

## Resources for a Journey through Acts

Those of you who have enjoyed our retelling of the principal incidents in the Book of Acts may like to see the articles set out here. The idea is that they might be a useful resource for **home groups and Bible studies**. They are, of course, not meant in any way to replace the careful reading of the biblical text but the imaginative retellings of the events may help to bring the stories to life in a new way.

In addition to the reprinted material, we have created sets of questions and discussion starters to accompany each article. Please feel free to print them off and use them in your local church settings. It is our prayer that in using them you will have as much blessing as we had in producing them.

Shirley, Des and Heather

April 2022

## 1. Acts 1: 12-26

### Matthias – a servant rather than a star

The name's Matthias. Go on, be honest, some of you probably haven't ever heard of me. If you were asked to list the Twelve Apostles my name would be the one you'd be struggling to get. That's ok – in fact I'd be surprised if it were otherwise. I've never been one for the limelight. You'd never bracket me with the likes of Peter, James or John. They're in a completely different league. I've always preferred being in the background and so ending up as the twelfth Apostle came as quite a shock.....

I became a follower of Jesus on the day of his baptism when I heard John the Baptist point to him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". I see so clearly now how those words came true in the events of the cross and what followed. After his resurrection Jesus was with us for forty precious days opening the scriptures to us and from them teaching about his Kingdom and our role in it. The first time I saw him back from the dead I couldn't take in single word he said. All I wanted to do was bury my face in the ground at his feet and worship. We all however came to see that he was preparing us for a very special mission – to take his message to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. How on earth were we supposed to do that?

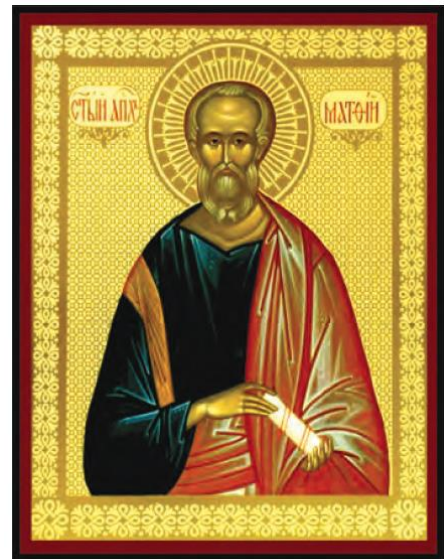
So, there we were, about 120 of us. Jesus had told us to wait and pray and that's what we were doing. As you would expect we looked to the men who had been Jesus' closest disciples to take charge. Sadly now there were eleven rather than twelve. We were all struggling with our feelings about Judas. What had possessed him to do what he did and betray the Master? What a terrible act and what a dreadful end he had come to.

Then Peter took the lead. He explained that everything that had happened in recent days had been there, foretold in veiled form, in the scriptures, even down to Judas' betrayal. Based on one of the Psalms, Peter declared that it was essential that someone should step into the now vacant place.

It didn't take long for us to see what Peter was getting at. Jesus had deliberately chosen twelve companions as his disciples. Twelve was the number of the tribes of Israel, the people of God. By choosing twelve disciples Jesus had been signalling that he was calling into being a new people of God – this time not limited only to Israel but embracing all of any nation or race who followed him. A whole new thing was coming to birth. We didn't even know what to call it. At first, we described it as the Way but later we settled on the word *Church*.

So, twelve it had to be. In Jewish eyes it would provide continuity with what had gone before and later on we came to see that our Gentile friends valued the sense of it indicating the start of something new and inclusive.

I wondered who the replacement would be – Jesus' brother James perhaps or a natural orator like Stephen. Peter however declared with great conviction that there were two important qualifications. Firstly, the person had to have been someone who had personally seen the risen Christ and could thus testify to the resurrection and secondly, they had to have been with Jesus from



*Icon of St Matthias.*

the time of his baptism until the day he was taken up into heaven. This was wise. All twelve leaders would then together be the guardians of all that Jesus taught. They had heard all his teaching, listened to every parable and been present at very many personal exchanges between the Master and ordinary people. Together the twelve apostles (as they now became known) were to be the foundation stones of the new movement providing authority and protecting against false teaching.

I looked round the room. That second point knocked out a lot of contenders. The room fell to prayer – intense solemn prayer and deep listening silence. I'm not sure when I realised that a lot of eyes were looking in my direction. I felt the sweat break out on my forehead. Surely not! It seemed that the choice was down to two candidates – a brother called Joseph Barsabbas and me. I suppose I could have refused point blank and withdrawn but, in that moment, I remembered the words of the Master "Whoever serves me must follow me" and I knew that all he wanted was my obedience and willingness to serve.

They prayed again and then they drew lots. And there and then I found myself chosen. It was the scariest but also the most blessed moment of my life. And I know what you're all thinking. Nothing more was ever heard from me again. After Pentecost my role was Jerusalem-based and unspectacular. But I like to think that I played my part and that I stand for all the ordinary believers who would come after me who might not do great things but who would offer the Master their availability and their best.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 1: 12-26; Isaiah 53: 1-12; Psalm 69: 25; Psalm 109: 8; John 12: 26*

### **Background points**

- The word apostle means "one who is sent". It is used in two senses in the New Testament. There are the Twelve Apostles appointed by the Lord Jesus as explained in the article. In addition, the term came to be used of those church leaders sent out to spread the Gospel and establish new fellowships of believers.
- Some scholars believe that Saul of Tarsus (Paul) was the real replacement for Judas. He may not have been with Jesus during his public ministry but he did claim to have seen him after his resurrection.
- Casting lots was a method used in the Old Testament for determining God's will. It probably involved shaking marked stones in a pot until one dropped out. After Pentecost we do not hear of it ever being used again.

### **Questions**

1. How does Matthias come across to you in this imaginary account? What is his appeal?
2. How did faith start for him?
3. Why was a replacement apostle needed?
4. What were the two qualifications? Why those two?
5. What do you think about the method of selection?
6. What do you think Matthias would have meant by "the scariest and most blessed moment of my life"?
7. Did the believers make the right choice in Matthias?

**Taking it further**

1. Servants or stars. Which does the Church today need more?
2. Modesty or ambition? Which characteristic better qualifies a person for church leadership?
3. In the absence of the twelve Apostles how does the Church safeguard its teaching today?

## 2. Acts 2: 1-41

### Nine o'clock in the morning

It was my very first visit to Jerusalem, and how memorable it would prove to be!

Ben, my husband, had said, 'Susanna, I'd love you to come with me to one of the great feasts in Jerusalem. Pentecost is a wonderful occasion, and a good time of year to travel.'

The pilgrimage from our home in Pontus on the Black Sea to Jerusalem took several weeks, and on the way our numbers grew as others joined us. Travellers love to exchange news, and the nearer we approached Judea the more we began to hear strange rumours about a man called Jesus of Nazareth. Some said he was the Messiah and had done amazing miracles, but others thought he was just another rebel who led people astray.

Didn't you hear how the priests handed him over to the Romans at Passover and had him crucified?' said one old man.

'Yes,' put in another pilgrim, 'and they are saying that his followers are spreading the rumour that he is alive again! Can you believe it?'

You can imagine that our interest in Jesus grew the more we heard.

Finally, we arrived in the holy city itself. Jews from every corner of the Empire thronged the streets, slowly making their way toward the temple. All around I heard people speaking Aramaic and Greek, while others were conversing in their local tongues. It was all so exotic and exciting!

As we neared the temple, I became aware of a sound that began to drown out the chatter of voices all around me. It was a big, powerful noise, a kind of roar. People stopped and looked about apprehensively. I thought at first it was a great storm, but there wasn't a breath of wind in the hot street. The sound seemed to come from a nearby building, and as I looked at it, I saw what seemed to be flashes of fire around it.

Suddenly, the door of the house burst open and an assortment of people spilled out onto the crowded street, all talking excitedly.

'Look!' said a voice behind me. 'It's those Galileans who were with that rabbi Jesus!'

The roaring sound had subsided, and I could now hear these Galileans speaking as they moved among the crowd.

A burly peasant was talking the most beautiful Greek in booming tones. One of the women approached a group of Egyptians and as they listened to her, I could see that they understood every word! I was amazed to hear one of the men speaking our own native language. He was praising God and telling us that Jesus is the Messiah! Ben and I pressed closer to see what was happening, and all around us we saw astonished faces.

'What's going on?' asked Ben, speaking for all of us. 'Here we are – Romans, Cretans, Egyptians, Libyans, Iranians – Jews from all over the Empire and beyond – and yet we're all hearing our own languages being spoken by these Galileans!'



'It must be some kind of miraculous phenomenon,' said another member of our group. 'They are speaking about the wonderful works of God. But what does it mean?'

Some men at the edge of the crowd began to jeer, 'Ha, they're all drunk! Listen to them blathering nonsense – they've had too much wine!'

Just then, one of the Galileans – a strong-looking man – mounted some steps and raised his voice.

'Listen, my fellow Jews, let me explain to you what is going on! These people aren't drunk. Sure, it's only nine o'clock in the morning!'

There was a ripple of laughter which quickly subsided. The man – who I later learned was called Peter – continued:

'What you are seeing here today is the fulfilment of a prophecy given by the prophet Joel: "In these last days I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."'

I felt a real stir of excitement inside me as he spoke. He went on to explain to us about Jesus of Nazareth and the miracles he had done. How I wished I had seen him heal the sick and even raise the dead!

Peter continued: 'But it was God's plan that you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.' So, it was true, he *had* been crucified – how terrible! 'But,' declared Peter, 'God raised him from the dead because it was impossible for death to keep him down!' Some of his companions shouted 'Hallelujah!'

Peter said much more than this, and we all stood there, our attention fixed on him, as he went on to prove how our Scriptures had actually foretold so many of the things that had come true in the life, death and resurrection of this man, Jesus.

'This is how it is, friends,' concluded Peter. 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.'

Some people around me were weeping by now. There was a great sense of sorrow that we Jews had failed to recognise God's anointed one and had treated him so shamefully. Some of the Jerusalem Jews spoke up now.

'Brothers,' they said, 'what should we do?'

Peter replied promptly: 'Turn away from your sin! Be baptised, every single one of you, and you will also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off.'

Peter was right, you know. Later that day, when Ben and I joined hundreds of others and were baptised in water, we too received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As we made the journey home again, we had our own news to share along the way about Jesus, and the amazing things that had happened that morning in Jerusalem.

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*Background reading: Acts 2: 1-41; Joel 2: 28-32.*

### **Background points**

- At this time Jewish people lived not only in Palestine but were spread around many countries in the Mediterranean world. Those living in other lands spoke Greek and were more liberal and open-minded than their Judean counterparts. This explains all the visitors to Jerusalem on that festival day.
- The Jewish festival of Pentecost came fifty days after Passover. It celebrated the spring harvest and also the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. This particular Pentecost provided a harvest of souls and marked the giving of the Holy Spirit.
- It is interesting that when Moses came down the mountain with the Law there had been the sad episode with the golden calf (Exodus 32: 28) and three thousand were killed. Now three thousand souls are saved.

### **Questions**

1. Why would this talk of Jesus of Nazareth have caused such excitement and curiosity among the pilgrims to Jerusalem?
2. Why would 'a mighty wind' and 'fire' have made such an impact on Jewish people?
3. The strange phenomena concerning languages greatly helped the visitors to hear 'the wonderful works of God'. Can you think of an incident in the Old Testament that was the opposite of this? (Genesis 11:1-9)
4. Why do you think the people were 'cut to the heart' by Peter's message?
5. Why was it important that new believers were baptized?

### **Taking it further**

1. Why is the day of Pentecost thought of as the day the Church was born? Is this correct?
2. What do you think Pentecostal style worship has to teach us today?
3. What place do we give the Holy Spirit in our personal experience and in our church life?

### 3. Acts 3: 1 – 4: 31

#### The end of the beginning

As a child growing up in Jerusalem, I was one of 'Benji's lads'. There were six of us and we got the title because Benjamin, one of our number, had been born lame and the other five always looked out for him. Some people said his disability was a punishment for some sin his parents had committed, but our mothers taught us that this is just how the world is and we should show our gratitude for our good health. So, we included Benjamin in games and every day after chores, at least one of us checked in on him. He liked that the group was known by his name.

When we became teenagers, like all Jewish boys we were recognised as adults and moved from chores to finding employment. Benjamin's only option was to find a place where he could seek alms to help him supplement the family income. It was then that we formed a rota to ensure that on most days, two of us would bring him to beg at the temple's Beautiful Gate. It was a great spot because giving to the needy is as important to pious people as praying and catching worshippers going into evening prayers brings out their generous side!

Although Benjamin's lower body was limp, he was no light-weight and as we got older it took longer to carry his stretcher through the busy streets and up the long stairway to the Temple. To that Benjamin added a disconcerting habit. He liked to be carried in reverse, facing back the way we had come so that he could make eye contact with folk walking in our direction. When they caught up, it was hard for them to avoid making a donation!

We had followed this custom for nearly thirty years when, on a summer's afternoon, the impossible happened. Just as we settled him beside the Gate, Benjamin called to a couple of men about to walk through. They seemed taken aback but walked towards us. Benjamin twisted round for his begging bowl. As he did one man said, quite forcefully, 'Look at us!' We all looked. They were gazing at Benjamin and it seemed as if love was flowing out of their eyes.

Then in a softer tone the same man said, 'I do not have silver or gold. But what I do have, I give you.' Before Benjamin could trot out his standard 'Any coin is welcome', the man grasped his hand and was pulling him up saying, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk.' As Benjamin allowed himself to be hoisted, his leg muscles became taut, his feet were straight; he stood wide-eyed; then confident.

None of the passers paid any attention until Benjamin suddenly started jumping up and down, waving his hands in the air and then running around, singing psalms. When the two men moved on through the gate, Benjamin danced along beside them. People soon recognised him. Some had given money earlier; others had done so for years. The crowd grew quickly as people wanted to find out for themselves what had happened. At Solomon's Colonnade they were hemmed in by a sea of jubilation and curiosity. Benjamin stood with his arms around the shoulders of his new best friends, Peter and John.

What happened next changed the lives of many in the crowd. It also brought the new Jesus movement into an unending confrontation with the religious and civil authorities. Peter, who had not said much since pulling Benjamin to his feet calmed the crowd and explained, very clearly, that neither he nor John had actually healed Benjamin. The miracle was performed by Jesus alone. Peter went on to explain that Jesus is the Author of Life who had walked and talked among people until a few months ago. Then he was unjustly crucified. Peter declared that what had allowed the miracle to happen was faith in the name of Jesus who was now risen from the dead. Peter's words were as

powerful as Benjamin's healing and he invited everyone to turn from selfishness and be blessed by following Jesus.

Just then the religious rulers turned up and turned on Peter and John for teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. They had the chief of Temple police with them. Peter and John were promptly arrested and jailed.

Next day, before the Supreme Court, Peter spoke with boldness and great wisdom. He told the judges that although they were oblivious to God's presence in Jesus, God had used their ignorance to achieve a holy purpose. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God now offered forgiveness to everyone, including them. Benjamin's healing was proof of God's power and mercy. Peter told them that their blindness to the goodness of Jesus was inexcusable. However, the Court was not interested in a healed man. It was more than disturbed that, apparently, Jesus was still operating through people who believed in his name.

From that day, the followers of Jesus were closely monitored by the authorities. Many who joined the movement after Benjamin's healing were among those later imprisoned and persecuted. Some were executed.

And Benjamin? He often pondered over the price Christ's people pay for practising mercy and proclaiming truth in his Name.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 3:1 – 4: 31; John 9: 1-5 and 15: 20-23; James 4: 16-17*

### **Background points**

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### **Questions**

6. Why would this talk of Jesus of Nazareth have caused such excitement and curiosity among the pilgrims to Jerusalem?
7. Why would 'a mighty wind' and 'fire' have made such an impact on Jewish people?
8. The strange phenomena concerning languages greatly helped the visitors to hear 'the wonderful works of God'. Can you think of an incident in the Old Testament that was the opposite of this? (Genesis 11:1-9)
9. Why do you think the people were 'cut to the heart' by Peter's message?
10. Why was it important that new believers were baptised?

### **Taking it further**

1. Why is the day of Pentecost thought of as the day the Church was born? Is this correct?

2. What do you think Pentecostal style worship has to teach us today?
3. What place do we give the Holy Spirit in our personal experience and in our church life?

## 4. Acts 4: 32 – 5: 16

### Ananias and Sapphira - a lesson to be learned

You would need to have been there yourself to have taken it all in. Even now years later the events are etched indelibly on my memory. It wasn't that long after Pentecost in the first exciting and heady weeks of our new movement. It was all going so well. We were caught up in what I can only describe as an extraordinary movement of God's Holy Spirit. The name of Jesus was being proclaimed with great authority; our numbers were growing rapidly; baptisms were a daily occurrence and when we met together to pray, we knew a power and a presence that seemed to shake the earth and lift us into heavenly realms.

And it wasn't just that we were growing. Something even more remarkable was taking place among us. The Spirit of the risen Jesus seemed to be making us one in heart and mind. We no longer thought of ourselves as individuals but rather as part of a new whole. We belonged to Jesus and his kingdom and because of that we belonged to one another. And we didn't just think it, we began to live it. We shared our possessions; we made sure that everyone had enough and no one was in need.

