Paul lay on the ground helpless. His travelling companions saw the light but did not hear the words spoken by Jesus. Paul asked, 'what shall I do, Lord?' (22:10). He was told to get up, go into Damascus and await further orders. The brilliant light had blinded him; his friends led him into the city. A man called Ananias came to him and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight', and immediately he could see again (22:13). Ananias was a devout, law-keeping Jew, highly respected by all the Jews in Damascus (22:12).

Paul did not start rebelling against the Law of Moses. He had a supernatural experience, an encounter with the risen Jesus and he was accepted into the home of a devout Jew; Paul saw no need to say that Ananias was a disciple of Jesus (9:10). Paul saw himself as a fulfilled Jew.

3. Chosen

Paul was busy persecuting followers of Jesus when he was confronted by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was taken in by Ananias who told him that, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know his will, and see the Just/Righteous One, and hear the voice of his mouth' (22:14). Paul probably shared with Ananias what happened to him on the road, although the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision (9:10f). In this vision God revealed that he had chosen Paul to be his witness to all men, to witness that Jesus is alive. Paul saw that the resurrection of Jesus was divine vindication of all that Jesus said and did. Paul does not specifically mention witness to the Gentiles at this point; he does in verse 21. What he says here is that he was baptized, probably by Ananias (cf.9:18), as a sign and seal that his sins were washed away. He was baptized calling on the name of the Lord.

Water baptism in response to repentance of sin was the mark of John's ministry. At Pentecost it became the mark of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ- it is the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us of our sin. Jesus, 'loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood' (Rev 1:5). All the animal sacrifices required under the law pointed forward to the only effective sacrifice for sin, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the Son of God (Heb 9:14). All blood sacrifices for sin were made obsolete by the once-

for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul was clearly but carefully preaching the new covenant in the blood of Jesus.

4. Commission

Paul was a Jew. He understood how Jews hated Gentiles. The people of Nazareth tried to kill Jesus when he pointed out that God sent Elijah to help a Gentile woman, and Elisha to heal a Gentile man (Luke 4:24f). The Lord revealed to Ananias that Paul was his chosen vessel to carry His name to the Gentiles (9:15). Ananias would have shared this revelation with Paul, although Luke does not exactly say so. Luke writes of Paul spending time in Damascus preaching Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, until the Jews turned on him. He returned to Jerusalem but after another threat to kill him the believers whisked him away to Caesarea (9:30). Paul gives more detail of this time in Jerusalem as he speaks to the Jewish mob from the steps of the Fortress.

Paul told how he returned to Jerusalem from Damascus some three years after his conversion (Gal 1:18). In Jerusalem he went to the temple, and while praying fell into a trance (22:17). He saw the Lord, who told him to get out of Jerusalem quickly because 'they', the Jews, would not accept his testimony about Jesus (22:18). Paul thought they would accept him because of his past, because of his zeal in persecuting Christians and even being complicit in the murder of Stephen (22:20). But the Lord knew better- as Paul came to realise. His past zeal for the religious traditions of the Jews would be completely ignored when the Jews heard him preaching salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Here in the temple in Jerusalem the Lord called Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles: 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles' (22:21 ESV).

Paul's defence was cut short at this point. He may have wanted to go on and explain the gospel which he took to the Gentiles, and that he was not telling Jews to stop circumcising their children. Circumcision was no longer a sign of the covenant; the sign of the new covenant was baptism. But hearing the word 'Gentiles', the crowd erupted once again, shouting for Paul to be put to death (21:22). In their violent rage they threw off their coats and hurled dust into the air; thankfully there were no stones to hurl at Paul, the servant of the Lord.

Paul was in chains after being beaten by the Jews and listening to their cry for him to be killed. 'Away with him', they shouted. Paul might have reflected on what happened in the same place almost twenty years earlier. It was back then that his Lord and Saviour heard the same cry from the Jews: 'Away with him'. Jesus was handed over to the Jews to be crucified, 'the just for the unjust to bring us to God' (1Peter 3:18).

Paul faces interrogation

Acts 22:23-23:10

If you are visiting a foreign country you need a passport, and you are supposed to carry that passport with you at all times. If you get into trouble your passport entitles you to consular or diplomatic assistance from the government of your citizenship. Did the apostle Paul carry a passport declaring that he was a Roman citizen? Probably not, but the Romans would have been able to ascertain the truth of his claim, and the consequences of a false claim to Roman citizenship were serious; it was a capital offence. Even so, the consequences of being in Paul's situation and not being a Roman citizen were dire. He was about to be scourged or flogged at the hands of the Romans, a form of torture that often resulted in death.

How did the apostle Paul come to be in this situation? We recall that Paul went up to Jerusalem at the end of his third mission into Gentile territory. He went up with a collection from Gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was led by James; it was a strongly Jewish church, with many being zealous for the law and opposed to Gentiles entering the church without being circumcised. In Jerusalem Paul was set upon by some zealous Jews. They dragged him out of the temple, accusing him of defiling the place. They were beating him to death in front of a mob when the Romans intervened to rescue him.

The Roman commander allowed Paul to speak to the mob from the steps of the Fortress. Paul spoke to the Jews in Hebrew, telling of his vision of the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, and again in the temple, where the Lord told him to leave Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles. The mention of Gentiles sent the mob into a frenzy. Yelling and screaming they threw dust into the air. They wanted to kill Paul then and there but the commander ordered his soldiers to bring Paul into the barracks.

As we continue following the life of Paul and his witness of the gospel while in chains, we have three points from the passage before us: born a citizen, brought before the Sanhedrin, and belief in the resurrection.

1. Born a citizen

Claudius Lysias, the commander of Roman forces in Jerusalem, was at a loss as to why the Jews were trying to kill Paul. At first he thought Paul was an Egyptian assassin. But Paul said he was a Jew, and he spoke to the commander in Greek. He let Paul speak to the mob hoping to learn what they had against him. But he spoke in Hebrew which the Roman did not understand; even if he did he would not have heard any specific charges being made against Paul. The commander was left with the option of getting Paul the prisoner to confess to his crime. The Romans believed in the rule of law but certainly not in the equality of every man before the law. There was one law for the Romans and another for the rest; and the law for the rest could be extremely cruel.

The commander did not bother asking the prisoner his crime. He immediately resorted to the surest way of getting the truth from a Jew- torture. He ordered Paul to be examined under scourging (22:24). This form of torture involved tying the prisoner to a pole, or maybe suspended by his arms from the ceiling, before proceeding to flog him with a whip of leather thongs in which bits of bone and metal were inserted. Up to this time Paul had been beaten with rods by the Romans but not

scourged (Acts 16:22). Scourging or ‘flagellum’ was most severe, leaving a man cripple for life, if not dead. Paul was aware of these consequences, although not afraid to die for the cause of the gospel. In the providence of God, Paul was born a Roman citizen and he used this citizenship to avoid such torture.

Paul was a Jew, but was also born a Roman citizen. His father must have been a Roman citizen. Just how his father became a citizen is not certain, but is it thought either he or his father was granted citizenship by the Emperor Pompey for helping the Romans in some way. Paul was first and foremost a citizen of heaven (Phil 3:20). Do you know what it means to be a citizen of heaven? Is this your primary citizenship? But he had a secondary citizenship, a citizenship in this world, and he was ready to use his rights as a citizen in the cause of the gospel of Christ in this world. As Christians we do not renounce such citizenship, but neither do we cling to it. We use it to vote in elections and to advance the cause of the gospel in this nation.

As Paul was being strung up by soldiers in preparation for scourging he indirectly told the centurion that he was a Roman citizen (22:25). He reminded him that it was unlawful to scourge a Roman who was not yet condemned. The alarmed centurion ran to the commander, who immediately came and asked Paul if he was a Roman citizen. He was shocked when Paul answered, ‘Yes’. The commander had spent a great sum, probably in bribes, in order to secure his citizenship. He probably took the name Claudius, after the emperor, at this time. Here was the prisoner he was about to torture claiming he was born a Roman citizen!

To scourge a Roman was, as Paul reminded him, illegal under Roman law. Even to have bound Paul, as he had done, was illegal. Those about to torture Paul withdrew; the commander was also afraid. The Lord in his goodness spared Paul this torture, although he remained in Roman custody- which was, in effect, protective custody.

2. Brought before the Sanhedrin

Claudius Lysias was ready to torture Paul but quickly stopped after learning it would have been against the law. For Roman citizens the law was basically just, and Claudius was eager to uphold the law. He had a prisoner, a Roman, whom he was holding without charge. He wanted to know what the Jews had against him. If there was no charge then presumably he would be released, but this would have put Paul’s life in danger. The next day Claudius ordered the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin to meet. He brought Paul before the Council to find out what they were accusing him of doing; and to allow Paul to respond (22:30).

In the Council, Paul stepped forward to address the Jewish leaders. He picked up where he left off the previous day in defending himself against their violent opposition- or defending the gospel that he preached. Addressing them as ‘men and brothers’, he declared that he had a clear conscience before God (23:1, cf. 24:16). He was not claiming to be perfect but to have lived in accordance with the knowledge he had. Only after believing in Jesus was his conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

The high priest did not like what he heard so ordered men standing near Paul to strike him across the mouth (23:2). Did he think Paul was being blasphemous, claiming to be a holy man? The Jewish

historian, Josephus, tells us that Ananias was a corrupt and violent man, unfit to be a high priest. But such was the depravity of Judaism in those days- remember how they treated Jesus, the Son of God.

Some try to defend Paul's response to this violence. It was a natural response and his words were true- indeed they were fulfilled when a few years later Ananias was killed for compromising with the Romans. Paul called Ananias a 'whitewashed wall', or as we would say 'a hypocrite', because he was acting outside the law- in contrast to the Roman commander. But Paul apologised when told that he was speaking against the high priest. Like David when being hunted by King Saul, Paul remembered the command of God not to revile or insult 'a ruler of your people' (23:5). How it was that he did not recognise the high priest is not clear; maybe because of his poor eyesight or because the priest was not wearing his usual dress or sitting in his usual place. Besides, Paul was not there to defend himself; he was there defending the gospel of Jesus Christ. Had not Jesus taught, 'Do not resist an evil person. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also' (Mat 6:39).

3. Belief in the resurrection

After receiving a smack on the mouth and then apologising for insulting God's high priest, as wicked as he was, Paul composed himself to defend the gospel in this Council of the Jews. 'Paul perceived that one part of the Council were Sadducees and the other Pharisees' (23:6). He knew that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection- or angels or spirits (23:8); they were sad-you-see! The Pharisees on the other hand believed in the resurrection, though not the fact that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.

We might think that Paul was simply out to split the Council when he cried out, 'I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee' and that he was on trial because of his belief in the resurrection. But it was a Council often at loggerheads because of this and other differences. The majority of politically-minded Sadducees had to tolerate the legalistic but popular and powerful Pharisees. The truth of the resurrection was, and is, central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's testimony was that the risen Jesus appeared and spoke to him on the Damascus road. The Sadducees did not accept this testimony- hence the slap across the mouth.

Although they worshipped God, the Sadducees were materialists, believing only in what they could see with their eyes. There are Sadducees in the church today, just as there are Pharisees or legalists. Liberal theology does not demand belief in the resurrection- or miracles or creation. Our secular society cannot comprehend the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, nor the resurrection of all individuals when Jesus returns. But the resurrection was fundamental to the gospel Paul preached and to the gospel we preach today. Remember, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, so do not get carried away by strange teachings (Heb 13:8) which are as prevalent today as they were in NT times. To the teachings of liberal theology we could add the teaching of Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons and many others.

Paul was born a Roman and a Jew. He was born into the sect of the Pharisees and educated under a Pharisee. As such he believed in the resurrection but acknowledged neither the atoning death of Christ nor his bodily resurrection until that day on the Damascus road. In saying, 'I am a Pharisee' Paul

was not aligning himself with the legalism of the Pharisees (cf. Phil 3:5), but simply saying he observed the law- Jesus observed the law (Mat 5:19) - and believed in the resurrection of the dead.

What Paul said caused the Pharisees in the Council to reconsider their opposition to Paul. They knew about his former way of life in persecuting Christians. Maybe an angel had spoken to him. Had not the great Gamaliel warned them about fighting against God? So scribes of the Pharisee sect raised their voices saying, 'We find no evil in this man' (23:9). The Pharisees were a powerful group but still they could not sway the Sadducees to drop the charges against Paul- whatever those charges were! The Council erupted into violence- a common occurrence it seems when Ananias was in the chair. Again the commander had to rescue Paul from the hands of the Jews. Fearing his prisoner would be torn limb from limb, he sent his soldiers into the meeting to forcefully bring Paul out and back into the barracks (23:10). He learnt nothing of why the Jews hated Paul- apart from a question about Jewish law, as he later wrote (23:29).

The Roman commander must have been disgusted at such behaviour in the highest court of the Jews. Luke does not cover up such depraved behaviour. These were of course, the men who condemned to death Jesus the Son of God. The end of this Council and the temple they were defiling daily was just a few years away.

