

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by F.B. Hole

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ACTS 1

BY ITS OPENING words the Acts of the Apostles is linked in the clearest way with the Gospel of Luke. The same Theophilus is addressed, and in the first chapter the story is resumed just at the point where the Gospel left off, save that a few extra details are given of the Lord's words after His resurrection, and the account of His ascension is repeated in a somewhat different setting. The Gospel *leads up to* His resurrection and ascension. The Acts *starts from* those glorious facts and develops their consequences. In the first verse Luke describes his Gospel as a "treatise . . . of all that Jesus *began* both to *do* and *teach*." The word "began" is worthy of note. It infers that Jesus has not ceased to do and teach by reason of His going on high beyond the sight of men. The Acts tells us what Jesus proceeded to *do*, by shedding forth the Holy Spirit from the Father, so that by Him He might act through the Apostles and others. In the same way we discover by reading the epistles what He proceeded to *teach* through the Apostles in due season. Before He was taken up He gave necessary instructions to the Apostles, and that, "through the Holy Ghost," though as yet the Spirit was not given to them. In his Gospel Luke had presented the Lord to us as the perfect Man, ever acting in the power of the Spirit, and in that same light we see Him here.

For the space of forty days He manifested Himself as the One living beyond the power of death, and thus abundant proof was furnished of His resurrection. During these contacts with His disciples He spoke to them of things concerning the kingdom of God, and directed them to await in Jerusalem the coming of the Spirit. John, who baptized with water, had pointed to Him as the Baptizer with the Holy Ghost, and that baptism was to reach them in a few days.

The Lord had been speaking of the kingdom of God; their minds however still ran on the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. In this they were like the two going to Emmaus, though now they knew that He was risen. Their question gave to the Lord the opportunity of indicating what was to be the programme for the opening dispensation, and we see again just what we saw in Luke 24; the Centre of the programme is not Israel but Christ. The coming of the Spirit would mean power, not that the apostles should be restorers of

Israel, but "witnesses unto Me"-witnesses to Christ unto the utmost bounds of the earth. The four circles of witness, mentioned at the end of verse 8, supply us with one way of dividing up the book. We begin with the witness in Jerusalem, and until the end of Acts 7 we are occupied with that city and Judaea. Then in chapter 8 comes Samaria. In Acts 9 the man to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles is called; and in Acts 13 the mission to the uttermost parts begins.

There appears to be a contradiction between verse 7, and what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:1 and 2. But there the point is that they knew well *what* was going to transpire as regards God's dealing with the earth: here that we may not know *when*, since that is a matter reserved by the Father for Himself alone. Our business is to render true and diligent witness to Christ. What that witness will effect is not plainly stated until we reach Acts 15:14.

Having said these things Jesus was taken up and a cloud - doubtless the cloud of Luke 9:34 - hid Him from their eyes. Two heavenly messengers however stood by their side to supplement His declaration of a few moments before. Their *mission* was to be witnesses to the ascended Christ; but their *hope* was to be His return just as He went. His going was not something figurative, shadowy, mystical, but actual and literal. His coming will be actual and literal in like manner.

Ten days had to pass before the coming of the Spirit, and the rest of the chapter tells us how those days of waiting were occupied. The number of avowed disciples in Jerusalem was about one hundred and twenty, and prayer and supplication filled their time. There could be no witness until the Spirit was given, but they could take and maintain the safe place of utter dependence upon God.

And further, they could refer to the Scriptures and apply them to the existing situation, inasmuch as the Lord had opened their minds to understand, as recorded in Luke 24. It is remarkable that Peter should have been the one to take the initiative in this matter, seeing he himself had so sadly sinned only about six weeks before. Still it shows that the Lord had thoroughly effected his restoration, and he was able to piece together Psalm 69:25, and 109:8, in this striking way. "Bishoprick" of course should be "office" or "charge," as reference to the Psalm will show. It was the office of apostleship that was in question, as also verse 25 of our chapter shows. Verses 18 and 19 are evidently not the words of Peter, but a parenthesis in which Luke

gives us further details of the fearful end of Judas.

An essential feature of apostleship was first-hand knowledge of the risen Saviour. The apostle must be able to testify of Him as having personally seen Him in His risen estate: hence Paul's third question in 1 Corinthians 9:1. Paul saw Him, not during the forty days but later in the full blaze of His glory. However, from the outset there must be the twelve apostolic witnesses, and Matthias was chosen. They had recourse to the Old Testament practice of casting lots: guidance, such as we read of in Acts 13:2, could not be known until the Holy Ghost had been given.