It was at this point that things took a strange turn. It began with an extraordinary act of generosity on the part of Joseph a Levite from Cyprus whom we came to call Barnabas. He sold a field, brought the money and handed it over to the apostles. This was big league stuff. Most of the rest of us didn't have that much to begin with and so our contributions hadn't amounted to anything spectacular. But although Barnabas didn't seek any credit for his donation it has to be said that we held him in very high esteem for such a selfless act.

I think this was where Ananias and his wife Sapphira went off the rails. They were recent converts. They saw the admiration and respect given to Barnabas and they wanted some of that for themselves. They craved recognition and esteem and that was their undoing. It seems that they decided to 'do a Barnabas'. They sold property and gave a hefty sum to the apostles. The trouble was that they pretended they were giving the entire proceeds of the sale when in fact they secretly kept a tidy sum back for themselves. It wasn't theft – after all, as Peter pointed out, it was their property and their money to begin with and no one had forced them to give anything – but it was dishonest and deceitful.



Peter saw through it immediately. I think he had what we have since come to call a word of knowledge. The Spirit revealed the deception and Peter didn't hold back. He said that Satan had been at work and he told Ananias that he had lied not just to the church but to God. Ananias was thunderstruck. There was no room for denial or further deceit. All of us who were present knew that, through Peter, God's judgment had been pronounced. The moral bar for the church was being set very high. Clearly corruption was to have no place in our movement.

That scared the daylights out of us – especially when we saw Ananias fall dead in front of our eyes and three hours later saw a similar scene take place with Sapphira. If God wouldn't tolerate wrong doing in his church where did that leave the rest of us? Indeed, some of our number quietly went so

far as to say that Peter shouldn't have been so harsh given his shameful denial of the Master when it mattered most and his subsequent forgiveness and reinstatement. It seemed a fair point.

Later however Peter explained things to us. It wasn't that Ananias and Sapphira were beyond grace and forgiveness. The real issue was the deception and concealment. The Lord Jesus was jealous for his church. He did not expect us to be perfect human beings but corruption like this would act like a cancer eating away at heart of the movement. It had to be dealt with before it had a chance to take hold. A similar type of judgement had fallen on Achan when he had disobeyed God and kept some of Jericho's treasures for himself back in the time of Joshua. Clearly God took sin in the ranks of his people very seriously.

I think it would be fair to say that this incident took our movement to a new level of understanding. Before this we'd been on a high – full of excitement and euphoria and ready to take on the world. Now we were chastened. We were less triumphalist and much more reflective. I'd like to think we were somehow purified. We both loved and feared God in a new way.

At first the news about Ananias and Sapphira made a lot of people think twice about joining our ranks. We lost any superficial appeal we may have seemed to have but we now drew in those who were truly serious about discipleship. And it's probably not a coincidence but after this we started to see some amazing signs and wonders taking place in terms of miraculous healings and victories over the forces of evil. We had all learned a very important lesson.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 4: 32 – 5:16; Joshua 6 and 7*

### **Background points**

- The early believers were generally from the lower social ranks of society. As Jews they would have all been brought up to care for the poor with the giving of alms. Now however they were sharing their possessions so that it was said "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). This was generosity of a different order.
- Various suggestions have been made about what exactly happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Was it their own conscience that struck them down? Was it Peter's harsh denunciation or was it an act of divine judgement? Luke seems to be leading us to this last explanation.
- This incident occurred in the early days of the Church. Many see a parallel with an incident in Israel's early days in the Promised Land. After the conquest of Jericho, the Israelites were routed in what should have been an easy battle. Joshua saw this as an indication of God's displeasure at some hidden sin. After a search the culprit was found to be Achan who had disobeyed God's instructions and kept back plunder from Jericho for himself. He was stoned to death.

### **Questions**

1. What seems to have led Ananias and Sapphira to act as they did?
2. What exactly did they do wrong?
3. What do you think of the possible objection that Peter had very little room to criticise this couple?
4. How do you think this incident would have acted to change the atmosphere among believers? Was it a good thing if it made people "think twice" about joining the Church?

5. Why do you think Luke emphasises the fact that following this incident the Church grew and amazing signs and wonders took place?

**Taking it further**

1. Do we try to make it too easy for people to join the Church today?
2. Does God judge the Church (His people) more strictly than He does unbelievers?
3. Has today's Church lost or neglected the concept of discipline for its members? What forms might discipline take?
4. Is it better that our church giving is kept private and confidential?
5. Is the fear of God a healthy consideration in church life today?

## 5. Acts 6: 1-7

### ‘Choose seven men...’ - how delegating responsibility was key in the early Church

Does your work or ministry ever suffer because you get too busy?

My name is Nicanor, and I want to tell you how in the earliest days of the church we had this problem, and how we overcame it.

I live in Jerusalem, but I was born in Greece. The local Jews here tend to look down on us newcomers and call us ‘Hellenistic Jews’. Although I have lived here for about ten years, I always felt like a bit of a blow-in. But I did find a new sense of belonging about a year ago when I put my faith in Jesus as the Messiah and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Being part of this new community of believers has been wonderful, but recently the atmosphere of love and joy has become somewhat strained.

It really all began with the leaders of the movement taking on too much. You’ve no idea how busy they have been: preaching the good news about Jesus, instructing new believers like myself, and praying for people to be healed. Peter only has to walk outside the door, and people are laying the sick on the streets so that his shadow might fall on them and heal them! In addition to this, they headed up the compassion side of our ministry. I suppose it was natural that people brought gifts of money to them, and those in need appealed directly to them for aid.

I should tell you that we Jews really take almsgiving seriously. It’s not all reading the Scriptures and praying, you know. We believe in caring for the needy among us. After all, the Lord is a friend to the widow and the orphan. Each Synagogue has a good system in place: two collectors go around homes and the marketplace every Friday to collect money and food. Later that day this is distributed to those on their list who are unable to make ends meet. In addition, there is a daily house-to-house collection made for those in urgent need.



Well, right from the beginning the church began to take on this role of caring for the poor and widows among our number, and as I was saying, it was the apostles who found themselves carrying the burden. You can imagine what happened! Despite their best efforts, things didn’t run smoothly. I first became aware that there was an issue when some of our Greek widows began to complain.

“It’s not fair,” said one lady to me. “I moved here with my husband so we could pass our last days close to the temple. But my husband died, and now I am almost penniless. I have no children here to help care for me. If I don’t get help from my fellow believers, I don’t know how I shall manage to eat!” Others told me how they felt neglected in favour of the Judean widows, and there was a growing sense of jealousy and discontent which began to affect us all.

When these complaints reached the ears of the apostles, they called a full church meeting right away. I went along, as did many of us Hellenistic believers who were concerned about the plight of our friends. I wondered how the leaders of the church would handle the criticism.

Well, they were great. They listened to our complaints and didn’t come over all defensive. They could see right away that there was a genuine problem.

‘You’re quite right,’ said Peter, ‘We apostles have been trying to do too much ourselves and this aspect of our ministry is suffering.’

One of the other leaders came up with a great suggestion. I’m sure the Holy Spirit must have inspired him! ‘Why not follow the pattern we use in the synagogues? We should select seven men to oversee the collection and distribution of alms.’

Everyone thought this was a great idea. Andrew said, ‘This will free us up to concentrate on our calling to preach and to pray.’

‘Alright, then,’ said Peter to us all, ‘Choose seven brothers to take on this responsibility. And make sure they are men who are full of the Holy Spirit and God’s wisdom.’

I was very humbled to be one of those chosen. My friends Stephen and Philip were also selected, as were Procorus, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas. I was surprised and pleased that all of us are from a Hellenistic background, which makes us feel included and honoured. At the end of the meeting, the apostles gathered around the seven of us and laid their hands on each of us. I had a real sense of being commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit for this important ministry.

It’s wonderful how this new arrangement has worked out so well for everyone. We have made a proper list of the widows who need aid, and there is no more jealousy. The apostles are no longer distracted by managing finances and can give more time to the ministry of the Word. Becoming this thing called ‘church’ is such a learning curve, and we have discovered an important lesson through this experience: we can’t leave all the work to the leaders – we all have a part to play. I’ve also discovered that I need the power of the Holy Spirit to administer alms just as much as the apostles need His power to preach!

Of course, the seven of us also get many opportunities to share the gospel and pray for the sick. Stephen and Philip are becoming very powerful preachers. And with peace again reigning in our midst, it is no wonder that the good news is spreading!

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*Suggested reading: Acts 6: 1-7; Exodus 18; Romans 12: 1-8; Ephesians 4: 1-16*

### **Background points**

- Widows and orphans were considered to be the most vulnerable groups in society. The Old Testament made it clear that that God wanted them to receive special help. See Exodus 22: 22; Deuteronomy 14: 29 and Isaiah 1: 17. The early church was honouring this practice as a matter of course.
- There is no suggestion that the perceived unfairness in the daily distribution of funds was intentional. Most likely it was down to communication difficulties between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking groups. Unaddressed, however, the inequity would have festered and threatened the unity of these new believers.
- The response of the Apostles, in creating a system of delegation, echoed a principle first put forward by Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law in Exodus 18.
- We do not know why seven helpers were chosen. Seven is a number in scripture that suggests completeness and that may be part of the answer. Later it became common practice for church fellowships to have seven deacons.

- The fact that all seven helpers were from a Greek-speaking Jewish background was a wise and magnanimous gesture on the part of the Apostles.

### **Questions**

1. Were the Greek-speaking Jews right to raise this issue of unfairness?
2. How did the Apostles turn this problem into a win-win solution?
3. What do you think about the qualifications for those to be chosen for this office?
4. Why do you think it was wise to have all seven of the chosen men were from Greek rather than Hebrew backgrounds?
5. Why do you think the seven were commissioned by the laying on of hands for their new role?

### **Taking it further**

1. Are there believers in our churches today who see themselves as “second-class citizens”? How this be remedied?
2. Are there people in our churches today who are simply too busy and thus causing the work to suffer?
3. How far should leaders be prepared, like the Apostles, to listen and delegate?
4. How good are we at making sure that we provide for our neediest members?
5. Should the Apostles’ choice of ‘prayer and the ministry of the word’ (v4) still be the priority of our leaders today?

## 6. Acts 8: 1-25

### You can't buy the Holy Spirit

In the end we left in something of a hurry. Jerusalem had become a dangerous place for followers of The Way, the people who believed in Jesus as God's anointed Messiah. This community of believers grew rapidly due to the powerful preaching of Jesus' original disciples and the miracles done through them. As numbers increased, so too did the jealousy and anger of the religious authorities, yet their persecution did nothing to stop the daily flow of new converts. We practised obeying the commands of Jesus to love one another and shared our possessions, especially with the most vulnerable who were often orphaned children and widows. Seven deacons were charged with ensuring the fairness of the daily food distribution. Stephen was really the leader, and my cousin Philip was another deacon.

Some men from a synagogue started arguments with Stephen. Confounded by his wisdom, they concocted false charges against him and notwithstanding his inspired speech to the court, Stephen was sentenced and stoned to death. The first person to die for loving Jesus. Our shock was compounded by the fierce persecution that followed. Saul of Tarsus, Prosecutor-in-Chief, made no distinction between men and women when it came to imprisonment and maltreatment, so the apostles decided that whilst they would stay in the city, new believers should escape to places of safety. As a deacon Philip would have stayed but he and Sara had four young daughters, so it made sense to leave. He invited me to travel with the family and that is how I came to the province of Samaria.

We reasoned that Samaria would be among the last places Saul would come, because strict Jews such as he never dealt with Samaritans. They were deemed to have corrupted the religion of our forebears. We anticipated being met with suspicion in Samaria, but it turned out that our fears were unfounded. From the day we crossed the border, we received the warmest welcomes and hospitality. Then it dawned on me. Philip had been guided by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was famous throughout Samaria, indeed some people had actually met him when he taught and healed many near the town of Sychar, where he helped a woman at the local well. Now people were eager to know more about Jesus so Philip, instead of lying low, found himself teaching and baptising new believers. He became a powerful channel of the Lord's healing and deliverance to many people.

The most dramatic convert was Simon, a high-profile celebrity whose sorcery amazed and tantalised the countryside. He believed and was baptised into the new church. He attached himself to Philip, constantly asking questions and encouraging people to listen to his new friend.

Some weeks later we were surprised by the arrival of two principal leaders in the Jesus movement. Peter and John had been particularly close to Jesus and recently spent time in prison, for preaching. Apparently, news of the growing community in Samaria had reached Jerusalem and I supposed they had come to check on Philip's preaching and announce rules for the Samaritan believers to obey. Not at all. The first thing they wanted was to pray for everyone and when they did, they asked the Holy Spirit to fall on the new followers. It was afterwards, when they laid their hands on people's heads, the Spirit came. Everyone was filled with joy and the Spirit brought gifts to enable us to grow in our love for Jesus and one another.

Everyone's faith was strengthened; we prayed for healings and our love for one another deepened quickly. Simon was overwhelmed and decided that the power of the Spirit provided an ideal

opportunity for him to regain popularity. He asked Peter how much money it would take for him to be given the ability to dispense the Holy Spirit.

I never saw a man so quickly or effectively chastised. Peter told him that his belief in Jesus was confined to his head and that his heart was not right with God. The desire to use God's gift to promote himself was a grievous sin. He warned Simon to plead with God to remove such unworthy and selfish ambitions. I do not know if Simon ever asked for God's forgiveness. He crept out of our lives. Perhaps if he did repent, he was too embarrassed to return to town and found fellowship somewhere else.

Peter and John stayed only a short while before making a preaching tour of Samaria en route to Jerusalem. Within weeks the Holy Spirit had removed Philip also, calling him south to Gaza. Eventually he moved to Caesarea where his adult daughters were often led by the Spirit to speak God's messages to the church.

I have remained in Samaria and often reflect on how the Lord is present in the unexpected and even unwelcome events of life, demonstrating his love and teaching us deeper truths. Another recurring thought is that Jesus instructed his first disciples to make disciples in Samaria and everywhere else, but it was the next generation of followers who were eventually driven out to found new churches.

It is interesting too that in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit simply 'fell' on those who heard, but in Samaria the Spirit chose another way, patiently waiting until the hands of God's servants were placed on humble heads. Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul, later urged his young friend Timothy to fan into flame the gift God gave him through the laying on of hands. I know now that the Spirit's coming is divinely ordered, often taking place in unexpected moments and ways, simply because Jesus wants to make every single person his beloved child.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 6 & 7 for the background; Acts 8: 1-25; 2 Timothy 1: 1-7*

### **Background points**

- It is well known that there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans at this time. The Samaritans were the descendants of the mixed race that had grown up in Palestine during the period when most Jews were exiled from their homeland. They practised a basic form of Judaism but with enough significant differences to make Jews resent both their presence and their beliefs.
- This incident marks a key stage in the fulfilment of Jesus' commission to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria before going on "to the ends of the earth". This probably explains why Peter and John arrive on the scene in response to the news of Philip's ministry.
- Peter and John's actions in laying hands on these new Samaritan believers was an outward acknowledgement of welcome and inclusion.
- There must have been some dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit to have impressed Simon to the extent that he offered money for the power to impart the Spirit to others.
- The word simony has come in our language to mean one who attempts to use money to obtain position or preferment in the church.

### **Questions**

1. In what way did the persecution following Stephen's death have a positive outcome?
2. Even though he believed and was baptized what do you think really motivated Simon?

3. We are not told but what do you think were the manifestations that the newly baptised Samaritans experienced when they received the Holy Spirit?
4. Why do you think Simon so wanted to be able to lay hands on people as he had seen Peter and John do?
5. Why was Peter so outraged?

**Taking it further**

1. Do people still try to manipulate the Holy Spirit for personal gain? What might be the signs that this is taking place?
2. Do you agree that the Holy Spirit 'blows where he wills' and that experiences of him cannot be reduced to a formula? Why do some groups try to do this?
3. Why do we not see more dramatic and supernatural signs of the Spirit's presence in our local churches today?

## 7. Acts 8: 1-8 and 26-40

### A divine appointment - Philip obeys the Spirit's prompting with interesting results.

Hi, I'm Philip, one of the original seven deacons chosen to distribute food to the widows in Jerusalem. I want to tell you how I saw a promise of Jesus fulfilled in an amazing way.

I had heard, many times, what Jesus told the disciples after his resurrection, just before he returned to his Father in heaven. He said, "You will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Well, when I first heard that I wondered how it could ever come about. But after my dear friend and fellow deacon, Stephen, was stoned to death, there was a great persecution of the followers of Jesus and many of us fled Jerusalem to nearby towns. You'll have heard how I went to stay in a city of Samaria and that even the Samaritans responded to my preaching. It was such an exciting time, and there was great joy in the city as many people were healed and delivered of evil spirits.

I was busy ministering there and delighted to see the number of believers grow, until the Lord sent me on a very unusual assignment. I can only describe it by saying that an angel of the Lord told me to go to the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. As you can imagine, it wasn't easy to leave the work in Samaria, but when the Lord speaks to you clearly like that – well! You've just got to obey. I had no idea what would happen when I got there, so I just had to trust God and ask him to make the next step clear to me when the time came.

This road wasn't very familiar to me. It goes south-west to Gaza and then on to Egypt. The further I walked along the road the hotter it became. I kept my eyes open for anything unusual, but there was nothing apart from the hot sun, the barren desert, and the usual travellers and caravans. Just as I was beginning to wonder if I had mis-heard the Lord, I was passed by a very fine-looking carriage. The driver and his passenger were African, and I was impressed by their exotic garments and air of importance. The passenger was reading from a scroll.