We must be careful in the church, especially the leaders, to maintain order within church courts. The NT church was disorderly at times (1Cor 14:40). And sadly, depraved behaviour has been seen in the church down through the ages. Even today, those outside the church have reason to feel like Claudius must have felt with the Jews. Let us be mindful of how the world sees us in the church. If we are focused on obeying God's commands, the command to love God and love one another, we will not need to be ashamed.

Journey to Rome begins

Acts 23:11-35

The apostle Paul went up to Jerusalem at the end of his third mission. He went despite warnings and a prophecy that he would be bound by the Jews and end up in Roman custody (21:11). He went with good intentions but this prophecy came true. Actually, it was as the Jews were trying to kill Paul that the Romans rescued him. The Roman commander wanted to know why they were trying to kill Paul but his attempts to get to the bottom of the case failed. Without any charge against the prisoner, who turned out to be a Roman citizen, Paul should have been released. But this would have meant death at the hand of the Jews. Paul knew this. He had reason to fear for his life if released; but life as a prisoner of Rome was not so great either. What would become of this servant of the Lord?

Have you ever been in a predicament like this? Probably not, but you may have been in a situation where you saw no way out at the time. Whichever way you turned the prospect was bleak; you were in a no-win situation. The Bible speaks of situations like this. Paul himself wrote, 'God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted/tried beyond what you are able, but with the temptation/trial will also make the way of escape that you may be able to bear it' (1Cor 10:13); what a comforting verse! The Lord knew Paul's plight as he sat in a cell in the barracks at Jerusalem. In his grace he appeared and spoke an encouraging word to his servant Paul. He assured him that he would witness the gospel in Rome. In this message we will firstly note this word of encouragement from the Lord, secondly the conspiracy to murder Paul, and thirdly his conveyance to Caesarea.

1. Encouraged by the Lord

This was not the first time the Lord spoke to the apostle. Paul had just shared the amazing story of his conversion with most of Jerusalem, telling how the risen Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus. And while giving this testimony from the steps of the barracks he also told of the Lord speaking to him in the temple, telling him to get out of Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles (22:21). Moreover, while witnessing in Corinth on his second mission the Lord spoke to Paul in a night vision shortly before the Jews brought him to the Roman proconsul, Gallio. Gallio made a significant ruling- or non-ruling- regarding the Christians. He refused to distinguish them from Jews under Roman law. Here in Jerusalem the Roman commander was facing a similar problem as he tried to find out what the Jews had against Paul, who was a Jew and a Pharisee. Neither Gallio nor Lysais found cause to charge Paul with serious crime. If they had done so Paul's gospel ministry would have been seriously curtailed.

Here in Jerusalem Paul barely escaped a Roman scourging. He must have felt very much alone. He had no one to turn to for help, apart from the Lord; we might wonder where James and the church people were at this time. Luke does not say that Paul was praying when the Lord Jesus stood by him this night, but he probably was. In any case, the Lord in his omniscience knew how Paul was feeling. And he came to Paul saying, 'be of good cheer' or 'take courage' (23:11). What joy must have filled the apostle's heart to hear these words from the Lord? It was long time since the Lord last spoke in this manner- way back in Corinth in fact, as we noted.

Apart from this word of encouragement, or as part of this word of encouragement, the Lord told Paul two things; firstly, that he approved of Paul's witnessing of him in Jerusalem. This Paul had done as he gave his testimony from the steps of the barracks. Again in the Sanhedrin he witnessed to the resurrection. Paul was not simply defending himself; he was witnessing Jesus before Jew and Gentile.

At his conversion Paul was divinely commanded to witness the name of Jesus before Gentiles, Jews and kings (9:15). He was carrying out this command. This word from the Lord was an encouraging word of confirmation, just in case he was beginning to doubt.

Do you sometimes doubt that your witness for the Lord is in vain? We have just returned from India where missionaries ministered for many years but saw little fruit for the Lord. But now, a generation later, the fruit is coming. We remember that God is the Lord of the harvest. He is the one who gives fruit; our task is to be faithful in sowing the word. Just in case you are saying, 'I have not had any word from the Lord', do remember the Great Commission given by Jesus: 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark16:15). If the Lord in some way calls you to a specific people group, well and good. But remember, he calls each of us to be his witnesses wherever we are. Could the Lord be saying to you, 'Take courage, you have testified of me in Sydney and Mt Druitt?'

The second thing the Lord spoke to Paul about was the future. We all want to know the future. We want to know what the weather will be like next week. We want to know what will happen to property prices next year. But the Lord is concerned about people hearing the name of Jesus- and we should share this concern. The Lord told Paul, 'You must also bear witness in Rome' (23:11).

Do you remember Paul's circumstances? He was in a prison cell in Jerusalem. The Romans were ready to torture him to death when he told them he was a Roman citizen. Outside the Jews were waiting to beat him to death. Fanatics were waiting to get their hands on him, as we will see. Paul might have thought he would die in Jerusalem, and that very soon! But Jesus stood by him saying, 'You must bear witness of me at Rome' (23:11). Paul believed the word of the Lord. He would live to see Rome; which was his prayer. He had decided to go to Rome after visiting Jerusalem, in accordance with the Lord's commission to go to the Gentiles (19:21). God's plans are always perfect. There is no 'Yes and No' (2Cor 1:20). We can be very clever at finding reasons why not to do what the Lord commands us. Moses tried this. But let us be more like Isaiah who said, 'Here am I! Send me' (Isa 6:8).

2. Conspiracy to murder

The Lord fulfils his every promise, and he does so in his own time. On this occasion it was almost immediate. The very next day some Jews conspired to murder Paul, an action which led to him being taken to Caesarea. Luke goes into this conspiracy in some detail. Some say he liked telling a good story, which may be true, but from this story we get an insight into fanatical Judaism, Paul's own family and Roman administration.

Fanatical Jews led fickle Jews in condemning Jesus of Nazareth, shouting before Pilate, 'Crucify him, crucify him' (Luke 23:21). Fanatical Jews were desperate to get rid of Paul whom they saw as violating their law. They saw Paul escape the mob outside the temple- they were probably in that mob. They saw him escape the uproar in the Sanhedrin. In desperation, forty of them took an oath which may have been along the lines of, 'So may God do to us, and more also, if we eat or drink until we have killed Paul' (23:12). They informed the 'chief priests and elders' or the Sadducees of this oath and asked them to petition the commander to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin once again on the pretence of making further inquiries (23:15). They planned to kill Paul while the soldiers were escorting him to the meeting. The soldiers would probably kill many of them but such was their fanaticism. We still see violent religious fanaticism today.

Murdering Paul this way would not have been easy, but as the Lord intervened it became impossible. Their plot to ambush and kill Paul became known to the son of Paul's sister, and he made it known to the commander. Just why this young man was in Jerusalem, or how he came to know of this plot, we are not told. Nor are we told much about Paul's sister- despite our eagerness to know more about the family of this great apostle. Since Paul's father was a Pharisee, some assume his family rejected him when he became a follower of Jesus. But this nephew's readiness to report this plot to murder Paul shows a familial affection, if not a fellowship in the Lord.

The young man went to Paul in the barracks and told him of the plot. Paul called a centurion and asked him to take the young man to the commander (23:17). The commander took him by the hand into a private place and listened to his story- which he believed. The commander sent the young man away, warning him not to breathe a word to anyone about their conversation. Had the commander already decided to send this case to a higher authority? It did seem to be beyond his ability and/or authority. If so, the young man's story served to confirm his decision and hasten his conveyance of Paul the prisoner to Caesarea.

What became of the forty fanatics when their plot was foiled? What about the oath they took not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul? These zealots were fanatical about keeping the law, but ironically, or hypocritically, were ready to lie and to murder, contrary to two commandments. They had a zeal for God but without knowledge, not even knowledge of God's commandments (Rom 10:2). You will find similar people today, even in the church.

3. Conveyance to Caesarea

The commander wasted no time in conveying his VIP prisoner to his superior officer in Caesarea. He called two of his centurions and told them to get their soldiers ready to march. That very night two hundred soldiers, along with another two hundred spearmen and seventy cavalry, would convey Paul out of Jerusalem. Paul was given horses for his transport (23:24). It was a very large contingent because the commander was taking no chances. He knew what Jewish zealots were like. A band of forty assassins was something to be reckoned with. The soldiers left with their prisoner around 9pm and reached Antipatris, a town on the plains, under cover of darkness. Being safely out of the Judean hills, the soldiers could return while the cavalry continued on to Caesarea with their prisoner.

The commander wrote a letter to be conveyed with Paul the prisoner, and this was duly delivered. The letter is interesting and informative, being that of a Gentile and a Roman. Luke writes of the commander's letter that 'he wrote a letter in the following manner' (23:28). It is here that we learn of the commander's name, Claudius Lysias. He addresses the letter to Governor Felix (23:26) who was procurator of Judea from AD52 to AD59. Lysias explains how Paul became his prisoner, covering up the fact that he had put him in chains before learning that he was a Roman citizen (23:27). All he could say with regard to what the Jews were accusing him of was that it was something to do with their law. Like Gallio (18:14), Lysias concluded that Paul had committed no crime deserving of death (23:29). The threat of a Jewish attack led Lysias to send this prisoner to Caesarea, to where the Jews would be told to bring their accusations. When Felix read the letter he asked where the prisoner was from. Cilicia was a Roman province so he could go ahead with a trial without involving a local ruler. And so the apostle Paul remained in Roman custody until his accusers came down from Jerusalem.

Before Felix in Caesarea

Acts 24:1-27

I noticed the name 'Felix' in a book of baby names that came across my desk, but it was not top of the list. It is a Latin or Roman name meaning 'happy' or 'fortunate' according to this book, which also said it had 'positive overtones'. No such overtones come from this name in the Bible or other history books that refer to this Roman governor. He appears in the Bible because the apostle Paul was sent to him by Lysias, the Roman commander in Jerusalem. Lysias took Paul into custody when a mob outside the temple were trying to kill him. When Jewish zealots took an oath to kill Paul no matter what, Lysias transferred his prisoner to Caesarea. He told the Jews to take their accusations to Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea. In this chapter Luke gives an account of Paul's trial before Felix, and of his personal witness of the gospel to Felix and his wife Drusilla.

1. Accused by the Jews

It took five days for the high priest, Ananias, and elders from the Sadducees to come down to Caesarea. They brought an orator or lawyer with them, a man called Tertullus (24:1). Tertullus was probably a Hellenistic Jew familiar with Roman, as well as Jewish law. The Jews were allowed to impose their own law regarding the temple but not the death penalty. In any case, Paul was a Roman citizen in Roman custody so Roman law applied.

Felix sat in the judge's seat to hear the case. He was open to flattery, like most men, so Tertullus began by 'buttering up' the judge as we say. Actually this was typical of court proceedings in those days. We will see Paul doing the same thing, but not resorting to lies like Tertullus. Tertullus began by praising Felix and thanking him for the long period of peace he brought to Judea and for his foresight in bringing reforms. Both Tacitus, a Roman historian, and Josephus, a Jewish historian, write of Felix making ferocious attacks upon the Jews. Tacitus writes, 'he practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with the instincts of a slave'. The flattery continued with a promise not to be tedious or to weary the governor (24:4).

The accusations against Paul, three in all, move from the general to the specific, from the political to the religious; the Romans were more concerned about politics than religion. Firstly, they accused Paul of being a pest or a plague within Jewish society, of stirring up trouble all around the world. This was a serious charge. The Romans did not take kindly to men making trouble in their empire. But the Jews brought no evidence for this charge. The second charge was more specific, but again without evidence. The accused Paul of being the ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes (24:5). Felix had dealt with various uprisings and sect leaders in his six years as governor. Tertullus tried to portray Paul as another such person. 'Nazarenes' was a derogatory term associated with Jesus of Nazareth. He tried to disassociate Paul's 'sect of the Nazarenes' from the religion of the Jews. Did Paul look like a typical sect leader?

The third charge was more specific in that it referred to the arrest of the prisoner- 'we seized him' (24:6). Why did they seize him? Because he tried to profane the temple. The Romans cared little about the temple; they let the Jews manage it themselves. But to the Jews profaning the temple, by bringing in a Gentile for example, was a serious matter. They thought Paul had profaned the temple and were beating him to death when Lysias intervened. They complained that he took Paul out of

their hands. They could hardly claim that they were giving him a fair hearing. Besides, they could only assert that he **'tried to profane the temple'** (24:6). This word was somewhat of a give-away in the court. Tertullus did not have the evidence to make an actual charge of profaning the temple. He left off the case at this point, and invited Felix to examine the accused himself (24:8) - which under Roman law he was obliged to do anyway.

The high priest and his elders joined in vocal agreement with these accusations. We do not know the number of elders in the party, but it was in stark contrast to the one man on the other side of the court making his own defence. Paul was not alone of course, because, as Jesus said, 'when you are brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake... I will give you a mouth and wisdom' (Luke 21:12-15). David was not afraid of those who 'set themselves against me all around', and neither was Paul (Ps 3:6).

2. Answers from Paul

Paul was in the court listening to the accusations against him. After receiving a nod from Felix he began to answer the charges, as well as witness the gospel of Jesus Christ. He began with customary reference to the benevolence of the governor- flattery if you like but without lies. In answering the charge of being a pest and of creating dissension among the Jews, Paul reminded the court that he had only been in Jerusalem twelve days when they arrested him, and that he had come there to worship. As a Jew, and a purified one at that, he was permitted to worship in the temple. The Christians continued going to the temple for some years it seems. His accusers brought no evidence of him disputing with anyone or inciting the crowd, because there was none (24:12). He had simply gone to the city and to the temple to worship God. He later refers to alms and offerings which he brought with him (24:17).

Paul readily admitted to worshipping God according to the Way, which the Jews called a sect. The early Christians referred to themselves as belonging to the Way, probably a reference to the words of Isaiah taken up by John the Baptist, 'prepare the way of the Lord' (Luke 3:4), or maybe to Jesus' own words in John 14:6: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. The Way was not a sect, not a departure from Judaism, but was in fact the fulfilment of Judaism. Paul worshipped the God of the fathers and believed everything written in the Law and the Prophets (24:14). Paul did not teach anything contrary to Scripture. He dismissed any notion that he was leading people away from believing and worshipping the God of the Bible. It follows that the Jews were not adhering to the teaching of the Bible. This was obvious with regard to their attempts to murder Paul. It is true of Judaism today- they are not worshipping the God of the Bible (John 3:26).

Paul returns to the hope of the resurrection that is central to the teaching and faith of the Bible- despite the Sadducees rejection of this truth. Paul speaks of the general resurrection, the resurrection of the just and the unjust, of the saved and the unsaved (24:15). In his letters he speaks of the resurrection of believers, but in keeping with the teaching of Jesus, and the whole Bible, he clearly believed in the resurrection of all the dead on the last day (John 5:28-29, Dan 12:2). The resurrection will be followed by the judgment. Every person who has ever been born will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

With this in mind, Paul endeavoured to keep a clear conscience without offense toward God and men (24:16). He sought to live according the commands of God. Paul was not perfect but he knew the grace of God in forgiveness when he confessed his sin. In this way he kept a clear conscience. Do you strive to keep a clear conscience before God and men? Or do you harbour sin in your heart, being too proud to confess before God or man? Remember when Paul spoke harsh words to the high priest- he confessed the moment he realised he had sinned by breaking God's command (23:5).

The Jews brought no concrete evidence before Felix (24:13). Paul goes on to supply the evidence regarding the specific accusation of attempting to profane the temple. He had not been to Jerusalem for some years. When he went there it was to worship God not to stir up trouble. He went to celebrate Pentecost. As already stated, he had not been there twelve days when they grabbed him. Moreover, he had gone up with gifts for the poor and offerings (24:17). We have referred to the collection Paul made among the Gentile churches because Paul writes of this in his letters. But this is the first time Luke mentions this collection- it is actually Paul who mentions it in his defence before Felix.

Paul went to Jerusalem with good intentions, the intention help his people and to worship God. He went to the temple after purifying himself according to the law. Some Jews from Asia saw him and assumed he was still defiled from contact with Gentiles, and that he brought Gentiles into the temple. This was a serious accusation but was totally false. His accusers had no evidence. They had not even brought the men who saw him in the temple (24:19). Paul had no lawyer but with God-given wisdom he demolished this charge of Tertullus and the Jews. Crucial witnesses were not present.

Having effectively destroyed their case, Paul quickly moved to witness the gospel before this ruler and the Jews. He referred to his outburst in the Sanhedrin telling everyone that he was on trial because he believed in the resurrection of the dead (24:21). If they wanted to accuse Paul of misconduct in the Sanhedrin then let them do so- at least they were present at the time! It was this reference to the resurrection that brought him support from the Pharisees -who were not present here in Caesarea. The Sadducees rejected such teaching. Once again Paul made his belief in the resurrection central to the charges made against him. This was a hot theological issue- too hot for Felix to handle. But it was a matter of personal concern to all men, including Felix.

And so Felix adjourned the proceedings (24:22). Paul's accusers had failed to establish any charges and Paul should have been released. Felix knew about the Christians, maybe because his wife was Jewish. He knew Paul was innocent- just as Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. Why then did he not release Paul? He said he wanted Lysias to come down and give evidence, but he had the commander's letter. After two years Paul was still in prison, with no further trial mentioned (24:27) - so what happened to Lysias? At least Felix allowed Paul some liberties. He allowed Paul's friends to visit and provide for his needs, which the Christians in Caesarea no doubt did. Luke writes that Felix often called for Paul and chatted with him, looking for a bribe (24:26). Bribes were illegal but not uncommon in this pagan administration- as in many places today. I still remember a clerk from the court taking my hand and leading me to the tea shop where he asked for a bribe to get a document signed by the magistrate.

3. Alarm of Felix

Talking to a man like the apostle Paul is fraught with danger- especially if you are looking for a bribe! Taking bribes was one of Felix's lesser evils. We have learned of his brutality and of his lustful ways from historians. Here in the Bible we learn that he had a wife called Drusilla (24:24). She was Jewish because she was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I. She was the wife of another man until Felix lusted after her and lured her into marrying him. She became his third wife.

Although fishing for a bribe, Felix was also curious about this religion called the Way and about Paul's faith in Christ. Paul obliged, and reasoned with Felix and his wife about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come (24:25). Righteousness and self-control were not part of Felix's vocabulary. For him life was about lust not love, about survival by fair means or foul. He was probably keeping Paul in prison so the Jews would not make a compliant to Rome- as well as fishing for a bribe.

Yet Paul talking about righteousness and self-control had some impact on Felix; not that he was convicted of his sin but at least became aware of it. Paul was following in the footsteps of John the Baptist who told Herod Antipas of his sin in taking another man's wife. How many preachers today are ready to confront even men in high places with their sin?

Felix knew he was a sinner but, like many today, he was not concerned about this. But then he was told about the judgment to come. Paul told him about God's righteous judgment from which none will escape because all will rise from the dead. There are foolish people who think they can escape God's judgment. Realising the gravity of his sin, Felix became afraid (24:25). Good! But instead of repenting and seeking forgiveness for his sin, as Paul would have urged him to do, he told Paul to go away until a more convenient time. Did that more convenient time ever come? Probably not. The walls of hell are inscribed with the names of millions who said, 'at a more convenient time'.

Trial before Festus

Acts 25:1-22

How is the new president of the USA doing? The media is reporting on his performance almost every day and giving him a low performance rating. You also may be rating his performance low. Yet, if you believe what the Bible says about all authorities that exist being appointed by God (Rom 13:1), you might be asking why God allowed this man to be elected president. While the press condemns everything he has done, thousands of children will one day thank him that they were born and not aborted. Did God hear the cry of the unborn- 'Let me live!' I am not here to give political commentary but I do urge you to look at world events, as well as events in your own life, from God's perspective.

Politicians come and go; we do not look to them to usher in the kingdom of God. God has called us in the church to be hastening the coming of his kingdom through faithful preaching of the gospel to every person (Mat 24:14, 28:19, 2Peter 3:12). As the gospel is preached and as God changes individual hearts, so this world will be changed for the better. God has his elect in this world and he hears their prayers. In his sovereignty he rules over the affairs of men. Our Catechism teaches that, 'God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions' (Shorter Catechism Q11). That includes the actions of rulers does it not?

In the last eight chapters of the book of Acts the apostle Paul is a Roman prisoner. He was at the mercy of pagan authorities. We are reading secular history; in fact, we have been referring to historians like Josephus and Tacitus. But this is more than secular history. We are reading history from God's perspective. How amazing! We might compare these eight chapters to the book of Daniel which similarly give a detailed history from God's perspective. We have lots of histories of the Second World War but none from God's perspective. Yet, with the aid of these Biblical histories we learn how to understand the Second World War and all world events, and indeed events in our own lives, from God's perspective.

Daniel declared of the Lord that, 'He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and raises up kings' (Dan 2:21). In Proverbs 21:1 we read, 'The heart of the king is in the hands of the Lord'. Here in Acts we read of the Lord speaking to Paul in a vision, telling him he must testify of Jesus in Rome (23:11). Paul was encouraged. God had revealed his plan for Paul, a plan which rulers unknowingly fulfilled. In all the turmoil of politics at least remember that God's ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9), and higher than the ways of petty politics.

Paul was taken into Roman custody in Jerusalem because the Jews were trying to murder him. A trial before Lysias failed when his attempt to get evidence from the Jews led to a violent uproar in the Sanhedrin. The Jews were not interested in a fair trial; they just wanted Paul dead. Paul was taken to Caesarea where Felix conducted a trial. He could not convict Paul because the Jews brought no evidence. But he kept Paul in prison for two years as a favour to the Jews- and in the hope of getting a bribe. In Jerusalem prison provided protection for Paul. In Caesarea it was more like political incarceration, a time when Paul had to patiently remember the words of the Lord about witness to Gentiles and kings and Jews (9:15), and doing this in Rome itself (23:11).

Felix was recalled to Rome by Emperor Nero in AD 59 after complaints from the Jews. Not wanting to prejudice his position by offending the Jews even further, he left Paul in prison (24:27). Felix was replaced by Festus. Festus went up to Jerusalem, just three days after taking over, where the Jews pressed him to get rid of Paul because he was a pest not fit to live (25:1-3). They did not want a trial but if Festus insisted they wanted it to be in Jerusalem. They planned an ambush to murder Paul along the road. Our second point will look at the trial conducted by Festus in Caesarea, and third point, the reference to Jesus in this trial.

1. Jerusalem or Caesarea

The Romans ruled the province of Judea from Caesarea but Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish worship and power. Festus wasted no time in making the trip to Jerusalem to meet his subjects. At a meeting with the high priests and leading Jews he was prevailed upon to send Paul to Jerusalem. He quickly learned of the importance of this prisoner to the Jews. They had a win in that Felix left him locked up. They were looking for another win from this new and inexperienced procurator. Evil men that they were, despite their religious robes, they were plotting to murder Paul on the way (25:3). The forty or so assassins may have been ready to make another attempt- even if rather hungry after two years!

Festus was not as gullible as the Jews hoped. Since Paul was in Caesarea, and Festus was going there, he told the Jews to send their leaders and those with evidence against Paul to Caesarea, where he would conduct a trial. Festus stayed on another ten days in Jerusalem. The Jews wasted no time in once again bringing their accusations against Paul. We are not told if Tertullus was again called upon; it was two years later. That the Jews were still intent on killing Paul after two years of imprisonment shows the depth, and satanic inspiration, of their anger against God's servant. King Saul spent years and heaps of resources in a relentless campaign against God's servant David. 'Persistence and deceit are the trademarks of the churches persecutors' writes Larkin. Do be aware of the persistent use of deceitful language by those who hate the moral teaching of the Bible, starting with the word 'gay'.

Jesus told his Jewish persecutors, 'you are of your father the devil' (John 8:44). Paul informs us that we are in a spiritual battle so must put on the armour of God to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph 6:11). We must be alert, as 'wise as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Mat 10:16). We should be neither naïve nor paranoid. We do not become so focussed on Satan's activity that we lose sight of Christ's victory, and the work that he has given us to complete. Do not forget about the providence of Almighty God.

2. Judgment by Festus

The next day Festus took his place on the judgment seat, and Paul was brought before him (25:6). The Jews who had come from Jerusalem stood around making their accusations. Luke does not give details but they were probably the same as those they brought before Felix. The accusations were serious but they could not prove any of them (25:7). We will soon learn that the name of 'a certain Jesus' featured in these accusations, or at least in Paul's response (25:19).

Under Roman law the accused was given the opportunity to defend himself; Paul defended all followers of the Way at the same time. Paul denied breaking any Jewish law or Roman law, or that he

defiled the temple in any way (25:8). As with the trial before Felix, he was not found guilty of any charge. But again, as with Felix, he was not released. This new procurator was also careful not to offend the Jews, so Paul became a 'political football' as we say- all in the providence of God. Festus however, did not simply procrastinate. Out of 'left field' came the question to Paul, 'are you willing to go to Jerusalem and be judged by me there?' (25:9). There is no indication that he would be handed over to the Jews for judgment by them- not at this stage anyway. The question was about place not jurisdiction. But Festus was desperate to keep the Jews happy, so Paul could not be sure of remaining under Roman jurisdiction. In any case, the Jews would be trying to murder him before he got to Jerusalem.

Paul had no choice but to appeal to Caesar- even though it was later agreed that he could have been set free if he had not made this appeal (26:32). Remember that the Lord had told Paul he must witness in Rome. The world was looking to Paul's release, or his death, but God was looking to the name of Jesus being heard in the palace of the king. It was proper that Paul, a Roman citizen, be in a Roman court. He was concerned that this ruler was playing politics rather than exercising justice. Favouritism and bribery lead to injustice.

Paul was not a fatalist. He was not going to test God by walking into a Jewish trap. Jesus refused to test God by jumping from the temple tower (Luke 4:12). God had given Paul wisdom, as well as knowledge. He knew he had the right to appeal to a higher court, and in God-given wisdom he chose this course of action. He knew he was on trial for the gospel and must defend himself, and the gospel, with all his might. He also knew God's will for him to witness in Rome.