Immediately I had a sense of 'This is it!' The Spirit clearly prompted me to run up to the carriage and stay near it. Imagine my amazement when I heard that the man was reading from the prophet Isaiah! We exchanged the typical greetings of fellow travellers and I learnt that the man was actually the minister for finance to the Queen Candace. I have never been to his country, but it lies south of Egypt. For some years he had been attracted to the Jewish religion.

'I've been up to Jerusalem,' he said, 'and I am on my way home. I managed to purchase this scroll of Isaiah the prophet in the Greek language.'

'Are you able to understand it?' I asked, sensing an opening to share the gospel.

The great man sighed. 'How can I, unless someone explains it to me? Look, you are a Jew. Seeing as we are going in the same direction, why not join me here in the carriage and you can answer my questions?'

'Thank you, Lord,' I breathed and climbed into the carriage, thankful to get out of the blazing heat.

The official opened the scroll again. 'Now, listen to this,' he said, and began to read:

*He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before his shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.*

He leaned back and looked at me. 'Now, tell me, who is the prophet speaking about? Himself or someone else?'

Well, I almost laughed out loud. Of all the passages in Isaiah, this one most clearly speaks of the suffering and atoning death of the Messiah. Our Jewish rabbis are very puzzled by these verses, but to those of us who follow Jesus, it all points to him.

'That prophecy was written hundreds of years ago, but it has only very recently been fulfilled. When you were in Jerusalem, did you hear any talk about someone called Jesus of Nazareth?'

Well, of course he had, so I was able to tell him how the events of Jesus' death and resurrection were a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

'When Jesus was arrested and brought before the high priests and Pilate, he didn't defend himself at all, even though he had done nothing wrong. He was like a sheep going to slaughter. He was innocent but Isaiah says, "he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquity".'

After we had talked for a long time and I had shared my own story with him, we came at last to that part of the road where there is a wadi. When he saw it my new friend called to the driver to stop the carriage.

'Look, Philip,' he said, 'I believe everything you have told me about Jesus. What is to prevent me from being baptised right here, before I return home?'

Well, I did some quick thinking. Up until now I had only seen Jews and Samaritans coming to believe in Jesus. But after all, Jesus had said 'to the ends of the earth'. To me, Ethiopia\* certainly fell into that category! We had been discussing how God's servant had been led like a lamb to the slaughter, and I remembered that John the Baptist had called Jesus 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'.

'Well, Lord,' I prayed, 'I guess you wouldn't have led me all this way unless it was your plan to bring salvation to this man.' I said to the official, 'Let's do it!'

So, there we were, up to our waists in water, as I baptised him in the Name of Jesus. It was the most unusual baptism I had ever done! When he came up out of the water the man was beaming with joy.

I never saw him again, as the Spirit immediately carried me away to Azotus for a new mission trip, but I often thank God for guiding me to the right person at just the right time and place.

*\*The area is not in modern day Ethiopia, but Sudan.*

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*Suggested reading: Acts 8:1-8 and 26-40; Isaiah 53.*

### **Background points**

- The important official whom Philip encountered was most probably a 'God-fearer'. The term refers to a Gentile who worshipped the God of Israel but had not become a full convert or 'proselyte'.
- As a eunuch it was not possible for him to convert as Deuteronomy 23:1 explicitly stated. In Isaiah 56: 3-6, however, the prophet writes that eunuchs and foreigners will one day be part of God's family. Perhaps that explains his interest in reading the scroll of Isaiah.
- In the ancient world people mostly read out loud rather than silently. Thus, Philip heard what the official was reading. The passage (Isaiah 53) could not have been more appropriate.
- This incident is another milestone in the spread of the Gospel – Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and now it goes beyond and into Africa.

### **Questions**

1. What do you admire about Philip's willingness to head south on this desert road alone?
2. What was remarkable about what the Ethiopian happened to be reading?
3. In what ways might this encounter be a model for personal evangelism?
4. What do you make of the Ethiopian's willingness to be baptized?
5. What follow-up would there have been for this man? Do you think his faith would have survived?

### **Taking it further**

1. Can success in ministry make us too comfortable and prevent us from new ventures?
2. Chrysostom in the 4<sup>th</sup> century wrote 'Verily one has reason to admire this eunuch for unlike Saul of Tarsus he had no supernatural vision of Christ yet he believed. So great a thing is the reading of scripture.' How common today are dramatic conversions?
3. This incident shows us Christianity reaching out to someone whom Judaism kept at arm's length. Is there a lesson here for us today?

## 8. Acts 9: 1-25

### Ananias - a message to deliver

What was it Peter said on that special Day of Pentecost as he quoted the prophet Joel? *'Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men will dream dreams.'* I remember it so well. I was in the crowd on that occasion and was one of hundreds who believed and got baptised as followers of Jesus the Messiah. I witnessed many amazing instances of the Holy Spirit's activity that day but never in a million years did I think that someone ordinary like me would ever be entrusted with a *vision*.....

Back home in Damascus I found that I wasn't alone in coming back from Jerusalem as a believer. There were quite a few of us. We had to watch our step with the authorities and quickly developed our own intelligence network to keep one step ahead of the synagogue rulers who clearly saw our movement as some kind of dangerous threat. We learned to be very careful while at the same time witnessing as effectively as we could to our new faith.

My vision, when it came, could not have been clearer or more direct. Don't ask me how but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the Lord speaking. He told me to go to Straight Street, the main east west thoroughfare in the city, find the house of someone called Judas and ask there for a blind man from Tarsus by the name of Saul. He would be praying and waiting for me because the Lord had told him that a man called Ananias would arrive and pray for him to have his sight restored.

It took me less than a minute to grasp what I was being asked to do. Our people knew all about this Saul of Tarsus. He was notorious. He had been responsible for the arrest of scores of our fellow believers in Jerusalem and the word had got round that he was heading to our city with letters from the High Priest to arrest anyone claiming allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. The journey would take him about six days and we had all been warned to be especially careful and on the lookout for trouble when he arrived.

I tried to argue. This man was highly dangerous. No way did it make sense to have any contact with him at all. It would be like volunteering to enter a lions' den. But clear as day the Lord spoke. He said that Saul was a chosen instrument who would bear his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. Strangely he also said that suffering would be part of his calling.

Don't forget, I was still a relatively new believer. I wanted to be obedient but this was a really big ask. I confess I wrestled with it through an entirely sleepless night. It seemed to me that the Lord Jesus was calling me to put my life on the line. I would not have trusted Saul of Tarsus any further than I could have thrown him. Many in our fellowship might have seen the whole thing as a clever trap designed to bring Saul into contact with our network of believers. I could have ended up not only losing my own freedom but also betraying my friends into the hands of a bitter and powerful enemy.

As dawn broke a peace like I'd never known before came over me. The only way I can describe it is to say that I surrendered. I knew what I must do. I would obey. I would go and see this man and pray with him. I would do it even if it cost me my life. Deep down I knew it was the right thing to do and, in that moment, I consciously felt the Lord's pleasure – the greatest reward I could ever want.

Most of you know what happened. I found the house, went in and came face to face with this man who had struck such terror into all of us. The reality bore no comparison to the reputation. He was a broken man. He had indeed been praying; he was totally blind; he hadn't eaten or even drunk

anything for three days. He was a wreck. Fear left me in an instant. Instead I was filled with love and compassion. I like to think I saw him in that moment as the Lord Jesus saw him. I saw him, not as he was right then but as the 'chosen vessel' he would become.

I crossed the room in an instant. I called him 'Brother Saul'. I told him of my vision and how the Lord Jesus had sent me to pray that he would receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. I laid hands on him then and his sight was restored straight away. The change in his face was even more dramatic. It was clear to me that in that moment he was baptised, immersed, in the Holy Spirit.

He knew enough of our ways to know that water baptism was required of all new believers and so I had the honour of baptising him in front of a small gathering of my incredulous friends. It took some convincing at first for them to accept what had happened. The proof of the pudding however came quickly as Saul lost no time in going into the synagogues of Damascus and proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

You know the rest. Saul (Paul by his Roman name) has gone on to do great things. Last I heard he has taken the Gospel as far as Rome itself but is now under house arrest. I wonder if, like me, he ever thinks back to our encounter on Straight Street and how the Lord's word to him that day has been fulfilled. I feel so honoured to have been the one who delivered it.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 9: 1-25; 22: 1-17, 26: 1-23*

### **Background points**

- Damascus was about 135 miles north east of Jerusalem and the journey would have taken about six days on foot. It was a very ancient city, settled as early as the second millennium B.C.
- The 'Street called Straight' is still there today. It runs directly east west and is one the world's oldest continually occupied streets.
- We do not know how Christianity reached Damascus. It may well have arrived back with visitors to Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost or with some of the believers fleeing Jerusalem in the persecution that followed the martyrdom of Stephen. (Acts 8: 4)
- It is interesting to note that we never hear of Ananias again after this encounter with Saul. This was his moment. It took courage and obedience but what he did was of immense significance.

### **Questions**

1. Why was Saul so vehemently opposed to the followers of Jesus?
2. What do you make of the words that came to Saul 'Why are you persecuting me?'
3. How do you know that this encounter with Jesus was not just all in Saul's imagination? (v7)
4. What insight did the risen Christ give to Ananias concerning Saul's very specific calling?
5. How did Saul's meeting with Ananias act as confirmation of what had happened to him on the road to Damascus?
6. What did it take for Ananias to call him 'Brother Saul'?

**Taking it further**

1. Ananias was ready and available for the Lord to deploy. If we listened more, would we hear God's voice of command more readily?
2. Does God still speak through visions today? Should we seek them?
3. Have you ever obeyed a prompting of the Holy Spirit?
4. Can you make a connection between Ananias and modern- day peacemakers in Northern Ireland?

## 9. Acts 9: 32-42

### Peter remembers Tabitha

Sometimes being an apostle demands a great deal of patience. At my advanced stage of life, I seem to get bombarded with so many questions and requests to reminisce about all that I have witnessed over the years as a disciple. Believers seem to have an endless capacity to want to hear about life with the Master during his three wonderful years of public ministry – indeed John Mark plans to put all my memories down in writing so that none of them get forgotten or distorted. It's a great idea to record things for posterity. It means that believers who never knew the Lord Jesus when he was here in the flesh can meet him and come to know him better in the written word. And if some of the stories don't reflect all that well on me, well I'm ok with that.

But I have other memories too. I can think back over the years to all that has happened since Jesus left us physically but sent us out in the power of his Spirit to be heralds of his Kingdom. Wonderful times. Such adventures. Easily worth another book.

Recently someone asked me which miraculous event in the days after Pentecost stands out amidst all the others. Interesting question. They were probably expecting me to tell them about that very public healing of the lame man at the Temple, or my supernatural escape from prison or about the times when sick people were laid out in the streets waiting to be healed in the name of Jesus. They were surprised, I think, when my thoughts turned to a humble widow called Tabitha who no-one outside Joppa has ever heard of.

It happened at a time of relative peace for our movement. We had just had a helpful "clearing the air" session with Saul of Tarsus and had sent him off back to Tarsus for his own safety. I was travelling around the country encouraging the growing number of new fellowships. I had stopped off at Lydda and was privileged to see a man called Aeneas healed after eight years of being bed ridden. His testimony caused a sensation and many came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

In the midst of all this, two brothers from Joppa came to see me. They were clearly deeply distressed. It seemed that one of their number, a widow called Tabitha, had just died. They begged me to come at once. My initial reaction was obvious. The lady was dead. What exactly did they expect me to do? In the back of my mind however I recalled the time the Master went to the home of a synagogue ruler called Jairus whose daughter had died. I remembered something else too – the words of Jesus when he said 'Greater things than these shall you do because I go to the Father'. I wasn't at all sure what I was supposed to do but I knew I that I couldn't ignore this summons.

When I got there, they took me straight up to see the body. The lady had been laid out in an upper room awaiting burial. The atmosphere was charged with grief. It was clear that she had been greatly loved. The women present almost queued up to show me the beautiful items of clothing she had made. It seemed she had used her great skill with a needle to provide for believers and neighbours alike. More than that, she had done it quietly with joy and with love.

I think maybe they just wanted me to pray with them in their loss but in that moment, I knew I must do more. It was as if the whole thing was a



replay of that scene with Jairus' daughter. They were taken aback when instead of the comforting prayer they were expecting I told them all to leave the room. They did so immediately. I went over to where Tabitha was lying. I felt so alone. That other time I had been there with Jesus, James and John and the girls' parents. Now there was just me. Yet not so. In that moment I felt as if the Lord had slipped into the room beside me. That is what gave me the courage to kneel down, pray and then say simply 'Tabitha, get up'. And she did – just like all she had been waiting for was the command.

You can imagine the excitement and the joy that followed. The news spread like wild fire and many came to believe. I ended up staying on in Joppa for a while to help the believers cope with all those coming to faith. They found me lodgings on the coast with a man called Simon the Tanner.

So why Tabitha? Why does she stand out so clearly as I reflect back over the years? It wasn't just the incredible miracle. I think it was because, as I saw the needlework she had done and the love and esteem in which she was held, I realised that leadership isn't always about exerting authority, it's about having influence – influence that comes from example. Her life of quiet humble service had clearly impacted and shaped the character of the church in Joppa and shown believers what it means to serve the Lord Jesus by serving others. 'The greatest among you shall be your servant.' Servant leadership. I had learned it from the Master and seen it in his life but Tabitha brought it home to me again in a way I will never forget.

Last I heard she's still alive and sewing away.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 9: 32-42; Matthew 9: 18-26; John 14:12; Matthew 23: 11-12; Luke 22: 24-27*

### **Background points**

- This incident follows immediately after Peter's visit to Lydda during which a paralysed man was healed and many in the town came to believe. Both the healing of the man and the raising of Tabitha are reminiscent of miracles Jesus performed (Matthew 9: 1-8 and Luke 8: 40-56). Peter is following in his Master's steps.
- Peter is clearly exercising an itinerant ministry. His visit to Joppa (modern day Jaffa) seems to be mostly pastoral. He is concerned not only with evangelism but also with caring for those like these widows who are grieving the loss of their friend and sister.
- The name 'Tabitha' is Aramaic. It is the name which her friends would have used. Dorcas is the Greek version of the name. Both words mean 'gazelle'.

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think the believers in Joppa sent for Peter?
2. What does this incident show us about the quality of fellowship experienced in Joppa?
3. What was it that moved Peter so much and led to him taking action?
4. In what ways did Peter copy what he had seen Jesus do?
5. Why do you think he stayed on in Joppa afterwards?

### **Taking it further**

1. Who do you see as having been the most important influencers in your life?
2. What do you see as the difference between leadership and influence?
3. What should 'servant leadership' look like in today's church?

**4.** What does this incident teach us about how we should value the different gifts bestowed on church members today?

## 10. Acts 10

### Cornelius and Peter – recasting the die

#### The good commander

Caesarea was a great army posting. It was the capital of the Empire's province of Judea and apart from a bit of peace-keeping in Jerusalem, we enjoyed the city's cultural life and its Mediterranean shores. I am Gaius, now retired but ex-Standard Bearer and Personal Aide to Centurion Cornelius. We were not only comrades but close friends, mostly due to what happened when we were based in Caesarea.

Cornelius was a trusted leader and well liked in barracks. Well educated, he assiduously studied the cultures in countries where he served and absorbed their best ethics as his own. He found Judea unique. For the first time, he met people who believed in a single god to whom, they were convinced, the whole world belonged. To us this was a ridiculous contradiction. How could such a powerful god allow his worshippers to be the constant victims of oppression by other nations? Cornelius learned that for centuries the Jews lived in confident expectation of a Messiah who would usher in for them a golden age of power and peace. Many Jews got fed up waiting. Our occupation of the land was pockmarked with skirmishes that quelled emerging revolutions. By searching their writings diligently, Cornelius concluded their God's character was full of patience and loving-kindness. This resonated with his own spirituality and he made devotions to this Jewish god.

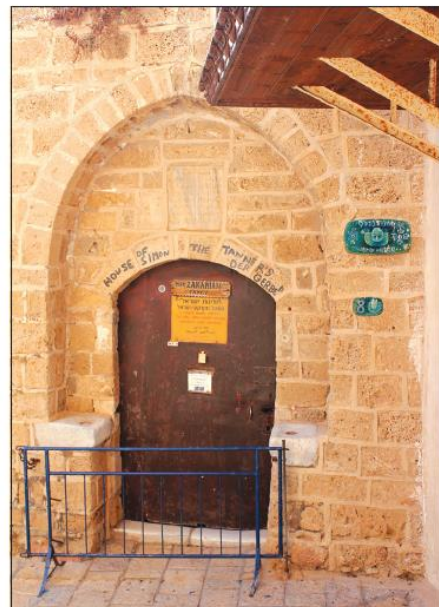
#### Stories and dreams

Stories began to circulate about a non-violent Jewish leader who had been crucified by the governor in Jerusalem. Some believed he was somehow still alive and 'appearing' among his followers. Our authorities paid little attention. The followers were peaceful and posed no threat but the Jewish hierarchy was frantic to quashing his popularity. This Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, enthralled Cornelius. He said it was obvious Jesus embodied the compassion and wisdom of God.

One afternoon following his prayers he confided quite excitedly that he had seen and received instructions from an angel. Cornelius wanted me to them carry out. With another officer and two house-servants I was to undertake the day's journey south, to Joppa, and find a man named Peter, a guest of Simon the leatherworker. Apparently, this Peter knew Jesus and I must invite him to Caesarea. Therein lay the crunch. Jews were suspicious of Romans. They also had strict rules forbidding social contact, including eating, with non-Jews. Sensing my apprehension, Cornelius said we must not go where we were not invited. Reflecting now, years later, I see God's hand was preparing these two men for a meeting that would determine the religious future of thousands of people. For forty-eight hours I was at the centre of it!

#### Journeys of legs and hearts

As we stood at the leatherworkers' gate enquiring about him, Peter himself appeared. He dismissed religious conventions and insisted we stay the night. He too had an instructive dream. Next day in Caesarea he again brushed aside Jewish law by crossing the threshold of a Gentile's home - probably the first time he had ever



*Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa.*

done so. Aware that Peter was rising above his own laws, Cornelius construed his action as godlike and in front of soldiers, friends and neighbours the commander knelt in worship. Peter mildly chided him saying he too was human, a fisherman also learning new things from God. Asking why he had been sought out, the answer came, 'Tell us what God wants us to know'.

Peter spoke of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and how he was The Way through whom people could be forgiven and empowered to live new lives. We had known a bit about Jesus, but was mesmerizing. Peter's teaching was wonderfully the opposite to the world we knew. He was in full flight when the Lord took over the gathering. It was as if the love we were hearing about with our ears, joyfully welled up within us. Without exception everyone began singing and shouting praises to God - in languages we had never learned! Now it was the turn of Peter's friends to be awestruck. They were seeing God doing for us, foreigners, all he had promised for Israel.

We discovered that Peter's impetuous nature, when surrendered to God, was a powerful tool, for immediately he stretched the limits further, and declared we should all be baptised. In that holy act the first ever non-Jewish Church of Jesus Christ was born.

Peter remained in Caesarea for a few days. Soon after he left, Philip arrived and his four daughters brought prophetic insights to help us mature as Jesus' disciples. Back in Jerusalem, questions were asked. Followers there were deeply rooted in Jewish custom and their faith in Jesus frequently brought them under scrutiny, by the religious authorities, as a false sect. They could have kept their heads down and non-Jews out, but after hearing Peter's answers about God's blessings on us, they joined in thanks to God. They confirmed Peter's first words to Cornelius, 'God shows no partiality but, in every nation, accepts anyone who is in awe of him, turns from evil and does what is good.' Those words were a turning point and although persecution returned, it only served to make stronger missionaries who travelled the world with the best news ever.

*Suggested reading: Acts 10*

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### **Background points**

- In Matthew 16:19 Jesus famously gave to Peter 'the keys of the Kingdom'. It can be said that in preaching to Jews on the Day of Pentecost and subsequently to Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17) Peter was "opening up" the Kingdom to these groups. In this passage Peter is seen to admit Gentiles into the Church.
- Cornelius was to some extent a God fearer. He seems to have embraced monotheism and the worship of the God of Israel. This is seen by his praying 'at the ninth hour' which was one of the Jewish set times for prayer.
- In Peter's vision the sheet was filled with all kinds of animals – presumably clean and unclean, in the eyes of the Jewish law. The command to 'kill and eat' would have been deeply troubling to Peter. He was being led to see that such things as the food laws and other observances were not to get in the way of reaching the Gentiles.
- What happens after Peter's speech is really a Gentile Pentecost. It makes Peter realise that 'to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life' (v 18). This incident is a fundamental turning point for the Church.

### **Questions**

1. What makes this a very unusual Roman officer?

2. Why do you think that Peter's vision was repeated three times? Can you think of another time he had to be told something three times
3. What was special about Peter inviting the messengers from Cornelius into the house?
4. What does Peter say he has just learned (v 28 and v 34)? Why was that a vitally important principle for the future of the Church's mission?
5. What was significant in Peter baptising those present in the home of Cornelius?

**Taking it further**

1. Can you think of a time when God had to make you unlearn a previous assumption? How ready were you to change?
2. Have you ever been in a meeting when the Holy Spirit seemed to fall on the room? What was it like?
3. What are the implications for us today of Peter's statement that 'God shows no partiality'?

## **11. Acts 11: 19-26 / Acts 13: 1-3**

### **Paul and Barnabas – the dream team**

You know him as Paul the Apostle but when I first met him, he was Saul of Tarsus to us and that very name was enough to strike fear into believers of a nervous disposition. We had all heard of his exploits in and around Jerusalem – how he sought out and persecuted anyone found to be following the Lord Jesus. Then came his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus and reports of him proclaiming his new faith openly in the synagogues. I had followed it all with great interest.

I've always believed that people can change. Maybe that's why I'm thought of as the encourager my name suggests. Unlike many of my fellow believers I was prepared to give Saul the benefit of the doubt. I prayed for him daily and longed to meet him. I was thrilled when at last he came to Jerusalem and I had the opportunity to introduce him to Peter and James the Lord's brother. What a time that was as Saul set out his understanding of how the scriptures had been fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus. What incredible insight he displayed – and all of it arising, as he put it, not from any man but by direct revelation from God himself.

The trouble was – how was this zealous young disciple to be of use? Saul was clear that his primary calling from God was to reach Gentiles. Peter and a few others could grasp this idea in principle. Some however were nervous. Jewish feeling against our new movement was still running high and many felt that to let Saul loose on the streets of Jerusalem could make things a lot worse for us. (The stoning of Stephen was still in everyone's mind.)

The decision was reached that Saul should be sent back to Tarsus for the time being. There he could take time to reflect and prepare for future service. Some probably even hoped that he would spend the rest of his days happily content to proclaim the Gospel in that place. They thought they had heard the last of Saul of Tarsus. But I was never one of them. I knew this man was special. I knew that the anointing of God was upon him. I could see that Saul had been given a vision of God's purposes that reached far beyond Jerusalem, Judea or Samaria. This man thought big. He wanted the Gospel of the Lord Jesus to reach to the ends of the earth.

Ten long years passed. We had heard nothing from Saul. We didn't even know if he was still alive. Meanwhile the church in Jerusalem was growing. It was also beginning to think differently about the possible inclusion of Gentiles in our ranks. Peter had had an experience in the Caesarea home of a Roman officer called Cornelius in which the Holy Spirit was poured out on Gentile believers. He had even baptized them. Naturally this caused quite a sensation. The possibilities it opened up for our movement were enormous.

Then an interesting situation developed in Antioch, that great Gentile city which was rated the third city of the Empire. Reports reached the Apostles in Jerusalem of numbers of Greeks coming to personal faith. I was thrilled to be the one asked to go and investigate. When I got there, I can only say that my heart rejoiced. It was so evident that God was doing something very special. What I witnessed was not the result of human efforts in evangelism. God's Spirit was sweeping Gentile men

and women into the Kingdom causing them to be captivated with Jesus and on fire to serve him. The only thing lacking was teaching. These Gentiles were coming from the worship of idols. They knew nothing of how the God of Israel had prepared people over the centuries for the coming of the Messiah. In short, they needed context – they needed someone who could make the scriptures understandable to new believers who were not Jewish.

I knew immediately who it was that we needed. But was he still in Tarsus? Had he held true to the faith? Would he come? There was only one way to find out. I took ship for Tarsus that very day.



*Ruins of Antioch*

When I arrived, it didn't take long to locate Saul. In fact, I heard him before I saw him. He was busy plying his trade of tent making just off one of the main streets – and as he worked, he was speaking of Jesus to a small group gathered around him. Our eyes met. He smiled as if he had been expecting me. I had been worried that maybe he might be angry at how we seemed to have side-lined him and kept him at arm's length but he simply embraced me with welcome and evident delight. He was ready to leave with me for Antioch that very day.

We worked together in that city for a whole year. It was one of the happiest times of my life. Our aim was to build up this wonderful and diverse community of believers by teaching and example. The Spirit moved in a remarkable way creating disciples rather than mere converts. The impact on the citizens of Antioch was considerable. They even gave us a nickname. They called us 'Christians' meaning supporters of Christ. We rather liked that. It covered us all – Jews, Gentiles, men, women, slave, free. Before anything else we were happy to be known as 'Christians'.

With hindsight it was preparation for the wonderful moment when, through a prophetic word, Saul and I were commissioned and sent out from Antioch on the adventure of a lifetime. But that's a story for another time.....

.....  
*Suggested reading: Acts 11: 19-26, 13: 1-3*

### **Background points**

- What happened in Antioch took the Apostles back in Jerusalem largely by surprise. Greek speaking Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene started witnessing to Gentiles and saw many come to faith in Jesus. The Jerusalem leaders sent Barnabas to investigate.
- This followed on from and no doubt affirmed Peter's experience in the home of Cornelius.
- The Gentiles coming to faith needed to understand the preparation for the Messiah's coming contained in the Jewish scriptures.

- Barnabas could see that Saul of Tarsus was the man to help. He had extensive knowledge of the scriptures and he had a special calling and desire to reach out to Gentiles.

### **Questions**

1. How did the Lord use persecution to serve his purposes?
2. What does it say about Barnabas that he was the one chosen by the Jerusalem leaders to go to Antioch and investigate what was happening?
3. Why do you think Barnabas stayed with the Antiochene believers rather than returning back to Jerusalem?
4. Why do you imagine Saul would have been so ready to leave Tarsus and go with Barnabas?
5. What do you think developed between them as Saul and Barnabas worked together in Antioch for a year? Why was this important for what lay ahead?

### **Taking it further**

1. What qualities do you see in Barnabas that are still needed in the Church today?
2. Is our identity as 'Christians' more important than other ethnic, political or cultural groupings to which we may also belong? How might we demonstrate this?
3. Making converts or training disciples. Which should take priority?

## 12. Acts 12: 1-19

### **Persistent prayer opens prison doors – the night Rhoda encounters an escaped prisoner.**

My name is Rhoda. When John Mark asked me to tell you about that memorable night, he had a twinkle in his eye. To this day he likes to tease me about how I left poor Peter standing outside on the doorstep – and he an escaped prisoner!

I am a servant in the home of Mary, John Mark's mother. You'll have heard of Barnabas, their cousin from Cyprus. They are a well-to-do Levite family and Mary's home is in a wealthy street in Jerusalem, not far from the Antonia Fortress. This house has been a meeting place for the church in the city these ten years and more, and I have had a ring-side seat at many of the most wonderful times of teaching and prayer. Often, I have listened to the apostle Peter recount the stories and teaching of Jesus. It was from Peter that I learnt how to pray and not give up. As our Lord said, we must 'keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking.' That's why, when John Mark burst into the house that day and told us that Peter had been taken prisoner by Herod, I began straightaway to pray for his release.

We had been expecting something like this. Only a few weeks before, Herod Agrippa had James beheaded. It was an audacious act, but he did it to curry favour with the Jewish leaders who want to see an end to all followers of Jesus of Nazareth. As the day wore on, other believers came to the house and we began to piece the facts together. Peter had been arrested and was being held under high security in the fortress.

'They are treating him like a dangerous criminal,' said one of our number whose brother works at the fortress. 'Sixteen soldiers guard him day and night with four soldiers in each squad, and he is handcuffed to two of them at all times. Sentries are posted at all the doors. There's no way we could ever get him out.'

'What do you think will happen to him?' asked Mary in deep concern.

'Herod certainly means to execute him, but he can't hold a trial until after the Feast.' (It was the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened bread.)

'Right,' said Mary, 'that gives us almost a week. Pass the word around that my home is open day and night for any who want to gather to pray for Peter's release.' She turned to me. 'Rhoda, you'll be responsible for answering the door. Be very careful, and don't let anyone in that you don't know. Herod's men will be on the watch and any one of us could be next.'

During the next number of days there seemed to be a constant flow of friends coming to pray, especially after dark. I slept little, as I joined the prayer meeting whenever I wasn't doing my work. I grew quite tired running through the courtyard to the outer door in answer to a knock. It was an anxious time, but I kept on praying and trusting that the Lord would work some kind of miracle.

On the last night of the Feast the house was full of friends who had come to pray. We had heard that the very next day Herod would put Peter on trial, so time was running out. It was long after midnight when I heard a soft but urgent knock at the outer door. I hurried across the courtyard and called softly: 'Who's there?'

'It's Peter!' came the answer.

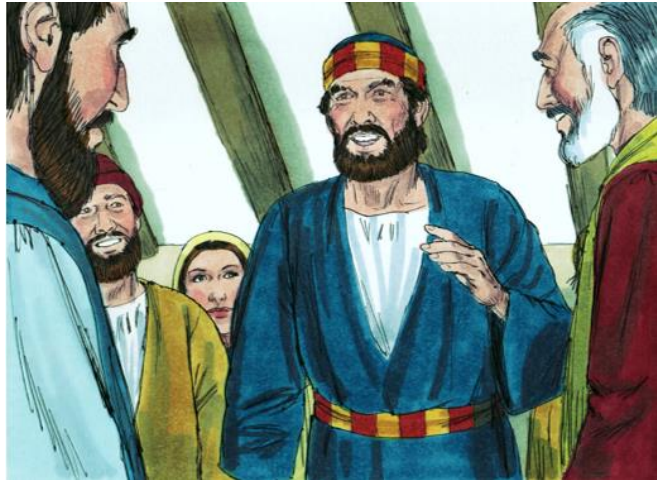
Well, I'm afraid I lost my head with joy! Behind me in the room I could still hear voices lifted in earnest prayer, and here was the very answer to their prayer at the door. I know you will think I'm mad, but I just had to run in and tell them right away.

'Peter's at the door!' I shouted.

'Rhoda,' said Mary calmly, 'What on earth are you talking about? You know Peter is in prison.'

'No, he's not!' I replied excitedly. 'He's at the door; I heard his voice.'

'You must be out of your mind,' said someone. 'The trial isn't until tomorrow. How could he get out of prison in the middle of the night?'



*Peter freed from prison*

'But I *know* it's Peter!' I was almost sobbing in frustration. At that moment we all became conscious of the sound of impatient knocking.

'Come on,' said John Mark, 'Let's see who it is.' They all followed me out and when I opened the door, a rather flustered Peter pushed past me.

You can imagine the uproar! We were laughing, praising God, and bombarding Peter with questions.

'Shush, everyone,' laughed Peter, 'and give me a chance to tell you what happened.'

He told us how a man woke him up in the night. 'I thought it was a dream because the chains just fell off my wrists.' He put on his coat and sandals and followed the man past the sentries on duty who looked past them as if they were invisible. Now all that stood between Peter and freedom was the heavy iron outer gate. As he watched dazedly, the gate seemed to swing open on its own and they stepped out onto the quiet street. Suddenly, Peter's companion disappeared.

'That's when I realised I wasn't dreaming,' said Peter. 'God sent his angel to bring me out. He has answered your prayers!'

Peter soon slipped away to another safe house and I didn't see him again for some time. Afterwards, I reflected on how we had been knocking on the door of heaven just as the answer to that prayer was knocking on the door of the house! I think we were all taken by surprise because we didn't expect God to answer in quite that way. Since that night I have always remembered not only to pray persistently and with faith, but also to look for the answer to come in unexpected ways.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 12: 1-19, Matthew 7: 7, Luke 11: 5-8.*

### **Background points**

- The Herod mentioned in verse one was Herod Agrippa the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled when Jesus was born. This Herod had been raised in Rome and counted the emperors Caligula and Claudius among his childhood friends. He owed his power in Palestine to Roman

patronage. For that reason, he felt the need to curry favour with the Jews and this explains his treatment of James (the brother of John) and Peter.

- Peter's execution was delayed because it would have been considered a desecration to carry it out in the week following the Passover Meal. The prison he was held in was most probably the Fortress of Antonia situated on the corner of the Temple complex.
- The use of four squads of Roman soldiers was standard Roman practice for important prisoners – one squad of four men for each of the four watches of the night.
- Peter appears to have been half-asleep throughout his 'escape' thinking he was dreaming.
- The fate of the sentries was standard practice for any jailer who let a prisoner escape. See Acts 16:27.

### Questions

1. What are we to make of the fact that James was put to the sword but Peter was spared?
2. Why do you think God waited until the last few hours to rescue Peter?
3. Why do you think this incident is recounted by Luke following on from telling us how the Gospel had been spreading so powerfully?
4. To what did Peter attribute his deliverance? (v 11)
5. What do you make of Rhoda?

### Taking it further

1. What lessons about prayer emerge from this incident?
2. Do we underestimate the role of angels today?
3. Do you think the Church lost something when it moved from home?

## 13. Acts 13/14, Acts 15: 36-40

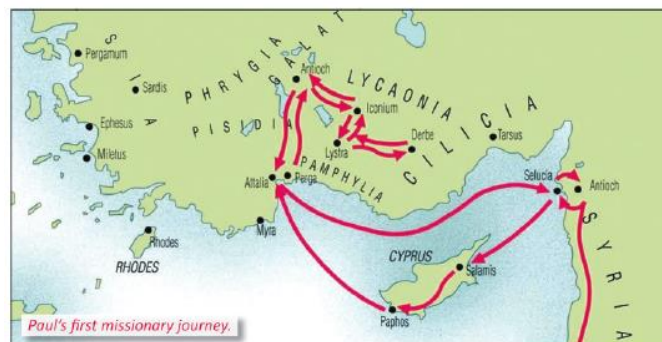
### To the ends of the earth - the adventure begins

The Dream Team – that’s what they called us when, under the Spirit’s prompting, the leaders of the church in Antioch commissioned us for that first great missionary journey. “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”. Those were the words spoken over us. They gripped our hearts and all we could do was obey. Naturally I took the lead. Saul was younger than I was. He was generally reckoned to be my protégé. I was the one who had championed his cause, fetching him from Tarsus after his ten years of isolation and securing his acceptance with the elders in Antioch.