Paul reminded Festus that,

1. He should be judged in a Roman court,
2. He was not guilty of breaking Jewish law, as Festus well knew,
3. If he had committed a capital offence he was willing to die and,
4. He was appealing to Caesar for justice (25:10-11).

After a brief consultation with his advisors, Festus made the decision to send Paul to Rome (25:12). The Caesar or Emperor at this time was Nero; in his early years he was not the anti-Christian monster he became.

Although Paul appealed to Caesar, Festus still needed to provide some sort of charge sheet to go with the prisoner. He had little understanding of the charges the Jews were making, especially when they started talking about their own religion/superstition and 'a certain Jesus, who had died, but who Paul affirmed to be alive' (25:19).

3. Jesus

Who was this Jesus they argued about? And what was the talk about him rising from the dead? Clearly, matters of religion do not belong in secular courts. The Reformers made this clear, especially in Scotland, but not all churches or states accept that church and state are separate jurisdictions. Not so long ago we had a secular judge judging two Christian men accused of offending Muslims in what they said about the Koran. The Christians had quoted the Koran; the judge had not read the Koran but

still convicted these men. At least Festus realised he was out of his depth. He took the opportunity of getting advice from a Jew, namely Herod Agrippa II.

This Herod was just seventeen when his father Agrippa I died in AD44- he was the Herod who killed James. When Agrippa II was older he was given rule over various territories around Galilee. He was also appointed by Rome to be in charge of Jewish affairs, of the temple treasury, and the appointment of the high priest. His youngest sister, Drusilla, had married Felix. His other sister, Bernice, had married her uncle but came back to live with her brother- leading to rumours of an incestuous relationship. The Herods, as we know from the Bible itself, were morally bankrupt with a number marrying their nieces.

King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, came to greet the new Roman governor (25:13). They stayed for many days, enough time for Festus to tell Agrippa about a certain prisoner left behind by Felix, and whom the Jews, at least the chief priests and elders, desperately wanted dead. Festus insisted on a proper Roman trial at which Paul the prisoner had opportunity to defend himself. Festus heard the accusations but found they were nothing serious, nothing deserving of death, just as Lysias and Felix has previously concluded (23:29, 24:22).

This is the first time we read of the name of Jesus being mentioned in the court; although Paul's repeated reference to the resurrection centred upon the resurrection of Jesus. It was his meeting with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road that changed his life and his understanding of Scripture. He preached Jesus as the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18). He saw the resurrection of Jesus as central to the gospel and to our faith (1Cor 15:14).

How wonderful to read that the name of Jesus was heard from the steps of the fortress in Jerusalem, in the courtroom at Caesarea, and soon to be in the highest courtroom of the most powerful nation on earth at the time. Is that name heard in the courtrooms and parliaments of our land? Are you concerned that it is? What about in the homes and churches of our land? Some are afraid to preach the resurrection of Jesus in this cynical, 'scientific' age. Do pray that the name of Jesus continues to be heard from your house to the houses of parliament across our nation.

Testimony before Agrippa-persecutor Acts 25:22- 26:11

The life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, is of vital interest to the Christian. Also of great interest is the life of the apostle Paul, the man who was changed from a persecutor of Christians to a preacher of the gospel. Many books have been written on the life of Paul, but as far as an autobiography is concerned what we read here in Acts 26 is the most extensive outside his letters. Sure, it is only one page in our Bible but it covers the essential details of his life, as far as Paul is concerned. We have seen a similar account back in Acts 22 when Paul addressed the Jerusalem mob. At that time he was cut short by the Jews when he mentioned the word 'Gentiles'. Here in the auditorium at Caesarea he is cut short by the cry of Festus, 'You are out of your mind, Paul!', but not before he outlined his Pharisaic heritage, the promise of the Scriptures, his persecution of Christians, his conversion, his commission and his conduct, and the content of the gospel.

Today we will look at Paul's life before his conversion as he described it. Before this a reminder of the situation in which he gave this speech. The Roman procurator Felix left Paul in prison in Caesarea when he was sacked and replaced by Festus. In getting to know his Jewish subjects in Jerusalem, Festus was told about Paul, with the demand that this man be put to death because he was 'not fit to live any longer' (25:2, 24). They gave no reason for this demand- none that Festus understood. Even after they made formal accusations against Paul in a Roman court he was none the wiser.

Concerned at the suggestion that he be taken back to Jerusalem to face trial, Paul appealed to Caesar for judgment; this meant going to Rome. Festus was required to send details about the prisoner and what he was charged with, but he had no idea what to write. Lysias had lived in Jerusalem, and even been to a meeting of the Sanhedrin. He might have known about the sect of Pharisees and the sect of Sadducees. He wrote to Felix when he sent Paul to him that 'he was accused concerning questions of their [Jewish] law' (23:29); not exactly precise charges! Festus probably knew even less than Lysias, and then it appears there was this new sect of Jesus followers.

Enter King Agrippa II or Herod Agrippa II, a Jewish royal whom the Romans had put in charge of Jewish affairs. Agrippa was eager to hear this man Paul for himself, so Festus obliged (25:22). Agrippa's grandfather, Herod Antipas, was similarly eager to meet Jesus (Luke 23:8). Festus invited Agrippa and his sister Bernice, who had accompanied him to Caesarea, to a huge show in the auditorium at Roman headquarters. All his military commanders were present, along with leading men of the city (25:23). Still in chains, Paul was brought before this elite gathering; his hands must have been free as he stretched out his hand to begin his speech (26:1). Festus explained how the Jews were demanding this man be put to death, even though he had not found him guilty of any crime. Paul had appealed to Caesar for judgment, so Festus had to send him to this higher court. In doing so he needed to specify the charges. Having no idea what to write he asked Agrippa for help (25:26). And so this meeting began with Agrippa giving the floor to Paul the prisoner.

1. Pharisaic heritage

Paul gladly accepted King Agrippa's invitation to speak. For a man who had been imprisoned for over two years without charge, Paul spoke with considerable restraint. He spoke with 'respectful demeanour' because it was not him personally but the gospel that was on trial. He was in chains

because of the gospel. Jesus told his disciples that they would be brought before kings and rulers, and that this would be opportunity for testimony; when this happened He would give wisdom and words to say (Luke 21:12-15). Paul spoke with confidence, knowing what he believed and what was at stake. He asked the king to listen patiently as he refuted the accusations of the Jews. He acknowledged Agrippa's role as 'Jewish advisor' and expert in Jewish customs and controversies, though not necessarily an expert in the Scriptures (26:3). Imagine for a moment if you were in the shoes- or chains- of the apostle. Would you be able not only to restrain yourself in the face of injustice but also to tell what you believe? Remember the words of Jesus that we have just heard, but also remember that you must also know what you believe.

As a young man Paul came to Jerusalem to study under a top rabbi and was top of his class- he was 'exceedingly zealous for the traditions of the fathers' (Gal 1:14). He studied to be a Pharisee, the strictest sect of Judaism, and lived as a Pharisee (26:5). This was common knowledge among the Jews though not mentioned by his accusers. In fact, as he goes on to say, he was so fanatically strict that he went after Christians. They were following a blasphemer, as the Jews labelled Jesus when he said he was the Son of God. Agrippa was probably a Sadducee but he understood what Paul was saying.

2. Promise of the Scriptures

Before moving on to his days of persecuting Christians, Paul draws Agrippa's attention to what Jews, at least Pharisees, believed. They believed in 'the promise God made to our fathers' (26:6). Paul's hope was in that very promise given to the Jews and yet his accusers were judging him for this. True Jews, Jews from the twelve tribes, were serving God with this hope. Listen to the words of Simeon when he saw the infant Jesus in the temple: 'My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people'. On the same occasion Anna spoke of Jesus to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:30, 38).

More specifically, this hope related to the resurrection which Paul previously spoke about, and was always talking about. Why should a Jew like Agrippa, or anyone for that matter, think it incredible that God raises the dead (26:8)? The Scriptures speak of a coming Messiah and of this Messiah rising from the dead (Isa 53). They speak of a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 65:17). Without a resurrection what is the point of such a promise. The patriarchs believed in this promise. God promised Abraham land, but more than a place on this earth. Abraham looked forward to the heavenly city. Since belief in the dead being raised is reasonable, and indeed is the promise of God, why should believing that he raised Jesus from the dead be so outrageous? 'If God did not raise Jesus, why believe that he raises the dead at all' writes Bruce.

In our 'scientific' age belief in the resurrection is widely ridiculed- although we might ask if it is any less scientific or believable than the belief that life emerged from a mixture of gases being zapped by lightning. Some church-goers listen to such 'science' and abandon belief in the resurrection. They preach the social gospel in an attempt to build a better world today. Yet people who have everything this world offers are not necessarily happy or contented. Jesus said, 'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul'.

Paul not only expected the Jews to believe in the resurrection; he expected Gentiles to believe as well. He preached this truth from the Scriptures, the word of God, and also from his own experience. He writes of unbelievers, or those who do not believe in the resurrection, as being without hope and without God in this world (Eph 2:12). Is this not the reason why so many in our world are living without hope? Is not the prevailing mood of our day hopelessness? Why? Because people reject God and his word. People refuse to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, a truth that is central to faith and hope in God. What is your hope? What will your hope be when you are ninety? Rotting in a box in the ground, or, what seems more popular today, having your ashes scattered on a river as the Hindus do? Maybe you hope to come back as cow or a monkey! Jesus rose from the dead and you will also rise from the dead, either to life with Jesus in his kingdom or 'life' with Satan in the lake of fire.

2. Persecutor

Paul grew up in Jerusalem as a strict observer of the law- as taught by the Pharisees. He pointed out to Agrippa that God's promise to the fathers included the resurrection of the dead. This is what Paul believed as a Pharisee and this belief had not changed. What had changed was that he now believed this promise was fulfilled in Jesus. Before his conversion he rejected this teaching and vehemently opposed any who accepted the resurrection of Jesus. Paul was clever enough to understand that if Jesus was risen from the dead it meant he was approved by God, and all that he said about being the Son of God must be true. He knew the implications of this message being propagated in Jerusalem and elsewhere.

So Paul, or as he then was Saul, went around the synagogues and homes in Jerusalem dragging out 'the saints' as he here calls them; he would not have been calling them saints at the time (26:10). He dragged them off to prison, and at their trial he would cast his vote to have them put to death if they did not deny Jesus. This may have been within the Sanhedrin or in a special body set up by the Sanhedrin. His victims had to choose between Christ and death. Many, like Stephen, chose Christ. Still today God's people are having to make that choice. Still today there are Jews who hate Jesus and his followers just as Paul did. There are Jews still looking for Messiah when, as we know, he has already come and already risen from the dead.

Paul undertook this pogrom with full authority from the chief priests, the men who now wanted him dead (26:10). He got their approval to go off to foreign cities tracking down followers of this pernicious 'sect of the Nazarenes' as they called it (24:5). Paul knew about the fury of the Jews who were accusing him because he had once believed and acted in the same way. He acted with zeal but without knowledge (Rom 10:2). He had since received knowledge. He had met the risen Jesus on the Damascus road and received the Spirit of God. Here we must leave Paul's story for today.

One point I make as we close. God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love, sent Jesus to speak to Paul, and he believed. God is still rich in mercy and is still a God of great love. And God still speaks today. He does so through his word, the Bible. If you believe in Jesus it is because you have heard God's word, his living word. 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God' (Rom 10:17). It is because when you heard the word, and the Holy Spirit quickened your dead heart making you alive unto Christ (Eph 2:1). If you have not yet believed then now is the day of salvation. Listen to the gospel, repent of your sin and believe in Jesus.

Testimony before Agrippa-preacher

Acts 26:12-23

The life of the Apostle Paul has attracted a great deal of interest, especially among Christians, and for obvious reasons. During my studies I read F. F. Bruce's, 'Paul, apostle of the free spirit'; I once heard Bruce speak in a nearby church. Back in 1920 William Ramsay wrote, 'St Paul the traveller and the Roman citizen'. These books trace St Paul's life from birth to death, although details of his death are uncertain. Here in the book of Acts, Luke concludes with Paul under house arrest in Rome. Was he released, before a second imprisonment and martyrdom? This is a question for another time. For now we pick up on Paul giving his testimony before King Agrippa, a guest of Festus in Caesarea.

Paul was born a Jew, born into the strictest sect, the Pharisees. He received a religious education in Jerusalem. He was so zealous that he set about persecuting any who believed in Jesus. The Sanhedrin supported Paul in this endeavour to silence anyone saying that Jesus was the promised Messiah and was risen from the dead. He was on a trip to the foreign city of Damascus in search of Christians when his life took a sudden U-turn. After telling of his conversion, he tells Agrippa of his divine commission, his conduct, and the content of the gospel, and then challenges Agrippa to personally believe in Jesus.