We were indeed a good team. We both shared a burning desire to bring the Gospel to the Gentile world (‘to the ends of the earth’ as the Lord Jesus had commanded). Saul was full of energy and drive while I like to think I brought wisdom and a moderating influence. Before we left, I had the idea to bring my younger cousin John Mark along as a helper. Mark lived in Jerusalem but he came without hesitation when I sent for him. He was such an enthusiastic young believer and I felt that this trip would give him training for future service. Saul possibly wasn’t so keen but I don’t recall that he raised any objection.

We had agreed our strategy in advance. In any location we would start by preaching in the synagogues among our own people. Jews were scattered all around the Mediterranean lands and where ten males could be gathered together you could have a synagogue. We would start there by presenting Jesus as the Messiah promised in scripture, proclaim his death and resurrection and what it meant, not just for Israel, but for the world and finally call on all to repent and come under his rule.

We went first to Cyprus crossing the island from Salamis where we landed to Paphos the capital city. I have to confess that this was a particular pleasure for me as I come from Cyprus and Mark and I have many relatives living there. I had to keep reminding myself that we were there on the Lord’s business and that family had to come second to our mission. Looking back maybe Mark got a slightly rosy view of what life on the road was going to be like.



He was badly shaken by the encounter with Elymas the magician. Sergius Paulus the Roman governor had summoned us to hear our message. It seemed to be going so well until this man confronted us openly in front of the Governor and took issue with all we were saying. It was at this point that Saul (or Paul as I should now call him) came into his own. He simply took over. He rounded on Elymas calling him a ‘son of the devil’ who was trying to twist God’s truth into lies. He declared that Elymas would be struck blind for a time – and so he was right there and then. It was a remarkable moment. The Governor was sufficiently impressed to respond to our message and declare himself a believer.

The effect on me and on Mark was no less profound. I now realised that the dynamic had shifted between Paul and myself. The apprentice had just become the master. I was now firmly, and

happily, in the supporting role. I had always been known as an encourager and encouragers ought always to be glad when eclipsed by those they have mentored. It was a relief really as deep down I knew that leading this mission was a burden I no longer had to carry.

The effect on Mark did not manifest itself immediately. In retrospect I think that that first encounter with evil spiritual forces was a bit too much for him to handle. He was only a lad in my eyes and up to this point had lived a fairly sheltered life among a close-knit group of believers in Jerusalem. Suddenly he was given an insight into real spiritual warfare. He probably felt way out of his depth and totally unprepared for what might lie ahead.

We then left Cyprus and reached the mainland at Perga in Pamphylia. Almost as soon as we landed Mark announced that he wanted to leave us and return home to Jerusalem. He gave no explanation and couldn't look us in the eye. Paul was disgusted and didn't hold back in saying so. I was devastated. I loved my cousin but I felt so let down. Taking him with us had been entirely my idea. The prophetic word that launched our trip had made no mention of Mark. The responsibility, I felt, was mine alone.

Our onward journey proved to be a great success. We saw churches established in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. It was not of course without cost. We got a lot of opposition from our fellow Jews who resented our message and our outreach to Gentiles. At one point in Lystra Paul was beaten so badly I thought he was dead. I will never forget helping him drag his bleeding battered body the sixty miles from there to Derbe, pushing himself to the very limits of human endurance. He never talked much about his sufferings but I can testify to the physical price he paid. Later he was to write to these Galatians 'I bear in my body the marks of Jesus'. No-one knew better than I what he meant.

I have huge admiration for Paul but I do think he was hard on Mark when he refused to take him on his next missionary journey. It led to a quarrel between us that took years to heal. Heal it did of course and friendship was restored. Those who love Jesus may fail to agree but must never fail to love. It's what the Master taught and what we strive to live by.

And in case you're wondering.... the chap did make good in the end. Ask Peter. Read Mark's Gospel.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 13/14, Acts 15: 36-40; 2 Timothy 4: 9-11; 1 Peter 5:13; 1 Corinthians 9: 3-6*

### **Background points**

- The first missionary journey is the beginning of the mission to the Gentile world fulfilling Jesus' commission to 'make disciples of all nations'.
- Paul's plan was to use the synagogue as the launching pad for the gospel message. His speech in Pisidian Antioch is an example of the strategy to preach Jesus as the promised Messiah and then extend the invitation to discipleship beyond the confines of Judaism to the Greek world. The fact that Jews were dispersed widely across the Roman world was of great strategic importance.
- We cannot be sure but it is believed that John Mark went on to write Mark's Gospel. He may even have been the shadowy figure who ran naked from the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14: 51) which would have made him an eye witness to the events of that night. We cannot know for certain.

- The row between Paul and Barnabas which caused them to separate was indeed sad. It did however prove positive in that it led to Silas accompanying Paul on the second missionary journey. Silas, like Paul, was a Roman citizen and this helped secure them their freedom from a tight spot in Philippi.

### Questions

1. Do you think Barnabas was right to want to take Mark along on the mission trip?
2. How would you have reacted to the encounter with Elymas?
3. What do you make of how the lead shifted during this incident in Paphos?
4. What brought Sergius Paulus to faith? (Read Acts 13: 12)
5. Why did Paul and Barnabas go first to the synagogue in any town?
6. What do you think of Paul's refusal to take Mark on his second journey?

### Taking it further

1. 'Christian leaders may fail to agree but they must never fail to love.' Why do leaders often to agree?
2. Are leaders always easy to live with?
3. How important are encouragers like Barnabas?
4. Would you consider the visit to Lystra successful? Does effective evangelism always carry a cost?
5. 'The Dream Team'. Is team ministry better than solo runs? Why?

## 14. Acts 15: 1-35

### The Jerusalem Council

#### Manaen

I may be an old man now, but my years have become ever more exciting. My childhood was spent in Rome, where the prince Herod was among my friends. We lost contact as teenagers when he was crowned King of Galilee. Later, our family moved to the neighbouring country of Syria to set up business in the large cosmopolitan city of Antioch.

#### An important event

From that time onwards, I joined the obligatory pilgrimage to Jerusalem each spring, to attend the feasts of Passover and Pentecost. It was during the visit fifteen years ago that I found myself on a new journey - one born in my heart and mind. This was the year Jesus of Nazareth was arrested and executed, but because we lodged outside Jerusalem, we did not witness these events. However, during the six weeks between feasts, we listened to people debating the teachings and healings of Jesus and the rumour that God had raised him from the dead. Then, as Pentecost began, I was in a crowd near the Temple. There was a commotion, broken by a strong voice. It was Jesus' disciple Peter. His preaching struck a chord deep within me and, with a host of others, I was baptised into the name of Jesus, the living Saviour and Lord. Immediately, I began to see God and my Jewish heritage in a new light.

#### Back in Antioch

At home, we followed 'The Way' by breaking bread, praying and sharing the news of Jesus with other Jews. After a time, people of other religions became curious. When any such Gentiles enquired about Jesus, we welcomed them into our fellowship. Then, a few years later, news reached us that Cornelius, a Roman centurion, had been baptised by Peter and we felt it right to follow this example. Before long we were not waiting for Gentiles to enquire but started preaching to them anyway. Converts poured in and local people nicknamed us 'Christians' or 'the little Christs'!

#### Deepening faith

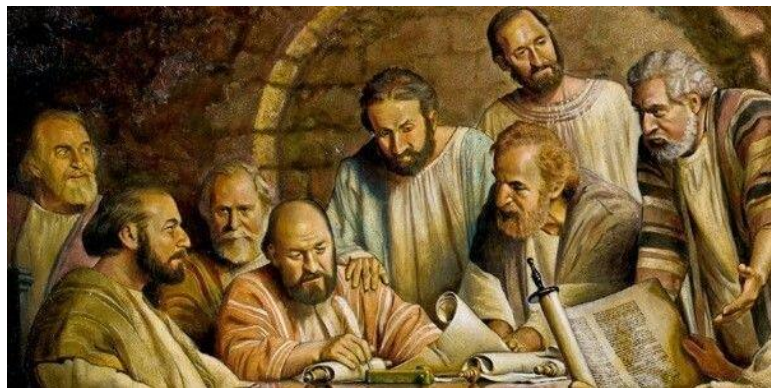
It was not long before a visitor arrived Jerusalem to investigate our spectacular growth. What Barnabas witnessed delighted him. He fetched his friend Paul from Tarsus and together they taught and guided us. Just over a year later, we were holding a prayer vigil when the Spirit prompted us to commission them to go beyond Antioch to preach the gospel. Our joy was unbounded when they came back telling how, in spite of vicious verbal and physical opposition in many towns, the Spirit had empowered them and blessed many as new churches were formed, consisting of Jews and Gentiles together.

### **The crisis**

Our exultation was short-lived. How often, just when progress is being made, hostility is not far behind. It arrived unexpectedly, in the form of learned believers from Jerusalem who insisted that Gentiles could not be Christians unless they first became law observing Jews. Barnabas and Paul, who had once scrupulously observed the Law himself, argued powerfully that the gift of salvation is free. It depends only on what God has done and anyone, of any race, may receive Jesus and all Jesus does, through faith in him. Nothing more is necessary. Demanding prescribed religious observances feeds the false notion that God's favour has to be earned. We could see that the future of the gospel hinged on solving this serious problem. It had to be referred to Jerusalem.

### **The Church Council**

In Jerusalem, the old-school Pharisees were deeply unhappy. Although now followers of Jesus, they clung tightly to the religious habits of a lifetime. They thought our position meant God had 'un-chosen the Jews'. They would welcome Gentile converts, but



*The Jerusalem Council*

only if they became Jewish in every respect, circumcised and law keeping. They argued that Jesus was a Jew who came, not to abolish, but fulfil the Law. The discussion ranged over several days.

Eventually Peter broke the deadlock. He reminded the Council how, nearly ten years before, he had testified to them that God showed no favouritism when anointing Cornelius's household with the Holy Spirit. He emphasised that, according to Jewish law, Cornelius was unacceptable. Paul and Barnabas followed on with stories of Gentiles receiving God's forgiveness and new life in Jesus, during their mission. The facts spoke for themselves.

With a peaceful authority James, the brother of Jesus, called for silence before God. When he spoke again, wisdom filled the stillness. He quoted the prophets Isaiah and Amos who wrote that God had always wanted Gentiles in the kingdom. Peter's experience was just the first example. Everyone knew God's requirements spoken through Micah, to love mercy, act justly and walk humbly with the Lord. That may have been in James's mind when he proposed that Gentile Christians must not be burdened with fulfilling Jewish Laws, but be asked in humility to abstain from certain practices belonging to their past paganism: sexual immorality; food offered to idols and meat with lifeblood still in it. 'That', he said 'is all'. His words became part of a letter that two leaders, Silas and Judas, brought from Jerusalem and read to a reassured and joyful congregation in Antioch.

### **The learning**

Looking back, I see how the Spirit ordered this revelation from God. Firstly, it was only when we listened to voices with wider experience than our own, that the truth became obvious. Then the personal stories of Peter, Barnabas and Paul were in harmony. Finally, James rooting those experiences in scripture, showed that God was not changing but saying and doing what God had always said and done. Israel, once described as 'no people' became in God's mercy a holy nation. Now, the Lord was doing it again!

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*Suggested reading: Acts 15: 1- 35 (Acts 13 and 14 provide background); Amos 9: 11-12, Isaiah 45: 22-23*

### **Background points**

- Antioch in Syria was the third largest city of the Roman Empire. It was situated on the Orontes River on a trading route between China in the East and Rome in the West.
- The Jewish population in Antioch was much more open than their counterparts in Jerusalem. As more and more of them became Christians they had no difficulty sharing fellowship and eating with gentile fellow believers to the consternation of the Jerusalem believers.
- The issue for the Council was whether gentile converts first needed to become Jews adhering to the circumcision and all the trappings of the Law.
- The outcome established the principle that salvation was through faith in Christ rather than adherence to the Law but a qualification was reached designed to avoid giving offence to the traditionalists.

### **Questions**

1. Why did the visit of some men from Judea cause such a dispute? (Acts 15: 1)
2. How did Paul describe the dispute in Galatians 2: 11-14?
3. From the speech he gave, how did James arrive at his judgement?
4. Why was this of vital importance for the future expansion of the Gospel?

### **Taking it further**

1. When might an issue in the Church today be of such importance that Christians might find themselves at loggerheads? Can you think of an example?
2. Are there lessons here for how things should be handled?
3. Is it always possible to 'agree to disagree'?

## 15. Acts 16

### The Colour Purple - how a business woman became the first covert to Christ in Philippi.

My friends often say, 'Lydia, you have a great head for business.' I guess they are right. I have been in the textile trade since I began work in a dyeing factory in Thyatira. I like the feel of wool and silk and I have a good eye for colour. I love the vivid shades of purple which are produced from crushing certain varieties of shellfish. As you can imagine, the factories are very smelly! It takes thousands of shells to produce enough dye to trim just one garment, so deep purple is a colour worn only by those rich enough to afford it. A few years ago, I moved to Philippi and set up my own business.



*Murex shell from which purple dye was extracted*

There is a good market for my fabrics in this Roman garrison town, so I have done well for myself.

Once I had established my business, I turned my attention to religion. Some of my friends were Jews and I began to join these women at their place of prayer outside the town. I liked the peace of those mornings in the midst of my busy life. The stone seats were shaded from the hot sun by some olive trees. A river ran close by, the babble of the water mingling with the murmur of our prayers. I learnt to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but was he my God? I wasn't sure.

It had been a particularly busy week for me. I almost stayed at home, but something drew me that Sabbath morning to the prayer meeting. At first, it was just the usual group of women, but soon we were joined by several Jewish men – strangers to us. We welcomed them and they introduced themselves as Paul from

Tarsus, Silas, Luke and a younger man named Timothy.

They sat down with us and began to talk. I ceased to hear the chatter of the river; I didn't feel the heat of the sun or notice the passing of time. The news these men shared gripped me. It was the first time anyone had told me about Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. They told us about his life, his teaching and miracles, and about his death and resurrection.

Paul, the leader, invited us to ask questions. I had just one important one: Can a non-Jew become a follower of Jesus? Paul explained that all I needed to do was to repent of my sin, believe in the Lord Jesus and be baptised. I didn't need to become a Jewish convert first.

It was very late in the day when I returned home and tried to work. My head was full of all the wonderful things I had heard. As I weighed them up, I knew I had discovered something of great worth. Forgiveness of sin, access to God, the gift of the Holy Spirit – all at no cost to me! I looked at a



*Paul's second missionary journey*

piece of purple cloth I held in my hand. So many shells crushed to extract the costly dye. If Jesus had paid the price to redeem my life – if he had been crushed and his life poured out for me – how could I not give my all to gain him?

My work has taught me to be decisive. No one was surprised when I was the first person in Philippi to be baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. What a wonderful day that was! As I rose up out of the water someone quoted from the prophet Isaiah: ‘Though your sins be like scarlet they shall be as white as snow.’ I thought it was very appropriate for me, as all my own dyes are colourfast. Now I had found One who could take the dye of sin out of my own heart!

I brought the other members of my household with me that day. They had heard all about the evangelists and their message, and they followed my lead and were baptised, too.

There was so much joy that day by the river. I had opened my heart to the Lord, and now I felt I wanted to open up my home, too. I said to Paul and his companions, ‘If you think I am truly sincere in my faith, do come and stay at my home. I have plenty of room, and you will be much more comfortable with us.’ At last I persuaded them, and so my home became the hub of all that happened after that. I still continued the business, but my well-ordered household was turned upside-down.

It reached a climax the day that Paul cast an evil spirit of divination out of a slave girl. I remember the date well as it was the night of the earthquake. The girl’s owners were furious because she could no longer tell fortunes and they stirred up a riotous mob. I was in the market place that morning and stood rooted to the spot as Paul and Silas were beaten severely with rods and hauled off to prison.

I was woken at midnight to feel the whole house shaking! Was God at work in some strange way? We soon heard the full story when Paul and Silas returned to my house later that day. They had such a story to tell! While they were singing praises to God the whole prison was shaken to its foundations and the doors were flung wide open. The jailer would surely have killed himself if Paul had not assured him that no one had escaped. The jailer was so much affected by the events of the night that he and his household believed in Jesus and were baptised.

As you can see, having the Lord Jesus in my life can get a bit exciting at times, but I wouldn’t change it for all the purple garments the world!

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*Suggested reading: Acts 16, Isaiah 1: 18*

### **Background points**

- Philippi was an important city founded in the fourth century BC by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. By the first century AD it had become a colony of Rome and was used to accommodate many retired Roman soldiers.
- It seems that Jewish people were thin on the ground in Philippi. It took only ten male Jews to create a synagogue and this would normally have been Paul’s first resort on entering a town. Instead, he is only able to find a ‘place of prayer’ outside the city gates where a group of women gathered on the sabbath day.
- Lydia is a perfect example of a gentile ‘God-fearer’ – someone attracted to the idea of the Jewish God who proved open to the Gospel when she heard it preached. She is said to be the first European convert to Christianity.

- It is ironic that Paul and Silas are arrested for advocating 'customs not lawful for Romans to accept' and then Paul is able to charge the magistrates with the same crime in arresting and beating Roman citizens without trial. This shows Paul using his Roman citizenship to good effect.

### Questions

1. What are your impressions of Lydia from reading Acts 16 and this article?
2. What makes Lydia unusual for a woman of her time?
3. What was Lydia's immediate action after being baptised? What did this indicate?
4. What early lessons do you think Lydia learned from the events surrounding the arrest and imprisonment of Paul and Silas?
5. How was Paul's response to the authorities both tactful and clever?

### Taking it further

1. Why did it make sense for Paul and his companions to begin their proclamation of the Gospel by seeking out those who already worshipped the Jewish God?
2. In what way do you think her days at the riverbank had prepared Lydia for hearing Paul's message? How was your heart prepared beforehand to receive the Gospel?
3. Why do you think baptism was so important for new believers? Is it still as significant today?

## **16. Acts 17: 16-34**

### **A student recalls and explains**

He was a strange man, who said strange things. His name was Paul and I saw him first on a Saturday when I visited the Jewish synagogue here in Athens. The Rabbis welcomed non-Jewish visitors or students like myself to be present at their weekly gathering. I overheard him say in conversation that he had arrived in Athens recently, after being forced to move on from two cities where he had fallen foul of both religious and civil authorities. The two friends who accompanied him left almost immediately, but he was expecting other colleagues to join him soon.

During the following week I caught sight of him in the city centre. He was bending down, squinting to read the inscriptions on the plinths of the statues depicting the family of our most powerful god, Zeus. They make up the Pantheon of twelve major gods that rule human destiny. Each god has power over different aspects of human life. For instance, Athena the favourite daughter of Zeus is the most powerful of the female gods and the warrior who protects Athens, which is named after her. She is also goddess of wisdom and handicrafts.

### **Apoplectic apostle**

I watched as Paul moved on to examine one of Athens' oldest statues. Reading its caption, he became agitated. Every student knew this idol well, 'The Unknown God'. Legend had it that when a plague ravaged Athens six hundred years ago, no religious ritual could appease the gods. Someone suggested sacrificing starving sheep to a god who remained a mystery. Within days the plague was assuaged and immediately, many statues were erected to the unknown deity. Time weathered them, until now only this one remained.

Paul turned around and grabbed the first man walking past! An animated conversation ensued, and I drew closer to listen. Athenians love to debate. The back and forth of argument is the way we develop our qualities of reason and logic in order to gain understanding and wisdom. A crowd soon gathered around Paul and his interlocutor. It included some very knowledgeable teachers who would not be in agreement on matters of life, religion, work, pain and death!

### **A debate begins**

When Paul saw the people listening, he repeated what he had been saying and captured everyone's attention by stating that he knew the character of 'the unknown god'. He claimed this god was the creator of everything and cared about how human beings live. He claimed the god had proved to him, and others, that death is not the end, but the beginning of new life.

Epicurean scholars were quick to rebuff him, telling him that life is no more than a series of chances, beyond our control; the gods don't care if we suffer; life is about finding as much happiness as possible because when we die, we cease to exist. To them, the notion that his 'unknown god' was a caring creator was stupidity at its height. They dismissed him with a typical Greek insult, 'You are nothing more than a sparrow bawling from the gutter for food from its parents!'



### **Some hope**

However, Paul's speech struck a chord with some of the Stoic teachers. They believed that every human being carried some spark of the divine which returned to its source at death. Stoics reasoned that the best human virtue is to accept well the highs and lows of life. It was one of their number who proposed that Paul should bring these fresh sounding ideas to the Court of the Areopagus where thirty sages supervised law and morality in Athens. The public could attend hearings but only they could judge on the merits of an argument. The Areopagus met in a temple of the same name on Mars Hill. If Paul was intimidated by his surroundings in this high-powered gathering, he did not show it. He claimed again that the unknown god was actually his Lord and the only God, whose ways are very different from the superstitious myths of the Pantheon. The Lord did not need to inhabit temples because the whole earth came into being at his word and yet he remained close to every person. This resonated with the divine spark of the Stoics, but when Paul announced that God had revealed the weaknesses and failures of human beings and would judge us all for our failure, eyebrows rose. Greeks are logical and good people but Paul asserted that only Jesus was truly good, and that God judges everyone against him. As proof, God had raised Jesus from the dead, with honour.

### **Gone, forgotten – failed?**

When Paul mentioned resurrection, some members shouted him down, but others said that these ideas required discussion at a later hearing. That never happened. Only one Council member, Dionysius, was sufficiently impressed to walk with Paul as he left. Some members of the crowd were interested and one lady whom I knew, Damaris, began hosting discussions about Jesus in her home. She later told me that Paul's friends arrived shortly afterwards and he left with them. Gone, as quickly as he came. It is if he had said his piece and left the outcome to his God. Damaris said they never heard from him again. Not even a letter of thanks. As I said - a strange man.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 17: 16-34*

### **Background points**

- Paul's normal pattern on arrival in a city was to seek out a gathering of Jews or gentile 'God fearers'. From this shared concept of the one God, he could start to teach about Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Athens however also called for a new approach. The city was full of temples to a whole host of divinities and schools of philosophy.
- It is interesting that the crowd's initial reaction was to think that Paul was introducing two news deities – one called Jesus and the other Resurrection.
- Paul's education and background came into its own here. Tarsus, his home city, was one of the main centres of philosophy in the ancient world. Paul showed himself familiar and at home with the art of philosophical debate.
- The Areopagus was the name given to the group of elite political thinkers and philosophers who exert a controlling influence on Athenian public life. Its members functioned as a court trying serious crimes and religious cases. Paul was on trial but he was also being given an opportunity to present his message to the greatest intellects in the ancient world.

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think Paul had been so keen to have Silas and Timothy join him in Athens?
2. Why did these intelligent Athenians find Paul's initial street preaching so confusing?
3. What did the misunderstanding about 'Jesus' and 'Resurrection' indicate about the message he delivered?
4. How was Paul's address to the Areopagus very different to the way he would have spoken in a synagogue?
5. How successful was Paul on this occasion? (Acts 17: 32-34)

### **Taking it further**

1. Do we ever feel intimidated by unbelievers who are more intelligent and better educated than ourselves?
2. What might be more important than winning an argument?
3. What are the core truths on which you would never be prepared to compromise?

## 17. Acts 18

### Priscilla and Aquila – a remarkable couple

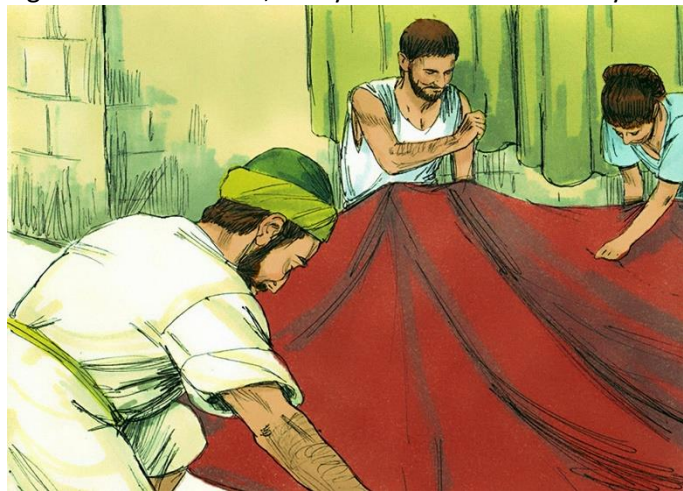
Let me introduce myself. My name is Aquila, better known as Priscilla's husband. A lot of men wouldn't care to be referred to chiefly in relation to their wife but I've never felt like that. I'm proud to be married to a woman like Priscilla and prouder than I can say to see the esteem in which she is held by our fellow believers. Every day I marvel at how the Lord has gifted her and given her such special insight and godly wisdom.

We came from Pontus originally and first heard about Jesus when some friends who had been visiting Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost arrived back buzzing with all that they witnessed there. Soon after this we moved to Rome where we were among the earliest believers in the fledgling fellowship there.

Long story short, we had to leave Rome rather abruptly when the Emperor Claudius took the step of expelling all Jews from the city. Unfortunately, he had heard reports about the disturbances which followed our attempts at outreach among our people. We moved to Corinth. It certainly wasn't the easiest of locations to live and witness to our faith but we both believed that God had a purpose for us there in that decadent and debauched city.

That purpose became clear when Paul arrived in town. The three of us had so much in common. We were Jews; we had a common background in tentmaking and above all else we shared a love for Jesus and a desire to reach out to others with the good news of his Kingdom. It was quickly decided that Paul would come and live with us. Thus, we could ply our common trade, pool our resources and best of all share in the work of proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, firstly to Jews but also to anyone who would listen.

What a time that was – as Paul opened our eyes to see so much in the writings of the Law and the Prophets that pointed to Jesus. I learned a great deal in those months but I have to be honest and say that Priscilla learned so much more. I used to watch her in the evenings when the day's work was done as she sat at Paul's feet and literally drank in his words, making connections between various scriptures that left me struggling in her wake.



*Priscilla, Aquila and Paul were tentmakers.*

Having said that, it was still a surprise when, after eighteen happy months, Paul asked us to make the move to Ephesus. Paul had run into a lot of opposition from the Jewish population in Corinth. He had by this time turned his attention to the Gentiles and even moved into a Gentile home next door to the synagogue. As you can imagine, this did not go down too well among our fellow Jews. It ended up in a full-scale court case in front of Gallio the Roman governor of Achaia. From our point of view Gallio did us a favour. He refused to take action, ruling that the dispute was an internal Jewish matter and of no interest to him. We were thankful for the protection this gave us but eventually the time came when Paul judged it right to move on.

Priscilla and I felt very honoured to be asked to go to Ephesus for the sake of the Gospel. We knew that it would not be easy. Ephesus is famous as a centre for state religion and also for the worship of the goddess Artemis whose temple, built on a massive platform, overlooks and dominates the city. We would be facing directly into a spiritual climate rife with magic and all sorts of occult and obscene practices. Light, however, always shines most brightly in the darkest places and we deemed it an honour to bring the light of the Gospel into such a place.

We'd only been there a very short while before Paul left us. Promising to return if the Lord willed it, he set off back to Jerusalem and Antioch. I could only marvel at the man's energy and drive. As arranged, Priscilla and I stayed on and joined with the team of elders appointed by Paul.

It wasn't long before a problem arose. A man called Apollos, a native of Alexandria, arrived in the city. He was Jewish by background, a very able scholar with an amazing knowledge of the scriptures. He appeared to be a firm follower of the Lord Jesus, being acquainted with so many details of His life and teachings. So much about him rang true – not least his very evident desire to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

It was Priscilla who was the first to get uneasy. She noticed that Apollos was very vague when it came to any mention of baptism. He appeared to be familiar only with the sort of early baptism practised by John the Baptist – a baptism indicating repentance. For us baptism was now so much more. Going into the water meant for us the end of the old life and the beginning of new life as a believer. It was a public act of following and identifying with what had happened to Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection.

Priscilla and I talked it over privately. We could see so much good and so much potential in this man. Yes, there was clearly a major gap in his understanding but that was no reason to write him off if he was willing to learn. Priscilla suggested we exercise our "ministry of hospitality". We invited him round to our home and explained baptism fully to him. Imagine, an intellectual from Alexandria being given a lesson in theology from a female tentmaker. It could only happen among Christian believers!

The result brought great blessing to the Church. Apollos totally got it and was humble enough to say so. Shortly afterwards we helped him make contact with the believers back in Corinth where he went on to exercise a wonderful ministry. Paul later wrote of the work in Corinth: 'I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase.' I wouldn't say this out loud, but I can't help feeling that my Priscilla had a hand in it too.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 18, 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9, Titus 3: 13, Romans 16: 3, Timothy 4: 19*

### **Background points**

- In the ancient world it was very unusual for a wife's name to be placed in front of that of her husband. This may have denoted Priscilla's higher social rank but more likely her standing in the Christian community. Priscilla (or Prisca as Paul called her) is named first in three out of five references to the couple in the New Testament.
- Acts 2:9 tells us that visitors from Pontus (on the shores of the Black Sea) were among the crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. We can assume they returned spreading the good news about Jesus. It is possible that this is how Priscilla and Aquila first heard the Gospel.

- The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that in 49AD the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome due to disturbances instigated by a figure referred to as 'Chrestus'. Most scholars surmise from this that the unrest was probably due to Christians preaching about 'Christus'.
- In Corinth Gallio's verdict helped to protect believers since it implied that Christians were a part of Judaism. As such they would have enjoyed certain freedoms such as exemption from participation in state religious worship.
- Apollos, as a scholar coming from Alexandria in Egypt, would have commanded immediate respect. Alexandria was considered an intellectual powerhouse. It had a large Jewish population and it was there that the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament scriptures was created.

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think Paul formed such a close bond with this couple?
2. Why did Jews resent Paul turning to the Gentiles with his message?
3. What does their readiness to move to Ephesus say about Priscilla and Aquila?
4. What do you think of how Apollos was treated?
5. Why was baptism such an important issue in the early church?

### **Taking it further**

1. How would you describe Priscilla and Aquila's marriage? What can Christians today learn from them?
2. Are there lessons here for dealing with fellow Christians who hold what we consider to be strange views or beliefs?
3. Is baptism and its meaning adequately taught and explained in today's Church?

## 18. Acts 19: 8-41

### Ephesus - Janus the potter

The sun was rising over the city of Ephesus as Janus the potter set up his stall. The colonnaded street was coming alive with the usual morning bustle. Near the harbour, baskets of fish sat alongside trays of fruit and vegetables, and the aroma of freshly baked bread reached the craftsmen at their shops. Across the street from Janus and the other potters were the silversmiths. Striding among these was Demetrius, a skilled craftsman who made silver figurines of the goddess Artemis. His dark eyes under their thick brows kept a sharp lookout on everything that went on in the city, and today they focussed on Janus. He strolled across to Janus's stall and took a long, keen look at the dishes, bowls, jugs and jars on display. He said nothing but stomped away in silence. Janus felt uncomfortable. Demetrius had noticed what was missing from his wares: the clay figurines which Janus used to make and sell.

Janus's father had been a potter and taught his son to take pride in being a citizen of this prosperous city on the Mediterranean coast. The crowning glory of Ephesus was not the theatre which could hold 25,000 people, but the glorious shrine to Artemis, goddess of fertility. Janus's father had been diligent in his worship of Artemis 'Because,' he told Janus, 'she brings a lot of wealth to this town.' That was true. Janus had learnt to make pottery figurines and shrines which were popular as gifts and souvenirs. His parents had died some years ago, and Janus now ran the pottery and shop. Life was pretty good.

Then, about eighteen months ago, Janus began to attend lectures in the Hall of Tyrannus. After a busy morning's trading he would buy himself some bread and sausage and take it into the cool hall where he could sit and listen to the debates. A Jew from Tarsus named Paul had hired out the hall and every day he and his companions led discussions there. Janus was used to listening to philosophers, but this was something completely new. What drew him at first was the miracles that Paul performed. There were many magicians in Ephesus, but no one had ever seen healings like these. One day, Janus actually saw Paul heal a man who had been lame from birth, and one of the other potters said that his mother had been cured of a fever when an apron Paul had used was placed on her.

The message Paul announced was that a new King called Jesus had come, that he had died and come back to life again. Jews and Greeks alike were soon being won over, and before long Janus himself became a believer in Jesus. At first, his daily life didn't change all that much. He didn't go to the temple of Artemis so often, but he continued to make his clay figures of the goddess. After all, he had a living to make.

However, things began to change in the city. More and more people were becoming Christians. Janus still sold plenty of household vessels, but he began to notice that at the end of a week's trading he had a lot of clay goddesses left over. The silversmiths were likewise affected, and Demetrius wore a dark expression as he went about his business.

One morning the street was buzzing with the news that seven Jewish exorcists had received a severe beating by a demon-possessed man – all on account of the name of Jesus! There was a new atmosphere of awe in the city after this. Janus realised that he had hadn't really taken his new faith seriously. Jesus had real power! He deserved respect. That night he took his remaining pottery figures and smashed them. A few nights later he gathered with the believers as many who had

practised sorcery burnt their scrolls and spells in a great bonfire. Janus tore an amulet from around his neck and threw it into the flames. ‘Lord Jesus, from now on I trust in you,’ he prayed.

Janus soon forgot about Demetrius’s visit to his stall, but as the morning’s trading ended the silversmith gathered the craftsmen together for a meeting.

‘Friends,’ said Demetrius, ‘we all know how much our business here is dependent on trade in religious goods. But since this fellow Paul has come to town, many people in Ephesus – and throughout Asia – have been led astray. He teaches that the figures we make are not gods at all! This has been crippling for our trade.’ Here, his sharp eyes seemed to rest on Janus. ‘There is a real danger that the very temple of Artemis will be discredited, and that she herself will be robbed of her divine majesty.’



His words released a flood of anger. ‘We can’t let this Paul steal our livelihoods from us!’ shouted someone. ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ Soon the whole city was in an uproar and crowds began to make their way up the main street to the theatre. Someone seized two of Paul’s travelling companions, but Paul himself was persuaded by his friends to keep away. Janus followed the crowd into the theatre, fearful of what would happen.

All was chaos! Everywhere there was anger, confusion and noise. A man named Alexander was pushed forward to speak, but when the crowd saw he was a Jew they all began to shout again, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ For two hours the mob kept up this chant, as the sun sank lower in the sky. Finally, the city mayor managed to bring calm, and the crowd emptied out of the theatre.

Janus walked home, tired and thoughtful. If Paul remained much longer in the city he would likely be arrested. He and his companions had turned the city upside down.

Or should we say – right side up?