1. Conversion

In our study of the book of Acts we have already read about Paul's conversion. This is now the third time we are reading about it, but the accounts come in different settings- besides, by his own admission this event was the most significant in his life, and by our admission the most important in the spread of the gospel that eventually came to our ears. The first account is from the pen of Luke writing about the early growth of the church. This growth came despite vicious opposition from the Jews which included the murder of Stephen. The young Paul witnessed and approved this murder, although Stephen's cry to the Lord while under a hail of stones no doubt left its mark on the heart this fanatical young Jew.

Although Paul's testimony before the Jews in Jerusalem does not include all that Luke writes, the details of his conversion are the same. And so it is with his testimony before King Agrippa over two years later. Armed with letters of authority from the chief priests, Paul was travelling with companions to Damascus. At midday suddenly a bright light flashed from heaven. Like a bolt of lightning, it knocked them all to the ground. But it was more than lightning because the light shone around him and the others (26:13) and he heard a voice speaking to him in Hebrew: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (26:14, cf. 22:7, 9:4).

Here we learn that the voice also said, 'It is hard for you to kick against the goads' (26:14). What is a goad? This is an agricultural proverb and the goad is a sharp stick used to drive cows. It is difficult or pointless for the animal to kick such an instrument. As a boy I often picked up sticks to drive the cows. But I remember one time my brother decided to kick the cow. He came off second best, as we say, with a broken toe! The voice from heaven told Paul he was foolishly kicking the cow as it were! He was trying to stop a movement that would not be stopped. He was in fact fighting against God, as his teacher once warned against.

Paul and his companions were flat on the ground. Only Paul heard the voice and the words spoken (26:14 cf.22:7). He answered asking, 'Who are you Lord?' (26:15). All translations have a capital 'L' for Lord, and rightly so, although the Greek is not specific. Did Paul know it was the Lord God speaking to him? Most likely- who else would it be speaking from the bright light? If he was in any doubt his question was soon answered: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (26:15). But Jesus was dead, so Paul thought, and so his religious leaders taught. The rumour that he was risen from the dead was just that as far as Paul was concerned, rumour. But dead men don't speak! Yet the voice said, 'I am Jesus'.

Can you imagine the impact this had upon Paul- or anyone for that matter? But Paul in particular because he was telling the world that Jesus was a blasphemer who was crucified and buried. Still today, God can, and does, change hearts of men and women who loudly condemn Christians and the gospel of Jesus Christ. You may not have experienced such a dramatic conversion, but the reality of Jesus being risen and being alive today is no less real to you than it was to the apostle Paul- I trust.

The risen Jesus also shocked Paul with the words, 'whom you are persecuting' (26:15). Paul was persecuting Christians, not Jesus. But this voice from heaven, the voice of the risen Jesus, told him that what he was doing was more than this. He was persecuting Jesus. Sure, he was persecuting the followers of Jesus, but Jesus himself? These seven words remained with Paul all his life. They influenced his whole theology. Not only was Jesus alive but he was somehow present in the men and women he was arresting and putting to death. Fighting against God indeed! This takes us back to Pentecost, to the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who believe. It feeds into Paul's teaching about being 'in Christ': 'If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation' (2Cor 5:17); 'If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he is not his. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin' (Rom 8:9-10). The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper mean nothing if Christ is not in you; 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27).

2. Commission and conduct

Paul's heart was radically and irreversibly changed when he heard the voice of the risen Jesus. We do not read about repentance and believing in Jesus but all this happened in a dramatic and powerful way. His words, 'what shall I do Lord?' say it all (22:10). Paul does not mention these words on this occasion; nor does he mention the role of Ananias in opening his eyes, bestowing on him the Holy Spirit (9:17). Here before Agrippa, who is patiently listening to him, he goes straight to the commission given him by the Lord Jesus. The Lord told him to get up because he would be the Lord's minister and witness, both of this experience and of things yet to be revealed (26:16).

This commissioning is reminiscent of that given to the prophets and to the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42. It was not a case of, 'good, now I am saved I can go home and keep on living the same way, except God will bless me'. Some people seem to get this idea. They think that becoming a Christian just adds another dimension to their life; they are happy that God is with them in whatever they chose to do. But when you are truly saved, when you become a new creation in Christ Jesus, the old has gone and the new has come (2Cor 5:17). Being new means being a witness for Jesus who saved you and who now lives in you by his Spirit. It is good if people notice and ask what has changed in your life, but better still that you tell them even before they ask. You, and every believer, are called to be a witness for Jesus, and that means telling people about Jesus.

Paul assured Agrippa that he was obedient to this divine commissioning. He went into Damascus and preached that Christ is the Son of God, and then to Jerusalem and all Judea (26:19-20). He went to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles, in obedience to the word of Jesus. In preaching Christ he called upon his hearers to repent, turn to God and perform deeds in keeping with their repentance (26:20). It was while doing such deeds that the Jews dragged him from the temple and tried to kill him (26:21).

3. Content

In verse 18 Paul reveals the actual words of Jesus regarding what he was calling him to do. He would open people's eyes that they might turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God; he would proclaim forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those sanctified by faith in Jesus. Both Jew and Gentile were living in darkness because they did not know the Light of the world. Darkness is the realm of Satan's power. In proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, Paul was proclaiming deliverance from Satan and a place in the kingdom of God. Paul never forgot these words of his divine commissioning. In his letter to the Colossians he wrote of giving thanks to the Father because he has 'qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. 'He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of his love, in whom we have ... the forgiveness of sin' (Col 1:12-14).

Paul explained to Agrippa that although the Jews had seized him, he was only doing what he had been divinely commissioned to do. In fact, God had helped him until this very day to be the witness he was called to be. Agrippa was one of few Jews in the audience at this time, but that did not matter because this message was for Gentiles as well as Jews. Moreover, it was for small and great alike; or slave and free, as he later wrote (Gal 3:28). Not only was he divinely commissioned to preach this truth, it was, in fact, nothing other than what is written in the Scriptures.

For the previous twenty-five years Paul had travelled the world in obedience to his divine commissioning. God had helped him through many difficult situations; none more so than now as he stood in chains before a Jewish king and a Roman ruler. What Paul was saying was not gibberish to Agrippa, as it apparently was to Festus. He assured Agrippa that all he said was in full accord with Moses and the Prophets. They spoke of the coming Messiah or Christ. This was the Jewish hope. Moreover, it was written that this Christ would suffer and then rise from the dead, and that he would proclaim light to the Jews and to the Gentiles (26:23).

This sounds a bit like an early creed that was taken up by the churches, a creed based upon messianic passages from the OT, primarily the Servant passages in Isaiah. Some think Paul may have referred to these Scripture passages; he probably did when preaching these central truths of the gospel to Jews like Agrippa but many Romans were present on this occasion. The truth was, of course, the same for Jew and Gentile. Gentiles must understand that God was fulfilling his promise to the Jews but that this promise included Gentiles. No follower of Jesus can ignore Moses and the Prophets. No matter where Paul started in his preaching he always came to the same central point, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the gospel he was commissioned by the risen Jesus to preach. It is the gospel we must preach, and the gospel that everyone, including you, must hear and believe if they are to be saved.

Testimony before Agrippa-responses

Acts 26:24-32

A new session of Federal Parliament began with the political leaders going to an ecumenical church service. I would be interested to know what they heard; not just what was preached but what they actually heard, and furthermore, what was the response of their individual hearts. I recall one leader responding rather rudely to a pastor who told him that homosexual marriage was contrary to biblical teaching. He answered that if made Prime Minister, he would, within one hundred days, change the marriage act to make homosexual marriage legal.

The apostle Paul was a prisoner. He was called to defend himself against accusations brought by the Jewish leaders. Festus, the Roman procurator, found him innocent but Paul, under threat of being returned to Jerusalem, appealed to Caesar for judgment. In sending Paul to Rome, Festus needed to detail the charges against him. The Jews and Paul had argued about religious matters that were beyond Festus, about Jesus who died but rose again (25:19). Festus asked King Agrippa to help him formulate the charges. For this reason Paul was brought before Festus, Agrippa and Bernice and a huge gathering of prominent civil and military personnel in Caesarea.

In making his defense, Paul outlined the gospel of Jesus Christ, explaining how the promise of the Scriptures was fulfilled in Jesus, in his death and resurrection. Festus had heard this before but failed to understand; which is why he asked Agrippa for help (25:19). As Paul came to the central facts of the gospel Festus cried out with frustration, 'Paul, you are out of your mind' (26:24 NIV). Paul had made his defense and now it was time for assessment. This was not a trial but a time for Festus and Agrippa to gather information. This information came with a personal challenge.

The death of Jesus and the empty tomb are historical facts. It is also true that Jesus rose from the dead; there were many eye-witnesses, the last of whom was Paul himself. Every individual must consider these truths because, as Paul told the Athenians, 'God will judge the world in righteous by this man' (17:31). In the closing verses of Acts 26 we see different responses to the gospel; the response of Festus and the response of Agrippa. We will consider another possible response and ask about our own response.

1. Festus

What are we to make of the response of Festus? He had not studied the Bible. He did not worship the God of the Bible; he worshipped Roman gods, including the emperor not long after this time. He worshipped the power and prestige of Rome. The idea of a man rising from the dead was beyond his comprehension. Hence the cry, 'Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad!' (26:24).

Festus was a materialist; he only believed what he could see. He had not seen anyone rise from the dead so this was impossible. He was superstitious but did not believe in anything supernatural. He thought educated men like Paul did not believe in anything supernatural either. But he had just heard this learned man testify to meeting the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. Festus could not get his

head around what Paul was saying, so he buried it in the sand. He cried out for Paul to stop because what he was saying was irrational as far as Festus was concerned.

Festus thought what Paul was saying was beyond reason. But Paul insisted that he was not mad, and that what he was saying was quite reasonable, and indeed true (26:25). Festus was like people who say, 'I have not seen God so he does not exist'. Have you heard anyone say this? Lots of 'enlightened' materialists say this. They reject anything they have not experienced. They reject religion as being superstition, while being deeply superstitious themselves, especially when it comes to buying a lottery ticket. Some talk about spirituality but only in terms of investigating their own inner being.

Paul said that the gospel of Jesus Christ is reasonable. As an educated and thoughtful man he did not believe in anything unreasonable. He did not have to reject all his learning, or leave his mind at the door, when he believed in Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus is perfectly reasonable and rational for a person who asked about death and the futility of life in the face of death. The secular materialist, the person who worships science and human achievement, and the philosopher, are left in the dark when it comes to death. But still they reject the resurrection of Jesus, the firstborn from the dead.

While religion has been relegated to a matter of private feeling and opinion in our western society, Larkin, writing of 'Paul's ringing defense of the gospel as true and reasonable utterances of things not done in a corner', says this should give us courage to bring gospel truth back into the public arena. 'Christianity does make sense. It will stand up to public scrutiny'.

Did Paul expect Festus to understand or believe the gospel of Jesus Christ? He said it was true and reasonable. If this is the case then any rational human being who hears the gospel can believe. There is no indication the Festus did believe in Jesus but a fellow Roman ruler had done so. When Paul went to Cyprus on his first mission the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, believed in Jesus (13:12). Sure he witnessed a miracle but from the beginning he sought to hear the word of God. He listened with astonishment to the gospel, and believed. Remember, the Jews saw many miracles but did not believe in Jesus. I hope you are not waiting for a miracle before you believe. The greatest miracle of all is the change the Lord performs in our hearts when we believe. Paul's conversion on the Damascus was a great work of God, was it not?

2. Agrippa

If Festus, like many today, rejected the gospel as being irrational, what about Agrippa? As a Jew he would have heard the Scriptures from his youth. In synagogue worship the Bible was read and psalms were sung. In the temple sacrifices were made for sin. Passover and the Day of Atonement were huge religious ceremonies for the whole Jewish community. So when Paul spoke about Moses and the Prophets, and about the promised Messiah, Agrippa knew what he was talking about. Paul could speak freely to Agrippa knowing he understood these things (26:26).

Moreover, he was certain that Agrippa had heard about Jesus, about his life in Galilee and Judea, and about his crucifixion outside Jerusalem. His grandfather, Herod Antipas, had actually met Jesus. His father, Agrippa I, put one of the apostles to death. Everything Jesus said and did was out in the open,

and it was the same with the apostle's teaching (26:26). Festus might have claimed ignorance about Jesus before he heard Paul, but Agrippa was well informed. If there are some like Festus today, there are many more like Agrippa. Who in our society has not heard about Jesus? We celebrate Easter and Christmas. And as I once said in a mission meeting, we have churches on every second or third corner but in India there are thousands of villages without any place of Christian worship. Thankfully we saw that changing in our recent visit.

Paul then asked Agrippa a direct question: 'do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe' (26:27). Paul, the man in chains, asked the king to respond to what he had just heard. Paul's question was straightforward but it put Agrippa on the spot: 'Do you believe the prophets?' Was this a bit too straightforward? Every Jew believed the prophets, publicly at least; otherwise they would be guilty of heresy. But Agrippa felt it too embarrassing to say 'yes' in front of his Gentile audience; and he was also afraid of the next question. So Paul answered for him.