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*Suggested reading: Acts 19: 8-41*

### **Background points**

- Ephesus was famous for three things. It possessed the magnificent Temple of the goddess Artemis (or Diana) which towered over the city; it was the home of the cult of emperor worship and it was a centre for magic and occult arts.
- Given the occult background it is significant that Paul’s preaching and teaching was accompanied by the operation of supernatural and miraculous gifts. It was as if a contest was being played out between the forces of darkness and those of the Kingdom. Later, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians made clear the reality of spiritual warfare.

- Artemis was a fertility goddess portrayed as a many breasted figure. Her temple in Ephesus was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.
- Paul spent about three years in the city teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus making use of the middle part of the day when many would have sought refuge from the heat of the sun.

### **Questions**

1. How many instances of the supernatural can you identify in this account? (Acts 19: 8-41)
2. Why would it have been important for new believers like Janus to make a public show of burning the trappings of magic and goddess worship? (Acts 19: 18-20)
3. In what way did Demetrius see the Gospel being a threat to the economic well-being of the city?
4. To what extent would you describe these events as spiritual warfare?

### **Taking it further**

1. Do we give spiritual warfare the recognition it deserves in the Church today?
2. Does our discipleship today sometimes call for us to pay a price in terms of our finances or choice of livelihood?

## 19. Acts 20 – 21:1-14

### A travel log – setting off

I am Gaius, born as a Roman citizen in Corinth. Ours is a trading family with business centres in Rome to the west and Derbe to the east. That has given me three homes, in three countries! Corinth sits almost half way between the other two. It was in Derbe that I heard Paul preaching when he visited with his colleague, Barnabas. His description of the God who created all things and the Jesus who came to redeem rebellious humans carried the authority of a man who knew from personal experience the love and power of his Lord. I was baptised (1 Corinthians 1: 14) became an enthusiastic supporter of the new church in Derbe, and a few years later a leader when Paul established a church in Corinth.

When Paul visited Derbe for the third time, about ten years later, I happened to be in town. He was fund-raising for famine relief in the Jerusalem church. Our people contributed generously and as Paul planned to travel on to Greece, I was happy to join his team as a treasurer. We sent couriers to Jerusalem from time to time with money we collected.

### Trouble on the way

We arrived in Ephesus where Paul would spend the next two years in fruitful ministry. Ephesus was home to the goddess Diana and one of the Empire's most significant centres of superstition. Paul debated daily with the Jewish leaders and the champions of other religions. Miracles accompanied his teaching and many converts were made. Then Demetrius, a chief silversmith



*Paul's third missionary journey*



*Diana, Greek Goddess of Love.*

of Diana, incited a protest. He and his associates were losing business as customers became Christians. One day my friend Aristarchus and I were suddenly taken hostage by anti-Christian protestors. Thankfully, the terror ended abruptly when the mayor intervened and persuaded them to release us. At that point Paul decided it was time to move on and we left hastily, arriving in Greece a few months later where Paul spent the winter writing letters from my home in Corinth.

Paul hoped to be in Jerusalem for Passover the following April but his plan was scuttled when we uncovered a plot by Jewish leaders to abduct him. Also, this prevented us embarking from Corinth so we retraced our steps overland for another port with the intention of getting to Jerusalem for Pentecost.

### A fall

We sailed to Troas where we chartered a boat for the next leg of the journey. The church gathered the evening before we sailed. A young slave called Eutychus was sitting on the window ledge of our third-floor room. Exhausted from his day's work, he gradually dozed off leaning against a shutter.

Suddenly we heard loud knocking on the door and opened it to discover commotion on the street. No-one had seen Eutychus tumble because our attention had been on Paul's teaching. The poor lad lay dead on the stones. Paul literally threw himself on top of Eutychus; cradled him in his arms like a mother would her child, and said, 'Don't fuss. He is not dead'. I knew he was. He was laid on a bed. We ate and shared Holy Communion. My faith in the power of Jesus became unshakable when, in the morning, Eutychus turned up at the harbour to say farewell!

The captain suggested a short stop at Assos, sixty kilometres down the coast. Paul, himself prone to change plans, decided that he could make Assos on foot in about the same time as the ship, pointing out that the distance by road was only 30kilometres. He walked, in prayerful aloneness and when we met up in Assos, yet another plan emerged! He truly wanted to meet the Ephesians again and perhaps he knew that if we sailed into Ephesus, he would be tempted to spend more time than he should. Perhaps also, he did not wish to provoke another disturbance so he sent two of us on the four-day round trip to bring the elders to him, in Miletus.



*The remains of the harbour at Miletus*

### **Danger at the end**

It was an emotional dockside gathering. Paul spoke with great affection and admiration for these men and women, recalling how God had blessed the church in this hotbed of paganism. Then he prophesied that they would meet fierce opposition from charismatic people who would cleverly win Christians away from the church with a "special gospel". They must keep careful watch to protect the Shepherd's sheepfold. Then Paul revealed another burden. The Spirit had revealed to him that such persecution awaited him in Jerusalem that he would never again travel freely. His words brought bitter tears to every eye. Each step towards the ship was a precious moment for these beloved friends. With heavy hearts we sailed for the island of Rhodes and took passage to Syria.

### **In his footsteps**

Docking in Tyre, we felt Jerusalem getting closer. Confident they spoke in the name of the Spirit, church leaders there tried persuading Paul to quit his journey. Paul was politely adamant and next day, children and adults all bade us a prayerful goodbye. Two days later, at the evangelist Philip's home in Caesarea, a visiting prophet named Agabus confirmed Paul's spiritual sense. Agabus took Paul's belt and bound his own hands and feet with it saying, 'The owner of this belt will be bound in

Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentile Roman authorities.’ Those words were powerfully reminiscent of Jesus telling his disciples that he would be handed over to the Gentiles. Looking back, we did exactly what the original disciples had done. We got a similar rebuke.

Jesus had replied, ‘You are stumbling-blocks. Your thoughts are not God’s thoughts.’ Now Paul echoed his Master, ‘You are breaking my heart with your weeping. I am ready not only to be bound or stand trial, but to die for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ We held our peace. We went with him. It was as he said it would be.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 19: 21 – 21: 16, 1 Corinthians 1: 14, 1 Corinthians 16: 3, Romans 16: 23, Matthew 16: 21-23, Matthew 20: 19*

### **Background points**

- The travel log described in these two chapters is breath taking. It shows us how conditions in the Roman Empire (under the ‘Pax Romana’) made such movement possible. The roads were good; the seas were largely free from pirates and there was a general confidence in law and order. All this helped Christianity to spread. It has been said of the first century that conditions were never bettered until the coming of the railways in the nineteenth century.
- The incident at Troas when poor Eutychus nodded off and fell to his death comes across as almost humorous given the happy outcome. Luke’s narrative paints a very vivid scene and gives us an insight into what it must have been like listening to Paul in his enthusiasm talking on and on and pouring his teaching into the gathered believers who he would never see again.
- The scene where Paul bids farewell to the Ephesian elders is one of the most touching in the New Testament. It shows us the bonds of love and fellowship that grown up between Paul and these leaders.
- Paul’s steadfast focus on getting to Jerusalem despite all the warnings reminds us of Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem and what awaited him there.

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think Paul was so anxious to get to Jerusalem?
2. Why would Paul have been keen to travel with a group of companions?
3. What do you find moving in Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders?
4. Was Paul wrong to proceed to Jerusalem after hearing what Agabus had to say?
5. What was Paul’s state of mind as he moved from Caesarea to Jerusalem?

### **Taking it further**

1. How do you respond when someone brings you a personal word of prophecy or a ‘word from the Lord’?
2. Should prophecy play a bigger role in church life today?
3. How far are you willing to accept suffering or trouble as part of discipleship?

## 20. Acts 21: 17 – 22: 24

### Don't mention the G word

My name is Trophimus from Ephesus. I would never have been in Jerusalem at all if it hadn't been for the gift. It was Paul's idea really. He had heard about the famine conditions there and how many of our fellow believers were suffering and he wanted to do something practical to help. This led to him organising a collection from all the churches he had planted on his travels. Desiring to be scrupulously accountable he insisted on a number of us accompanying him on the journey to Jerusalem and delivering the gift in person so that we could report back to our respective donors that the money had arrived safely.

But it was more than that. Paul wanted to demonstrate to the Jerusalem believers that the followers of Jesus throughout the world, Jew and gentile alike, were part of the same body. When one part suffered the other parts shared in the pain. The money was a simple expression of this solidarity. It represented a fundamental truth at the heart of Paul's understanding of the Gospel.

It wasn't as if Paul hadn't been warned that his presence in Jerusalem would bring trouble but, just like the Lord Jesus himself, he seemed to 'set his face steadfastly' towards the city. The believers there were grateful for the gift but it was clear that they were very nervous about Paul showing up in person to deliver it. For them Paul, despite having a remarkably fruitful ministry, appeared to be turning his back on the religion of his fathers teaching believers to disregard the Law, the Temple and its many ceremonies. Among ordinary Jews the feeling against Paul was much stronger. All sorts of false rumours about him abounded.

James as leader of the Jerusalem church came up with a plan. Paul should publicly demonstrate his Jewish credentials by taking part in a seven-day purification rite along with four other Jews who had recently come to faith in Christ, thus showing he had no problem with participating in such ceremonies. Only after this would he enter the Temple beyond the Court of the Gentiles.

It was all going so well until, believe it or not, I got dragged into the proceedings. It turned out that a group of visitors from Ephesus had spotted Paul and me in another part of the city and recognised us. It didn't take long before this perfectly innocent encounter turned into a report that Paul had taken me, a gentile, into the Temple beyond the boundary wall announcing death for any gentile who stepped over it thus desecrating the Temple.

This was the accusation hurled at Paul as he walked in the outer gentile court. I wasn't anywhere near him but I could hear the instant commotion as Paul found himself at the mercy of the baying mob. They dragged him to the very outer edge of the Temple complex and seemed bent on tearing him limb from limb – that's how strong feelings were running. Paul tried to reason with the ringleaders but he had absolutely no chance of making himself heard. Then some 'act first ask questions later' Roman soldiers weighed in and began giving Paul a beating. My brothers and I could only look on in horror and silently call on the Lord for help.

And the help did come – albeit from an unlikely source. Don't ask me how but word quickly reached the Tribune, Claudius Lysias. He was the commander of the thousand strong Roman military cohort stationed in the Antonia Fortress which adjoined the outer wall of the Temple complex. He immediately rushed to the scene bringing with him officers and men. Instantly taking charge he put a stop to the beating and had Paul bound with two chains. This action made my heart thump as I remembered how, in Caesarea, our brother Agabus had recently prophesied something very similar.

It was clear that the Tribune had no chance of getting to the root of the disturbance while the mob was shouting and baying for blood so he ordered that Paul be brought into the barracks. Just at the threshold Paul at last managed to say something to the Tribune. I wasn't close enough to hear but brother Luke was and told me later that he did so in Greek declaring himself to be a citizen of Tarsus. Apparently, this greatly impressed Claudius Lysias who up to this point had thought that Paul might have been an Egyptian insurgent who had recently led a rebellion. Clearly Paul was a man of intellect and refinement rather than a common rabble rouser.

You have to hand it to Paul when it comes to courage. If it had been me I'd have been thankful to get safely into the barracks and out of the clutches of the mob. Paul however calmly asked and received permission to address the crowd. He did this in Aramaic as a Jew speaking to fellow Jews. You could have heard a pin drop.

What did he say? He simply told his story. He told how he had started out as an enemy of the Church, how he had encountered the risen Christ on the way to Damascus and how he had been commissioned to take his message far away to the Gentiles. It was the G word that did the mischief. The mob again erupted in fury. There was no reasoning with them. The Tribune wisely ordered that Paul be brought into the barracks out of the public gaze.

Our little group was able to slip away. We went back to our lodgings and did the only thing we could do. We joined in prayer and we lifted Paul to the loving care of an Authority far greater than that of Rome. It was much later that we learned the rest of the story and recognised how our prayers had been answered.

I just wish it hadn't been my name that set the whole thing off in the first place.

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*Suggested Reading: Acts 21:17-40; Acts 22:1-24;*

### **Background points**

- The Temple in Jerusalem was laid out in a series of designated courts. The vast outer space was known as the Court of the Gentiles. Anyone could walk there and this was where traders and money changers operated. Beyond lay the inner courts which non-Jews were forbidden to enter on pain of death. Next was the Court of Women which marked the furthest females could venture. After that was the Court of Israel for Jewish men and then the area that was reserved for priests. Here was found the building containing the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.
- Warning signs from the period have been discovered threatening death for any gentile trespassing beyond the Court of the Gentiles.
- The Fortress of Antonia was built right up against the outer wall of the whole temple complex affording the Roman garrison a view of all that was going on in the Temple.
- It is worth noting that in this instance the Romans save Paul from death at the hands of the Jewish mob.

### **Questions**

1. Why was Paul so keen to have a group with him when he delivered the money gift to the Jerusalem believers?
2. What did Paul hope to demonstrate when he agreed to undergo the purification ritual before entering the inner parts of the Temple?
3. How do you think the Jerusalem church leaders really felt about Paul and his ministry?

4. How do the Romans come across to you in this incident?
5. What can we learn from the action of Paul's friends as they saw their leader being beaten and taken away?

**Taking it further**

1. What does Paul teach us here with regard to the handling of financial giving?
2. What can we learn from Paul about our responsibility to fellow Christians around the world?
3. How can we stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians in other countries?

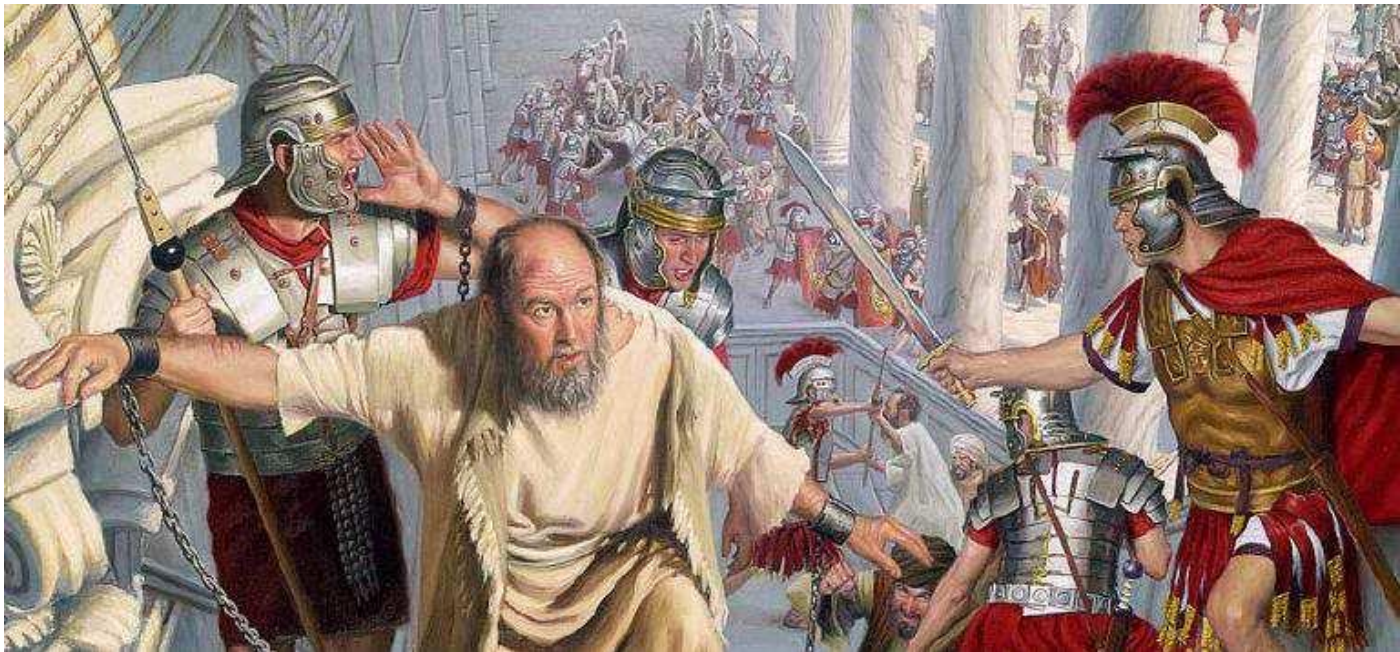
## 21. Acts 22: 22 – 23: 35

### A twelve-year-old's story - the arrival of an uncle

My name is Ehud and I am twelve years of age. Over one thousand years ago our tribe of Benjamin had a famous leader called Ehud and today Benjamin is one of two tribes still surviving in the Promised Land. We are all Roman citizens. That is because my parents came from the Asian city of Tarsus, in Asia where everyone became citizens when it was made a Roman city in my grandfather's time. We do not speak of our citizenship but it entitles us to fair treatment across the Empire.

Last year I discovered how important that is, soon after I met my famous uncle Paul for the first time. He is a travelling missionary. I learned about him from family letters which some of his friends brought when they came with money he had collected to help us during the famine. Uncle Paul told fantastic stories about miracles happening wherever he went and how he was introducing people of all nations and religions to Jesus. Many of them were Gentiles who lived very differently from us. Our family accepted Jesus as the Messiah but, unlike the Gentile believers, we still observed most of the religious practices of our ancestors. Father thought his brother-in-law was a bit easy-going with the Laws of Moses! I have been instructed in the Law in preparation for my Bar Mitzvah next year, when I will become a fully grown Jewish man.