Agrippa kept his religious beliefs to himself and thought others should do the same. Modern man thinks the same way; there is nothing new under the sun. Agrippa ducked the question with another question. What would you say if asked the question, 'Do you believe the Bible?' Would you find it confronting, or embarrassing if surrounded by your mates? Would you change the topic of conversation? Agrippa knew this would not be the last question. It would not only be, 'do you believe the Bible?' but, 'do you believe in Jesus?' If he believed the prophets, and the prophets spoke of the Christ who would suffer death and rise again, then he should believe in Jesus. The Bible, history, and indeed reason point to Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Agrippa understood what Christians like Paul believed but what about the cost- not the cost of suffering but of giving up his immoral life!

Agrippa sat on the fence, answering neither 'yes' nor 'no' to Paul's question. His answer was terribly tragic; 'In a short time would you persuade me to become a Christian?' (26:28 ESV). In Greek it is, 'in a little you persuade to make me a Christian?' with most translations taking 'little' to mean 'a little time'. 'The tone is sophisticated avoidance by a slightly embarrassed king' (Larkin). Festus and the other guests thought it was all madness, so Agrippa could not even admit to believing the Bible, let alone to becoming a Christian. Jesus said, 'let your light so shine before men' (Mat 5:15). Are you embarrassed to tell people that you believe in Jesus? If so, you need to question your commitment to Jesus. Paul had just told a huge audience what he believed, and that while in chains. Agrippa would not open his mouth. Where do you stand?

Paul did not give up on Agrippa. The king was feeling uncomfortable, but Paul got even more personal. He publically prayed for this man to believe. 'I would to God' that you become like me (26:29). Paul looked around at all the men in the hall and prayed that they also might believe in Jesus. He also looked down at his chains saying, 'except for these chains'. Paul was in chains because of the gospel. While the chains testified to the truth of the gospel, in that men like Paul were prepared to suffer and die for Jesus, he did not wish such suffering on anyone. The chains also demonstrated how threatening the gospel is to the world.

Agrippa felt so uncomfortable that he got up from his seat and left the hall (26:30). Festus and Bernice followed him, so that was the end of the meeting. Paul had once again witnessed the name of Jesus

before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (9:15). The official party conferred in private and concluded, 'this man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains' (26:31). For the fourth time Paul is declared innocent of all charges. Just what Festus would write to Caesar we are not told. All Agrippa said to him was, 'this man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar' (26:32). But Paul had appealed to Caesar and would soon be on his way to Rome to bear witness of Jesus there, just as the Lord told him (23:11).

3. Paul

We have seen a man named Festus reject the gospel because to him it was madness. A rational man of the world dismissed the gospel because he did not understand it. The question is, 'did he try to understand it?' Paul was not mad and he assured this rational man that the gospel was perfectly reasonable and absolutely true. If you sincerely and honestly examine the Bible you will find the same. The trouble with many is that they come with preconceived ideas, or personal hang ups. Some think science has proven the Bible to be wrong but, like Paul with his accusers, we ask for the evidence.

We have seen a man named Agrippa who neither rejected nor accepted the gospel. He had his religion but it would be a private matter. He might tick 'Christian' on the census form but that was as far as it went. He went along to family and cultural events and, as far as these were Christian, he was a Christian, events like Christmas and Easter. But weekly worship was seen as too much. He sent his children to Sunday school to make them good, moral citizens, even if he was far from being such a citizen.

Then third person in this account is Paul himself. Here is a man who embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ whole-heartedly. His life totally changed when he believed in Jesus. He preached the gospel to all who would listen. He prayed for them to believe. He called them to be like him, except for the chains. Who of these three men do identify with?

Journey to Rome continues

Acts 27:1-26

Do you like sailing or cruising on big ships? Cruising is very popular nowadays, but the extent of my cruising is the Manly ferry! Being on this ferry when a swell is coming through the Heads is enough for me. Sailing on the open seas was a perilous pursuit in Paul's day, and still today. Just a few years ago six lives were lost when a huge storm hit the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. The apostle Paul often travelled by ship. He says that he was shipwrecked three times, and spent a night and day in the deep (2Cor 11:25); that was before this shipwreck while travelling to Rome courtesy of the Roman rulers. Luke was travelling with Paul on this journey to Rome (27:1); the 'we' passages start again. He gives a vivid and detailed account of the journey that ended in shipwreck. I guess it was an experience he never forgot! We read it with interest but what do we learn from this chapter? Every part of God's word has something to teach us.

In the OT we have a similar account of a storm at sea in the book of Jonah. Jonah was not shipwrecked but there are similarities in the stories. Both Jonah and Paul were travelling with heathen men. They were at the mercy of these men sailing the ship. Jonah was running from God while Paul was a prisoner for Christ but both witnessed the Lord God in the midst of great tribulation. Jonah said, 'I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1:9). With God-given wisdom Paul initially gave advice about not sailing, and later encouraged the desperate sailors and passengers with words he received from an angel of the Lord. We live in a topsy-turvy world surrounded by lots of desperate people. We have a message of encouragement for these people, but are we telling them this message? Are we telling people how they can be saved? In looking at Paul's journey to Rome we begin with him setting sail from Caesarea. Our second point will be the centurion's decision to ignore Paul's advice and sail on, and our third point will be the storm.

1. Setting sail

To recap for a moment- the apostle Paul was in Roman custody at Caesarea. The Jews wanted him dead but after trials before Lysias, Felix and Festus he was found not guilty. However, he had appealed to Caesar for judgment so Festus was obliged to send him to Rome. Recall also that while in custody at Jerusalem the Lord appeared to Paul telling him that he must bear witness in Rome (23:11). If the Lord said he must bear witness in Rome then the Lord would take him to Rome. Paul did not forget this word from the Lord, although the Lord graciously reminded him of this word, as we will see (27:24).

A centurion called Julius was put in charge of Paul and other prisoners, and given the task of conveying them to Italy. This centurion 'treated Paul kindly' along the way (27:1-3). Someone has commented how in the NT centurions are portrayed in a positive manner, unlike rulers and kings. Jesus spoke of a centurion having more faith than any in Israel (Mat 8:10). As Jesus died on the cross a centurion commented, 'surely this was a righteous man' (Luke 23:47). And here in the book of Acts we read of the conversion of Cornelius the centurion. Is it that as men get more power they tend to become more corrupt? It is true that men and women in the lower ranks of society can be an influence for good- remember Joseph and Daniel. Indeed, whatever our place in society we can have influence for good if we know and love the word of God. Paul the prisoner ended up having influence over a centurion and a whole ship.

Julius managed to get his prisoners on a ship from Adramyttium, a port city near Troas. Luke and Aristarchus, a believer from Thessalonica, also boarded the ship probably to take care of Paul. Had they been with Paul during his two years in Caesarea? They were with him when he went to Jerusalem (21:18). Being a coastal vessel, this ship did not head into the open seas but sailed up the coast from Caesarea to Sidon. They stayed in Sidon long enough for Paul to go and visit 'friends' in the church there. This church most likely was established in the scattering of believers that took place after Stephen was stoned. Paul probably had a soldier guarding him all the time, but still it was unusually kind of Julius the centurion to grant a prisoner such liberty (27:3).

From Sidon the ship sailed north towards Cilicia, finding shelter from the westerly wind in the lee of Cyprus. To sail westwards they clung to the coast of Pamphylia and finally reached the port city of Myra on the south coast of modern-day Turkey (27:5). Myra was one of the main ports for the fleet that brought grain from Egypt to Rome. Julius found a ship belonging to this fleet; it was operated under the auspices of the Roman state. They could have continued sailing around to Troas and Neapolis, and then taken the overland route to Rome, but this may have taken more time. Some say Aristarchus left the party to go home to Thessalonica at this time.

Julius transferred his prisoners to this larger Alexandrian vessel at Myra (27:6). They ended up with two hundred and seventy-six people on board (27:37). With the westerly winds continuing, this ship made slow progress after leaving Myra. They finally made it to another port city further along the coast. Here they had to choose between putting into this port at Cnidus and waiting for favourable winds, or heading south to the lee of Crete and the city of Salmone. They chose the latter option. They managed to make it around the end of Crete and along its south coast to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea (27:8).

2. Centurion's decision

Having experienced difficult sailing conditions already we might have thought the centurion and crew of the ship would be content to stay put at Fair Havens. But the longer they stayed the worse the weather would get. It was dangerous to sail on the Mediterranean during winter. Luke says that the Fast, the Day of Atonement, was already over (27:9). The Day of Atonement would have been in early October in AD59 according to F. F. Bruce.

Paul had enough experience of sailing to warn against setting sail at this time of the year. He warned that if they left Fair Havens they would lose cargo, ship and lives (27:10). But the centurion ignored Paul's advice and listened to the captain, the owner and the majority who judged this port unsuitable to winter in. They wanted to move further along the coast of Crete to a better port called Phoenix, modern day Phoinika Bay most probably. The military man ranked above the captain and ship owner in this situation.

3. Storm

Just as Satan loves to tempt us with little successes and treasures, so the crew of this ship were tempted by a lull in the westerly wind. To use a nautical term, there were lured and hooked. They were, of course, looking for such a lull in the wind, so they found it (27:13). Paul on the other hand was not looking for this so was not tempted as they were. Christians looking for something in the

Bible that would allow them to rationalise their sin often find what they are looking for. One man found an obscure verse about concubines to rationalise a woman divorcing her husband on the ground of emotional abuse. The Pharisees were experts in finding loopholes in God's law.

When the gentle south wind started to blow the ship set sail along the coast of Crete. But after a short time the wind suddenly changed, as it often did at this time of the year. The sailors had a name for this weather event; they called it the 'Euroclydon' or 'northeaster' (27:14). As the wind switched from the south to the northeast and became gale force the only thing they could do was let the ship be driven along by this wind (27:15). This wind took them past a little island called Cauda and out into the open sea. They were in danger of running aground on sandbars off the African coast called the Syrtis Sands (27:17). And so began the most horrendous fortnight in the life of the two hundred and seventy-six people on board this ship. The sailors hauled the lifeboat on board to stop it breaking away from the ship. They somehow managed to run ropes around the wooden hull to help hold it together. They tossed cargo overboard, along with the huge tackle or spar of the ship. The ship was driven by the storm on the roughest of seas. Because storm clouds covered the sky they had no idea where they were- without seeing the stars they could not navigate. Everyone thought it was the end, the end of their life- everyone except Paul. Paul believed he would get to Rome because the Lord had told him he 'must witness in Rome' (23:11).

Paul had good news for everyone on board. Amazingly, there had been no loss of life so far. Lots of them were probably sea sick; no one was interested in eating. They were hanging on for their lives, no doubt praying to their various gods, like the men on the ship with Jonah (Jonah 1:5). Paul was also praying, as was his custom. One night an angel of the Lord stood by Paul to tell him that, not only must he be brought before Caesar, but that all the people on the ship would be saved. The ship would run aground and be smashed to pieces but no lives would be lost. Note how Paul refers to God who sent his angel that night: 'the God to whom I belong and whom I serve' (27:23). Remember how Jonah referred to God as he spoke to the pagan people on his ship: 'I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1:9). Can you say the same things of God in whom you believe?

Paul had a message from the Lord. He did not keep this to himself but stepped forward to share it with everyone on board. He explained that the God whom he served had given him good news. He was not taking glory to himself, although he could not resist beginning with an, 'I told you so' for ignoring his warning not to leave Fair Havens on Crete (27:21). Paul believed every word the angel of the Lord spoke that night. He shared this message with confidence, indeed with assurance that everything would turn out just as the Lord had said. 'Take heart' he told everyone, because no one is going to drown although the ship will be wrecked (27:22, 25). He finished by saying they would run aground on a certain island (27:26).

Paul the prisoner had all the people on board listening to him. They were literally and figuratively on board with him. How amazing! Why should they be listening to a man in chains? They listened because, as Paul boldly and unashamedly told them, he was a servant of the true God, the God who speaks and does what he says. We have God's words here in the Bible. Will you boldly and unashamedly share these words with the people you live and work with? They are, after all, words of great encouragement. No one who hears and believes these words will be lost.

Shipwrecked on the way to Rome

Acts 27:27-44

'The world has no idea how much it owes, in the mercy of God, to the presence in it of righteous men'. What do you think of this claim by the NT scholar, F.F. Bruce? It is a huge claim, but one supported by Scripture. Look at the story of Abraham pleading with the Lord not to destroy the city of Sodom in Genesis 18. Sodom was a very wicked city. We read that the outcry against it was very great; presumably this outcry was from the weak and vulnerable, from children being abused. The 'very grave' sin of this city was rampant homosexuality. The focus of this tragic story is Abraham pleading with the Lord to spare this city because of the righteous people in it. If there had been ten righteous people the Lord would not have destroyed Sodom (18:32). Does the city you live in know that you are saving it from destruction? Do you know the value of your prayers for this city? Leave aside the city for a moment- what about your family? Are you in effect saving your family from destruction through your prayers?

Paul was in chains, being transported across the sea to Rome, when a huge storm hit. The sailors did all they could to counter the storm, but in the end gave up and let the ship run. After two weeks of being battered by this storm everyone on board lost any hope of being saved - all except the apostle Paul that is. Paul prayed for the people with him on the ship and also encouraged them by telling them the word of the Lord. He acted as if he believed this word. He gained the respect of the centurion and others. He acted to prevent the sailors from escaping the ship and the soldiers from killing their prisoners, of whom he was one.

This account of Paul being shipwrecked on Malta is very dramatic; we get a sense of being on the ship with Paul as we read this chapter. It is historically accurate, and it is in the Bible for our teaching not just passing interest. Some speak of it as an acted parable in which physical salvation 'mediated by the wisdom and guidance of God's apostle' points to spiritual salvation (Larkin). Paul did write, 'imitate me, even as I imitate Christ' (1Cor 11:1) but in the sense of living like Christ not of being able to save others directly. The apostle's call to imitate him overshadows the lessons that we learn from this story. We will consider this passage under three headings as we seek to learn from it: escape of sailors thwarted, example of eating, escape by all including prisoners.

1. Escape of sailors thwarted

It was the fourteenth day since, against the advice of Paul, the ship left the port of Fair Havens on the island of Crete. Fourteen days and nights of being helplessly tossed about in the raging sea and not seeing the sun or stars left all on board despairing and physically weak because of starvation. Whether it was sickness or worry or just the physical impossibility of preparing food we are not told. It is hard to imagine anyone eating, or indeed sleeping, in such circumstances.

On the fourteenth night the sailors were awake at midnight when they sensed they were getting close to land (27:27). They probably heard waves crashing onto rocks off Point Koura on the island of Malta. They took a depth measurement, and another about half an hour later. They found the water was getting shallower- quite shallow at just 15 fathoms or about 30m. 'They dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come' (27:29). They were trying to slow the ship, hoping that when daylight came they would be able to actually see the land and avoid the rocks. The skilled sailors

might be able to steer the ship to safety, but without them who would operate the ship? What happened next must be appreciated within this context.

The skiff or lifeboat had been hauled on board to prevent it being lost in the storm (27:16). Paul or someone else noticed the sailors letting the skiff back into the sea. They said they were putting out anchors from the bow (27:30). From his limited nautical knowledge Paul thought this a bit strange; he suspected the sailors were planning their own escape in the lifeboat. So he spoke to the centurion, who by this time had learned the wisdom of listening to this man of God. The centurion sent his soldiers to cut the ropes and let the skiff or lifeboat fall away, thus thwarting the escape of the sailors. Paul warned the centurion that if the sailors escaped 'you cannot be saved' (27:31).

Paul had the word of the Lord that none would be lost but this did not mean he could sit back and let things happen- he was not a fatalist. He knew that the sailors were necessary participants in God's plan of salvation, just as he knew his own role in God's plan. If you are a parent you have a role to play in the salvation of your children- you must teach them the Bible. You must also consider God's role for you in his church. As a believer you belong to the body of Christ; you have been given gifts to use in this body. It is such a blessing to hear others praying for you and for this church. Paul was concerned for all on the ship; are you concerned for all in your church?

2. Example of eating food

With the break of day Paul urged everyone on board to eat something. Again, he had the word of God that all would be saved but not before the ship ran 'aground on a certain island' (27:26). Paul realised that physical stamina would be needed in order to survive. He was intent on everyone being saved, not just himself, so all needed to take some food after two weeks of not eating. He would show his confidence in the word of the Lord by eating food in front of them. He began by telling them that not a hair of anyone's head would be lost so they must eat in order to ensure their survival. This is literally, 'this is for your salvation' but we cannot link this to spiritual salvation. We are not saved from sin by anything we eat, not even the sacrament.

Paul set the example by taking food himself. 'He took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat' (27:35). They were encouraged and took food themselves after seeing Paul's example. It is difficult to see this as being the sacrament of the Lord's Supper although some say it is a reminder of the Eucharist. Jesus instituted the sacrament with his disciples at a meal in the upper room, and the church kept this sacrament, but it was not for the purpose of overcoming hunger, which was why Paul was eating bread on this occasion.

By giving thanks to God he was, of course, witnessing to God's gracious provision of food and of protection on this occasion (1Tim 4:3-4). The simple giving of thanks to God and eating was a witness to all two hundred and seventy-six people on the ship, almost all of them pagans. They all ate till they were full and then tossed the rest of the wheat overboard to further lighten the ship (27:38). They no longer needed the ballast to keep the ship upright; they needed a lighter ship to make it further up the beach.

Do you maintain a witness in your home by giving thanks to the Lord for the food you are about to eat? In too many homes it is a case of, grab a plate of food and head back to the television. And even if eating is around the table it is a case of diving in without waiting for 'grace'. This is not just a matter of etiquette or good manners, as important as such things are. It is a matter of bringing up your children to know and love the Lord. It is also a matter of witnessing to any guests who may be at your dinner table. No need to make excuses if it is your custom! You can even take your custom to the restaurant, giving thanks for the food in the name of Jesus. You will be surprised at the effect of such simple witness to the goodness of God, especially in our day.

Do you remember the story about the city man going to visit his friend on a farm? When the farmer set the table and bowed his head to give thanks for the food the city man said that educated people in the city no longer did this, they just dive in and eat. The farmer thought for a moment before replying: my pigs just dive into their food, and I thought they were just dumb animals.

3. Escape by all including prisoners

In the light of the new day they saw the land they knew was near. It was not familiar to the sailors, but they saw a bay where they might be able to beach their ship (27:39). So they cut loose the anchors and untied the ropes they had used to secure the rudder; they needed the rudder to steer the ship through the surf. They hoisted the mainsail to make their run to the shore (27:40). However, they ran aground on a submerged sandbar before getting to the beach. The bow stuck fast on this sandbar and the waves started pounding it from the stern. The vessel was already stressed from heavy seas; it would not be long before the waves smashed the ship to pieces.

Yet another challenge presented itself to the safety of all those on board, the prisoners in particular. There were other prisoners on the ship apart from Paul; just how many we are not told. The centurion and his soldiers were in charge of the prisoners. Under Roman law if a prisoner escaped his guard would receive the punishment due the prisoner he was guarding. So to avoid any such punishment the soldiers decided to kill their prisoners before they could swim off and escape. The raging sea does not distinguish between prisoner and soldier. When it comes to being saved from the elements there is no distinction between rich and poor, between slaves and free. When it comes to being saved from death it is the same- the Lord looks only on the heart.

Paul does not intervene to save the prisoners directly but he had shared the word of the Lord indicating that all would be saved. Besides, the centurion had come to like Paul and believe what he said. He had learned to listen to Paul's wisdom. So, in order to save Paul the prisoner, he stopped his soldiers from killing their prisoners. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and swim to the beach. Those who could not swim should look for broken timbers from the ship to carry them ashore. 'And so it was that they all escaped safely to land' (27:44).

And so we come to the end of a terrible ordeal for Paul and all two hundred and seventy-six people on board this ship. Not that Paul was now a free man; he was still a prisoner of the Romans. The ending may look like a Hollywood ending but this is a true story, a story that witnesses to the sovereignty of God and his purposes. The Lord who controls the wind and the waves (Mat 8:27) in his mercy chose to save all on the ship. It is also true that all were saved because of Paul's intercession

and his witness. Paul believed God's word that he would get to witness in Rome (23:11, 27:24) and he acted on this belief. He also had God's promise that all sailing with him would be saved. We do not, of course, have a promise from God that all people will be saved in the end, but we do have promises that he hears our prayer, and that he will bless our witness (1Cor 15:58).

Do you believe the word of the Lord? Do you know and do you believe the promises given by the Lord in the Bible? If so, are you praying, and are you living as one who believes? Pray and do not give up. As you have opportunity speak up and keep speaking up even in simple things like giving thanks before a meal. Keep on being salt and light in your home, in your workplace and in your city. You do want your family and your workmates and your fellow citizens to be saved from eternal destruction don't you?

Paul on Malta

Acts 28:1-10

As I read this account of Paul's journey to Rome I find myself referring to Google Maps to locate the places mentioned in the text. I have not been to any these places, except for Rome, but they are real places. The names may have changed but the geography is the same, apart from harbours getting silted up and closing. Malta is a tiny island to the south of Sicily and Italy; we have a Maltese community here in Australia. On the north coast of this island you will find a town called Saint Paul's Bay, as well as roads and streets named after this apostle. In South India you will find the Mar Thoma Church which is believed to have been established by the apostle Thomas. There is no written record in the Bible or anywhere else but local names and traditions cannot be dismissed.

A man called James Smith went further than following Paul's journey on the map. As a sailor and scholar he researched books and in 1848 sailed the route taken by Paul; he wrote a book called, 'The voyage and shipwreck of St Paul'. F.F. Bruce refers to this book extensively in his commentary. This man and others conclude that what is written in the Bible is in order, which comes as no surprise, yet is reassuring, for those who believe the Bible to be the inspired and infallible word of God.

This chapter is historical narrative; it is a story and must be read as such. Much of the Bible is historical narrative. As we read such writing and seek to learn what the Lord is teaching us we keep in mind the context. We do not pluck verses out of context and try to apply them to our life today- as we might do with a different form of writing such as in the book of Proverbs. Another principle we follow in seeking to understand what is written is that of comparing other passages of Scripture. In this way, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we hope to arrive at the lesson we are to learn. We will not, I trust, go off to pick up a poisonous snake believing the poison will not harm us! Jesus did not jump of the temple tower just to prove he was the Son of God.

The high drama of the shipwreck has come to an end. All on board the ship escape safely to land. This was not because of good luck or fate. It was not because of human skill or technology, although such things played their part. It was not even because of Paul's leadership, although this also played a part. They were saved because the Lord said they would be saved; his angel told Paul that he 'must be brought before Caesar, and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you' (27:24). It was a case of the Lord working all things together for good for those who love him, according to his purposes (Rom 8:28).

With all safely ashore the story is over- but not quite as far as Paul is concerned. He has not yet reached Rome. Moreover, the Lord has ministry for him to undertake on Malta. He had ministered to all on the ship of the sovereign grace and power of God. Such truths prepare the way for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is still with everyone from the ship but now has a new field of ministry among the people of the island. We will look at this ministry under three points: kindness of the natives, change of mind about Paul, and citizen Publius.

1. Kindness of the natives

Only after they landed on the island did they learn that it was called Malta. This name was given by Phoenician sailors. It is a Canaanite word for 'refuge'. 'Paul at least would realise the meaning of the

word from his knowledge of Hebrew' (Bruce). All two hundred and seventy-six persons struggled out of the water and up the beach where they were met by natives- literally 'barbarians'. The term 'barbarian' was used of people who could not speak Greek. These people were of Phoenician extraction and spoke a Phoenician dialect. Even so, the survivors could not be certain of their reception by the locals. Luke notes that they were 'unusually kind' (28:2). They were quite civilized.

In their kindness they quickly lit a fire so the seafarers could dry off. It was still raining and rather cold, probably around 10 °C. There is no indication that Paul or the other prisoners tried to escape. Paul, of course, knew it was God's will for him to go to Rome and the centurion was organising this for him. The other prisoners probably felt safer staying with the group, or with Paul in particular. All would have remembered how Paul told them they would survive, and they had.

2. Change of mind about Paul

The apostle Paul was not a man to give orders and then sit back and watch. He was always ready to lend a hand. He was a man who led by example. We have a similar culture in our society- or did. Do we still have working- bees at schools and churches? But other cultures can be quite different. As a lecturer in India I got strange looks when I joined the students in digging the garden. One high-caste Hindu student in fact hired a boy to come and do the physical work for him! Among believers there should not be any caste or class barriers because all are one in Christ Jesus. We have different gifts of course, but these do not preclude the simple lending of a hand when a need is seen. Paul saw the need for more wood on the fire and went to gather some sticks.

As Paul laid his bundle of sticks on the fire a snake slithered out and bit him on the hand. This snake/viper may have looked like a stick as it lay motionless in the cold, but in the heat of the fire it became active. Lawrence of Arabia writes of a similar incident with a black snake in his book, 'Revolt in the desert'. Because there are no snakes on Malta these days some are sceptical about this story. But the absence of snakes today does not mean they were not there in NT times. Others argue that vipers bite but do not cling on- this viper 'fastened on his hand' (28:3). But the natives knew what they saw. They saw this snake bite Paul on the hand and they expected him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. Moreover, we note that a physician like Luke would have been familiar with snake bites. He may even have tried to help Paul on this occasion. Before looking at the response of the natives, which is what Luke highlights in this account, we refer to the words of Jesus in Luke 10:19 about treading on serpents and scorpions and not being harmed. In preaching on that passage I said that in the context these words were more 'figurative than literal', and that this incident with Paul on Malta is the only record of a disciple surviving a snake bite.