Two weeks days after arriving with his international friends, uncle Paul got into trouble for not keeping the Law. People dragged him from the temple saying he contaminated it when he brought a non-Jewish friend inside. He was violently attacked until the Roman Commander, Claudius Lysias intervened to stop the beating and allowed him to address the mob but people turned nasty again when he spoke about God's love for Gentiles. Lysias took him to the fort for safety.



*Paul rescued by Roman soldiers*

### Court confusion

Since Paul is a Roman citizen too, Lysias decided that the Jewish governing council, the Sanhedrin, must hold an orderly inquiry to discover if an offence had really been committed. I watched from the steps of the colonnade. High Priest Ananias looked very angry, then he lost his temper when uncle Paul deliberately broke the rules. Instead of standing quietly he spoke up and said 'My brothers,' he

said 'I have fulfilled by duty to God in all good conscience to this day...' Before he could say another word, Ananias ordered anyone close enough to hit him on the mouth. Some people gasped, but others sneered as he was punched. Now I felt angry. I know a prisoner must not speak first, and by calling them 'brothers', Paul claimed to be their equal instead of the prisoner on trial. At the same time, it is against Jewish law to punish anyone before guilt is proven.

Uncle Paul over-reacted a bit. He told Ananias he was like a tomb, whitewashed to warn people not to touch it because that would defile them. Then he said he did not know it was the High Priest who had spoken. I thought it was his poor eyesight, but others said he was mocking Ananias who knew giving this order had broken the Law.

I remembered that Jesus was punched during his trial, but our Lord turned the other cheek. He pointed out the stupidity of the action, then simply stayed silent. I think uncle Paul might have recalled that too because he changed his tactics. He spoke about the heart of our faith – the resurrection. That was clever because immediately the two factions of the Sanhedrin started to argue with one another, The Pharisees who believe in the after-life and Sadducees who do not. Some Pharisees suddenly took my uncle's side suggesting that perhaps an angel spoke to him. The Sadducees do not believe in angels either! When they all began pulling at Paul, Lysias took him back to the barracks.

### **Becoming the hero**

Next morning on the way to class, Zareth met me. He was the only friend who knew Paul was my uncle. Zareth had been early to temple and overheard a large group of men taking a vow, not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. He even heard their plan, approved by Ananias, to persuade Lysias to return Paul to the Sanhedrin for more questioning. They were prepared to die by ambushing his guards and assassinating Paul.

I knew what I had to do. I ran to the Roman garrison and to see my uncle. As a Roman I was allowed in. Paul asked the Centurion to take me to Lysias. I felt awkward when the big soldier took my hand like a child, but he explained it was for my safety. Lysias's bodyguard would act first and ask questions afterwards if it was not clear I was accompanied. Lysias said he would find out soon enough if this was the truth. He warned me to say nothing to anyone. I ran home, told mother I would be home late and returned to watch the Antonia fortress. At dusk the main gates opened and about 500 foot-soldiers and cavalry left. In their torchlights, I saw uncle Paul on horseback, surrounded and safe.

### **Unfinished story**

News filtered back later that week. He had been taken to Governor Felix in Caesarea, the capital city. The letter from Lysias explained how he saved Paul from a Jewish mob, although he did not mention that he assumed Paul was guilty was about to flog Paul before finding out he was a Roman. That omission saved his career! He did give his opinion that Paul was innocent and the death threat would be removed if the Governor convened the trial. Paul is still waiting.

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*Suggested reading: - Acts 22: 22 – 23: 35, Judges 3: 12 -30, John 18: 20 – 24*

### **Background points**

- Being a Roman citizen brought special privileges under the law across the Empire. A citizen, for example, could not be crucified or arrested and beaten without trial and always

had the ultimate right of appeal to Caesar. It is thought that such citizens carried a small wooden badge called a 'diploma' on their person to prove their status.

- This passage gives us the only information we have about Paul's family. He had a sister living in Jerusalem. We have no mention of him having a wife. He was a Pharisee and they were expected to be married men. It is possible that Paul's wife had died. We simply don't know.
- Paul was tried by the Sanhedrin Council which was the highest governing body of the Jewish nation. It was comprised of seventy members and was presided over by the Jewish High Priest (in this case Ananias). Paul created mayhem when he set Pharisees against Sadducees against one another by his focus on the Resurrection. It was well known that Sadducees did not believe in any form of life after death.
- The fact that Paul's nephew was able to warn of the plot to assassinate him shows us just how strongly feelings were running among Jews.

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think that here Paul used his Roman citizenship to avoid a beating whereas in Philippi he allowed himself to be beaten and imprisoned?
2. What do you make of Paul's behaviour in front of the High Priest? Was he out of order here? How does it compare with that of Jesus at his trials?
3. Why was the word he received in Acts 23:11 particularly timely and encouraging?
4. How do you think the Roman authorities come across in this narrative?

### **Taking it further**

1. How far are Christians today called to respect state and church authority?
2. Should Christians today expect to experience increasing persecution and hostility in the modern world?
3. Ought we to be able to look to the state for help and justice?

## 22. Acts: Acts 24 -26

### Governors, kings and accusers

I am Sextus, an attendant to the magistrates in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine. My work involves recording court proceedings and occasionally, taking notes during interrogations. During this past two years prisoner Paul has impressed me with his demeanour and speaking ability. I have also become friendly with his biographer Dr Luke, who has discussed aspects of Paul's trial with me.

Paul is a Roman citizen who was brought to Caesarea under guard on the orders of Lysias, the military commander in Jerusalem. Lysias had uncovered a threat by the religious hierarchy to kill Paul so he made an official request to the governor Felix. The official request was that Governor Felix to ensure a fair trial for Paul knowing that should any harm come to him before that, heads would roll.

Felix was a ruthless governor whose usual method of settling local disputes was to use military force. The ensuing violence usually resulted in a considerable amount of plunder finding its way into his own coffers. A few years ago, he had a disagreement with Jonathan, a Jewish High Priest whom he had appointed himself. It ended with the priest's summary execution.

#### A corrupt governor and false charges

Felix intended to deal with the business of Paul quickly and set a trial date within the week. The Sanhedrin Council appointed a lawyer with a Roman name to prosecute the case. In my view the man, Tertullus, was incompetent. For example, he described Paul as a troublemaker throughout the world. To a Roman, the world is Caesar's domain so Felix dared not hint at judging on Caesar's behalf. Next Tertullus tried a subtle move. Knowing that the initial accusation of defiling the Temple had been disproved before Paul left Jerusalem, Tertullus claimed Paul had a mind to defile it. This was unproveable as it entered the realm of speculation. Finally, he claimed that it was the Jewish leaders who arrested Paul. Felix knew that was false too. Commander Lysias's letter said the leaders were attempting to lynch Paul before he intervened. The result of these accusations was that Felix asked no questions but moved quickly to hear Paul's side of the argument.

Paul spoke as one who observed the Jewish Law and worshipped as faithfully as any of his accusers.



*Paul before Felix*

Pointing out that none of his original accusers from Asia were present, he told Felix that the matter really at issue was the resurrection of the dead. Felix, who prided himself on his knowledge of the followers of Jesus adjourned the case saying he would consult with Commander Lysias in due course. I could see his mind scheming. Felix knew he needed to stay on the right side of the Jewish leaders, so he kept Paul under house arrest but having heard about the money Paul had collected in Asia to help the poor in Jerusalem, he planned to negotiate the payment of a ransom to

set him free. He began meeting Paul on the pretext of learning more about Jesus. The more he tried to manipulate him the more uneasy Paul made him by talking about righteousness, self-control and judgement. Luke says that this discomfort was a holy fear brought on by the Holy Spirit. I think it stemmed from the fact that Drusilla was a daughter of the Jewish king Herod Agrippa 1<sup>st</sup> and Felix had seduced her from her first husband.

### **Turning the tables**

Recently the Emperor dismissed Felix because of his diplomatic failures, and has replaced him with our new governor, Porcius Festus. Immediately on arriving, Festus visited Jerusalem where the Jewish leaders raised the question of finishing the 'Paul business'. It seemed a minor request, but they planned to ambush the military escort bringing Paul to Jerusalem and murder him. Fortunately for Paul, Festus stuck to protocol and turned the tables on the Jewish leaders by making them accompany him to Caesarea. He knew their accusations were without substance but recognised the need to pacify them. He even offered to supervise a trial in Jerusalem, but Paul refused and disarmed both Jews and Festus by seizing his right as a citizen to appeal directly to the emperor. Luke tells me that in doing so, Paul will achieve his primary ambition of travelling to Rome where, Jesus has told him, he must one day preach.

Paul's appeal now posed a problem for Festus. He needs to formulate a charge to justify sending Paul to Rome. Fortunately for Festus, King Herod Agrippa II, who rules a small portion of the country, arrived to pay him a courtesy visit. Festus consulted him about Paul. Agrippa, realising that there could not be a formal trial suggested a royal hearing, similar to the one his grandfather was given to question Jesus. Festus agreed hoping to find something substantial to offer Rome.

Agrippa could not help playing the judge. 'You may speak in your defence', he announced to Paul but it merely gave Paul the opportunity to rehearse what he might say before Nero. Paul waved away Agrippa's 'invitation' and told of his miraculous conversion on the Damascus Road. He recounted the teachings of the prophets and faith in Jesus the Messiah, all of which was very familiar to Agrippa. Paul's eloquence and passion impressed every nobleman and woman present and although Festus rejected as mad the idea of a crucified and risen Messiah, Agrippa was on the verge of a more positive response. He played it down by joking before the silenced assembly, "Paul you are trying to make me a Christian too quickly!" I was not appointed to prepare any official statement of the hearing. I know that in private, the verdict from Agrippa and Festus would have freed Paul, except that he had appealed to Rome.

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*Suggested reading: Acts 24 -26, John 16: 8-11, Acts 23: 11, Luke 23: 1-12*

### **Background points**

- Through the Book of Acts Luke has presented us with a largely favourable view of Roman rule. Here he stresses the antipathy of the Jewish establishment and the protection offered by the governing Roman powers who nevertheless were not always above bribery and corruption (24:26).
- Paul's protracted treatment in Roman custody shows us how, despite the might of their military power, the Romans needed to maintain diplomatic relations with the Jewish Sanhedrin Council.
- Herod Agrippa, grandson of the Herod who had tried Jesus (Luke 22), was the last of the Herodian kings. He was raised in Rome and was a keen collaborator with the Roman rule.

He did however take an interest in Jewish welfare and had been given influence over temple affairs in Jerusalem.

- As a Roman citizen Paul had the right to appeal to Caesar. In this case the Emperor was Nero. For the first five years Nero's reign was peaceful but was later to become increasingly cruel and irrational. It seems that Paul wanted to make sure that he received a trial under Roman rather than Jewish authority.

### **Questions**

1. What picture of Roman justice emerges from this narrative in Acts 24 – 26?
2. Why do you think the Jewish hierarchy was persistently so very antagonistic towards Paul?
3. Was Paul's appeal to Caesar a wise move? Why did he make it?
4. What do you make of Agrippa's response to Paul's testimony (26:28)?

### **Taking it further**

1. How effective do you consider personal testimony to be today?
2. What can we learn from Paul's behaviour in these trials that sets an example for how Christians today should act in any conflict with authority?

## 23. Acts 27: 1 – 28: 10

### Shipwrecked - the centurion Julius relates how Paul's journey to Rome was fraught with danger.

It was late summer in Caesarea when I was ordered by Festus to escort some prisoners to Rome. One was Paul of Tarsus, a Jew and a Roman citizen, who had incensed the priests in Jerusalem over some religious matter. Festus could see no harm in the man and was relieved when Paul demanded to be tried in Rome. We were to travel by sea and I looked forward to being back in Rome before the autumn storms set in.

The voyage began well, but we soon ran into a series of delays. At Myra in Lycia, I was able to find passage for my party aboard an Egyptian grain ship bound for Italy. However, the wind was against us as we sailed towards Crete. It was with much difficulty that we arrived at last at Fair Havens on the southern coast of the island.

As the captain and I were wondering whether it was safe to continue the voyage, Paul came forward and spoke to us. 'I can see that if we continue now, we are likely to suffer damage and loss – not only loss of cargo, but loss of life!' He spoke with great certainty, but the captain persuaded me that Fair Havens was not a suitable port to winter in, and the majority were in favour of continuing along the coast of Crete to Phoenix.

We left Fair Havens next morning in a favourable breeze and I felt more confident. Paul, however, did not look pleased. I felt annoyed as I had been kind to him. Why should I disregard the advice of experienced sailors for his sake?

We soon had other things to think about. After only a few hours at sea we were horrified to look aft and see black clouds rapidly approaching. In about half an hour a terrific gale, which we call a 'north-easter', had swept down and whipped the sea into a frenzy. The sailors could not bring the ship round into the wind and had to let her run before it. They passed cables underneath the hull in a bid to hold the wooden frame together.

I have sailed across the Mediterranean many times, but I have never experienced such a terrifying storm! We were being driven toward the sandbars of Syrtis off the coast of North Africa where many a ship has foundered, so the captain ordered the sail to be shortened. This did not help much, so the next day we began to throw the cargo overboard. The day after that we lightened the ship still further by jettisoning the ship's tackle.

I felt so powerless, an unusual experience for one used to commanding troops! I wondered if the gods were angry with us, as we saw no sun by day nor any stars by night. A terrible sense of despair fell upon all on board.

One bleak morning Paul appeared on deck and approached me and the captain as we huddled together against the biting wind.

'You should have heeded my advice,' said Paul sternly, 'when I told you not to sail from Crete. I told you we would suffer damage and loss, and so we have. But last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve came to me and said: "Don't be afraid, Paul! You must stand before Caesar. You will be saved and everyone sailing with you." So, take courage! I trust completely that what God has told me will happen. But we will have to run aground on some island.'

Run aground! That sounded disastrous, but I and the crew were so much at our wits' end that we were ready to grasp at any straw. So it happened that on the fourteenth night of the storm, at about midnight, the sailors sensed that we were nearing land. Anchors were thrown overboard into shallow water and we waited for the dawn.

Paul had now assumed control of the whole ship's company. 'While we are waiting for daylight,' he said, 'let's have some food. You've hardly eaten a bite for a fortnight and you need to build up your strength.' When the food arrived, Paul broke some bread, giving thanks to his God, and began to eat. Somehow this devout yet homely act raised our spirits, and we all ate.

Daylight revealed a sandy bay, so we cut anchors, hoisted the sail, and made for the beach. Some distance from the shore we ran aground and the much-battered ship began to break up. I gave the command for all to abandon ship, and everyone – some swimming and others clinging to the wreckage – made our way safely to land.

As I lay exhausted on the sand, I watched the great ship as it foundered in the shallow water. Out of the surf rose Paul, sopping wet but happy. I felt thankful to his God who appeared to have saved us all from drowning.

We found we were on Malta. Islanders quickly appeared to build us a fire and give us some food. Paul helped by gathering a large bundle of sticks, but as he was about to add it to the blaze a viper darted out of the heat and fastened itself on his hand! Without a word, Paul carelessly shook the creature off. The islanders watched horrified, expecting him to drop dead. 'He must be a murderer! He has escaped drowning, but the gods have caught up with him!' they exclaimed. Then, as Paul showed no ill-effects, they changed their minds and said: 'He must be a god!!'

Publius, the local governor, was very kind to us. His father was ill with dysentery. Paul asked to visit him and I accompanied him to the sick man's room. Paul laid his hands on him and called on the name of 'Jesus Christ'. Immediately the old man was healed! I felt a great sense of awe. What kind of prisoner was this?

We were well rewarded with gifts for this miracle and spent the winter on Malta, recovering from our ordeal.

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*Suggested reading Acts 27: 1 – 28: 10*

### **Background points**

- The sea held a dark fascination for Jewish people. For them it represented the dark forces of nature which had been driven back at creation. Paul was of course a seasoned traveller. In 2 Corinthians: 11 we learn that he had already been shipwrecked three times and had known the experience of being adrift on the open sea for a night and a day. This journey as winter drew on was clearly fraught with danger.
- As we read this account, we see that Julius the centurion clearly did not see Paul as an ordinary prisoner. Paul was a Roman citizen and a man of culture. He had not been convicted of any crime and had exercised his right of appeal to Caesar in Rome. We get the impression that Julius possibly saw his role as mainly that of an escort.
- Paul was no shrinking violet. In Luke's account he comes across as bossy and opinionated and ends up taking charge of matters as the ship was about to founder. This appears to give us quite an insight into his personality. He was a born leader.

- The incident with the viper may remind us of Christ's victory over the forces of evil and the fulfilment of the promise in Genesis 3: 15. It also calls to mind the words in Mark 16:18 which seem fulfilled here.
- The area in Malta where Paul is supposed to have landed is a tourist hot spot bearing the name 'St Paul's Bay'.

### Questions

1. Why was it so important for Paul to get to Rome?
2. Do you think Paul would have privately questioned why God didn't make the journey easier and still the storm for him as had happened on the Sea of Galilee?
3. What difference do you think that it made to him to experience the encounter with the angel?
4. How did Paul see a demonstration of Romans 8: 28 in what happened on the island of Malta?
5. What do these chapters teach us about God's sovereignty?

### Taking it further

1. Why does God allow his children to experience hardship and reversals when he could so easily make things easier for us?
2. What does God use to make effective disciples? (James 1: 2-4)
3. How does Ephesians 6: 10-20 help our understanding of the Christian life?