What Luke tells us about the response of the natives on Malta demonstrates a need to be cautious in any 'signs and wonders' ministry. The Lord is powerful to heal, as we will see in our next point, and he is able to save Paul from a snakebite, as he did, but this is not an argument for a 'signs' ministry without a 'word' ministry. The response of the native animists or pagans to what they saw changed from one extreme to the other in a matter of minutes. At first they said Paul must be a murderer because although he escaped the sea he was now going to die from a snakebite. They said 'Justice has not allowed him to live' (28:4). Some translations have an upper case 'J' because the Greeks viewed Justice as the virgin daughter of Zeus who kept watch for any injustice done on earth' (Larkin).

It is common for pagans to see suffering or sickness as divine retribution of some kind. Even the Jews took this view as they asked Jesus of the man born blind, 'Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?' (John 9:2). Some Christians also think like this; if you are not healed when prayed over they say you have not confessed your sin or you do not have enough faith. While the Lord does allow us to be afflicted when we sin (Heb 12:6), our suffering, our being bitten by a snake, is not necessarily because of any specific sin. Our affliction may be retributive or corrective, but it may simply be a consequence of living in a fallen world; we get sick as we age. It may also have a cosmic cause as in the case of Job. It may also be for the glory of God, as with the man born blind.

The natives watched and waited for Paul to swell up or drop dead because of retributive justice, but this did not happen. So they 'changed their minds and said that he was a god' (28:6). Enough said! As far as Luke is concerned, this world view or theological understanding is fundamentally flawed. Paul was not a god; he was a man who worshipped the true God. We recall a similar incident in Lystra after Paul healed a cripple. The locals called Paul and Silas gods and started to worship them, but Paul shouted at them to stop and to worship the living God who made heaven and earth (Acts 14:15). When some Jews came they changed their minds and stoned Paul. Such fickleness in people's theology is often seen today, but not among true and faithful believers in Jesus Christ.

3. Citizen Publius

The apostle Paul engaged in further ministry on this island. This time he met with a more considered response; but there is no mention of anyone believing in Jesus, in contrast to his ministry on Cyprus when the Proconsul believed (Acts 13:12). The chief citizen or official on the island, a Roman called Publius, lived on a large estate nearby. It must have been large if all two hundred and seventy-six survivors were accommodated. He took them to his place and looked after them for three days (28:7). During this time Paul learned that the father of Publius had come down with fever and dysentery. He may have had 'Malta fever', which is caused by a bacterium found in goat's milk- a vaccine for this disease was developed in 1887.

Paul went to see this sick man. He prayed as he laid hands on him and the man was healed (28:8). We might compare Jesus going to Peter's house and healing Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38f), the difference being that Paul prayed and healed this man in the name of Jesus. Publius was most grateful but did not start worshipping Paul. When news of this healing got out, people who were sick and diseased started coming from all over the island, and they were healed (28:9). Again we compare what happened after Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. The response of Publius and the people was that they 'honoured us in many ways' writes Luke (28:10- Greek is 'honoured us with many honours'). Some say Luke the physician assisted Paul and that the honour included an honorarium but there is no indication of this. Paul knew the story about Elisha healing Naaman, and the greed of Gehazi.

The people on the island were pleased to give Paul and company provisions when they departed; they had, of course, lost everything in the shipwreck. Apart from praying and healing many people, there is no mention of a 'word' ministry, but it is hard to imagine Paul refraining from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the response of the people is in keeping with a Christian response- honour where honour is due, and freely giving to those in need.

Rome at last

Acts 28:11-31

Missionary biographies are always interesting. Have you read about William Carey, Hudson Taylor or Adoniram Judson? You will read of men and women who suffered impoverishment and imprisonment, not to mention sickness and death in their families when they obeyed the call of the Lord to go to foreign lands. But for all this, such biographies should focus on the gospel, not the people. There is a tendency today not only to highlight the suffering, but also the special methods of evangelism adopted.

We have come to the end of the first missionary biography ever written but it is not really a biography because Paul's death is not recorded. It also focuses on the message not the man, and we see that neither the message nor the method changes. The work of mission continues; the gospel must be preached to all nations and then the end will come (Mat 24:14). The message has not changed nor has the method. Preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ is how Paul began and how he ended his ministry (28:31).

Paul and his colleagues completed three missions in the western world, before returning to Jerusalem in AD57. He planned to visit Rome on his next mission, a mission to Spain. He wrote to the Roman church telling of this plan (Rom 11:24). But in Jerusalem he lost his freedom. While in custody the Lord told him that he, 'must bear witness in Rome' (23:11). He was forced to spend two years in Caesarea but did not lose hope. He preached the gospel even in prison, to prisoners, prison guards and to rulers. Wherever and whenever Paul met people he told them about Jesus. Do you meet people? What do you talk about? Maybe you are the only believer some people will ever meet.

The Lord saved Paul through a shipwreck. He saved Paul and all on board because Paul 'must be brought before Caesar' (27:24). They were shipwrecked on the island of Malta, having unwisely set sail in early winter. They spent the three winter months, November to January, on Malta. When sailing became safe again they found a ship that would take them to Rome. We will follow this journey, noting the hearty welcome Paul received outside Rome, the hope of Israel explained to Jews in Rome and the witness of the Holy Spirit, and his house arrest in Rome.

1. Hearty welcome outside Rome

Another Alexandrian ship carrying grain to Rome had wintered in a harbour on Malta. The centurion managed to get his prisoners on board this ship to continue their trip. Luke notes that this ship had twin figure heads which were in fact idols to Castor and Pollux, sons of Zeus. These were gods that supposedly protected sailors. But all on board the ship with Paul knew it was the true and living God who Paul served that had saved them. False gods cannot save themselves let alone any man, woman or child. Yet so many trust in such gods: they trust in themselves and their money, they trust in their doctor, in scientists or politicians. All such men are in the same boat as we are so how can they save us? Only Almighty God can save us.

The ship left Malta and sailed north to Syracuse on Sicily. After three days they sailed on to Rhegium on the toe of Italy. Do geography teachers still describe the big boot of Italy kicking little Sicily into the middle of the Mediterranean Sea? Sailing ships depend on the wind, so when a southerly started

blowing just one day later they set out again. Up through the Strait of Messina they sailed at a rate of knots, and reached Puteoli in the Bay of Naples the next day (28:13). Although still 120kms from Rome this was the port that serviced the capital.

From Puteoli they would continue by road, the famous Appian Way, but not before Paul found brothers in the church at Puteoli and stayed with them seven days. Whether the centurion was just being kind to Paul or had work of his own in this town we are not told; but he had even more reason to be kind now than he had back in Sidon (27:3). 'And so we came to Rome' (28:14). The word of the Lord never fails-right?

News of Paul setting foot on Italian soil soon reached Rome. The church there knew about Paul even though he had not established this particular church; Paul had written them a letter some three years earlier. They responded to this news by sending a welcoming party to greet him. Prisoner or not, they would give him a royal welcome. Some made it almost 70kms to a place called Forum Appi, a place of ill repute at that time- although I don't think the Mafia were around in those days! Moving along with this welcoming party he came to another group who had only made it to the Three Taverns/Inns, but still 53kms from Rome. Paul was deeply moved by this welcome. He 'thanked God and took courage' (28:15). Although Paul never looked for the approval of men, and rarely received it, this hearty welcome lifted his spirits, as it would any man.

Paul was still being escorted by Julius and his soldiers. When they finally reached Rome the centurion's job was done- it must have been one of his most pleasant tasks escorting a man like Paul. Paul was handed over to the captain of the guard but allowed to live under house arrest in his own rented dwelling; the centurion must have put in a good word for him! Even so, a soldier guarded him at all times (28:16, 30). In Philippians 1:13, a letter written from Rome, Paul writes of being in chains. It is thought he was chained to a soldier at all times, with these being rotated every six hours. We are not told that any of these soldiers were converted but they would have heard the gospel from this most remarkable prisoner.

2. Hope of Israel

Whenever Paul arrived at a city the first thing he did was find a synagogue where he could worship- just as you look for a place to worship when you go to a new place. In the synagogue he would find Jews with whom he would share the fulfilment of the hope of Israel in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There were a number of synagogues in Rome but Paul was not free to visit them. Instead he called the leaders of the Jews to come together at his place of house arrest (28:17). As usual, he addressed them as 'men and brethren'; they were ethnic brothers not brothers in Christ. But before explaining the gospel he has to explain his chains. He did this in four brief statements:

Firstly, he had done nothing against Jewish religion or customs. He does not go into detail of what happened in Jerusalem and does not speak against his accusers. All he says is that he ended up in Roman custody.

Secondly, when he was examined in court they found him innocent. They found no reason to put him death, which is what the Jews wanted, although Paul does not say this. The Romans were ready to

release him but the Jews kept speaking against him even though he had done nothing against his people, or against Rome.

Thirdly, he was compelled to appeal to Caesar which is why he was in Rome. He was not making a counter charge against the Jews. He was not bitter but simply trying to escape their deadly designs.

But Paul had not called these Jewish leaders together so they would come to his defence. He was not wanting their sympathy or their help. He called them to speak about the hope of Israel. It was because of this hope that he was in chains (28:20). We recall him telling Agrippa of the hope of Israel as taught by Moses and the Prophets (26:6-27), the hope of the resurrection of the dead. The gospel which Paul preached was the fulfilment of all that was spoken by Moses and the Prophets. Jesus of Nazareth is the hope of Israel, indeed the hope of the whole world.

The Jewish leaders knew about the sect of the Nazarenes. The church had been in Rome for some years. They had heard lots of bad reports about it but were willing and eager to learn what Paul had to say on this matter (28:22). Rome was a very different place to Jerusalem. It was not dominated by a Jewish temple but by pagan worship. The Jews told Paul they had not received any letters about him from the leadership back in Judea and that no Jews coming to the city had reported anything about Paul- certainly nothing bad about him. Those who came to Caesarea to accuse Paul had not reached Rome apparently. It is doubtful if they ever showed up to bring their case before Caesar. So Paul's first meeting with the Jewish leaders in Rome was cordial. In fact they wanted to hear more of Paul's insights into the Scriptures- what an invitation!

3. Holy Spirit speaks in the Scriptures

Paul was well versed in the Scriptures. He had studied them as a young Jew. But he studied them in a whole new light after he was converted. It was his prayer and his mission that his Jewish brothers would see the Scriptures in this new light also and become Christian brothers. The sect they spoke of was not a sect but the fulfilment of the Jewish hope. This is what Paul explained to the Jews who returned some days later to listen to him at his house. We read that many came and that he spoke from morning to evening explaining the many Scriptures that point to Messiah and the kingdom of God, and were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.

We read that Paul 'solemnly testified of the kingdom of God' (28:23). David was the greatest king of Israel. The Jews looked back to the glory days of David's rule, especially so in this time of Roman oppression. The Scriptures speak of a descendant of David ruling in an everlasting kingdom (2Sam 7:13, 16). The Jews must have wondered about these words. Indeed, they were looking for a new king like David. Paul explained that God's kingdom had come and that Jesus was the king. It was not an earthly kingdom but a heavenly kingdom.

The Holy Spirit enlightened the minds and opened the hearts of some to believe what Paul preached. They were convinced and believed. But some would not believe. And so they all departed, some as a new creation in Christ Jesus and others remaining in the darkness of the old man. Paul preached in the hope that all would hear and believe, but knew from the prophets and from Jesus himself that some would harden their hearts against the gospel.

Paul did not hesitate to warn these unbelievers of the consequences of rejecting the grace of God freely offered in the gospel. He explained that their unbelief was spoken of in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit. He quoted words from Isaiah 6, words that Jesus quoted when asked why he spoke about the kingdom of God in parables (Mat 13:14f, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10), and words that Paul also referred to in his letter to the Romans (Rom 11:8). Yet they are not words we hear when the gospel is preached today. Why not? What do these words mean? The kingdom of God is only understood by those who hear and believe the gospel. There are people who hear but don't hear; the words go in one ear and straight out the other. Some sit in church week after week, year after year, listening to the call to repent and believe in Jesus but they are not moved.

Isaiah also speaks of such people as seeing but not perceiving the truth. They think they see but they remain blind to the truth of the gospel. This is a solemn warning from the prophet, from Jesus and from the apostle. It is especially applicable to Jews who know the Bible but remain blind to its truth. It is also applicable to people today who think of the Bible as a book of rules they must keep in order to be saved, or merely a book of good moral teaching. They bring their children to church to make them good citizens but are surprised when they actually believe in Jesus. The Bible is the living and powerful word of God.

The Jews were privileged to have the 'oracles of God' but if they failed to believe in Jesus they were just as lost as the Gentiles. Indeed, when Gentiles heard and believed they belonged to the kingdom of God just as much as believing Jews. And Paul told the Jews who rejected the gospel that the Gentiles would listen and many would believe (28:28).

And so we come not only to Rome but to the end of this book. We leave Paul still a prisoner in his own rented house after two years. He was free to preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ to any and all who came to him (28:30-31). What happened after these two years? Did he finally appear before Nero, the emperor at this time? If his accusers never showed up he was probably released (Nero did not turn against the Christians till AD64). One thing we can be sure about is that Paul, whether a prisoner or a free man, did not cease preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we, by the grace of God, continue in the footsteps of this man who once said, 'Imitate me even as I imitate Christ'?

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