ACTS 2

IF WE READ Leviticus 23, we can see that just as the Passover was prophetic of the death of Christ, so Pentecost was prophetic of the coming of the Spirit, in whose power there is presented to God the "new meat offering" consisting of the two loaves of firstfruits—an election from both Jew and Gentile, sanctified by the Holy Ghost. Just as that to which the Passover pointed was fulfilled on the Passover day, so that to which Pentecost pointed was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. On Jesus the Spirit came as a dove: on the disciples as the sound of a mighty blowing or breathing, and as cloven tongues of fire. The wind appealed to the ear, and was reminiscent of the Lord's own inbreathing, of which John 20: 22 speaks. The tongues of fire appealed to the eye, and were quite unique. The wind filled *all*: the tongues sat upon *each*. We may connect inward power with the one; and with the other the expression of the power in the many tongues as the Spirit gave utterance. When Jesus came, He was audible, visible and tangible - see, 1 John 1:1. When the Spirit came He was audible and visible only, and that in this mysterious way.

It is important that we should, from the outset, distinguish between the *great fact* of the Spirit's presence, and the *signs* and *manifestations* of His presence, which vary so greatly. This is the definite gift of the Spirit, referred to in John 7:39; John 14:16, though, since here only Jews were in question, the pouring out of the Spirit upon believing Gentiles (see Acts 10:45) was an act supplementary to this. Having come thus the Spirit abides with the saints right through the dispensation. As the result of the out-pouring here, they were all filled with the Spirit, so that He was in complete control of each. We must also distinguish between the *gift* of the Spirit and *the filling* with the Spirit, since the former may be had without the latter, as we shall see later. Here both were present together.

Those upon whom the Spirit came were a *praying* people, in this resembling their Lord. They were also people of *one* accord, and consequently in *one* place. The one place is not named: it may have been the upper room of Acts 1, but more probably, in view of the crowds that heard the Spirit-given utterances, some court of the temple, such as Solomon's porch. At any rate the thing was real and

powerful and could not be hid. It was, within a limited sphere, a reversal of Babel. There man's proud building was *stopped* by the confusion of tongues: here God signalized the *start* of His spiritual building by giving mastery over the tongues and reducing them to order.

We may see another contrast in the fact that when the tabernacle had been made in the wilderness and the Lord took possession of it by the cloud of His presence, He at once began to speak to Moses concerning sacrifice. This is shown by connecting Exodus 40:35, with Leviticus 1:1 and 2. In our chapter we have God taking possession of His new, spiritual house by His Spirit, and again He at once speaks by His inspired Apostles. Many people from different countries hear "the wonderful works of God."

The enquiry of the crowds gave the opportunity for witness. Peter was the spokesman, though the eleven stood with him as supporting his words, and he at once directed them to the scripture which explained what it all meant. Joel had predicted the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh in days that are yet to come, and what had just transpired was a fulfilment of it, though not *the* fulfilment. Peter's words, "this is that which was spoken," imply that it was *of the nature of* that which Joel had foretold, but not necessarily the full and conclusive thing which the prophecy had in view. John the Baptist had said of Jesus, "The same is He which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost" (John 1:33). Joel had said that, after Israel's repentance and the destruction of their foes, there should be this pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh. Now on the day of Pentecost there had been a kind of firstfruits of this in the pouring out of the Spirit upon those who formed the nucleus of the church. That was the true explanation of what had happened. They were not drunk with wine, but filled with the Spirit.

But Peter did not stop there; he proceeded to show *why* this baptism of the Spirit had taken place. It was the direct action of Jesus, now exalted to the right hand of God. This we find when we reach verse 33; but from verse 22 he had been leading the minds of people through the scenes of the crucifixion to His resurrection and exaltation. Jesus of Nazareth had been most manifestly approved of God during the days of His ministry, yet they had slain Him with their wicked hands. He had been delivered up to this by God according to His "determinate counsel and fore-knowledge," for God knows how to make the wrath of man to praise Him and accomplish His designs of

blessing; though this does not diminish man's responsibility in the matter. Verse 23 is a clear instance of how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man do not clash, when it is a question of practical results; though we may have difficulty in reconciling the two as a matter of theory.

What they had so wickedly *done* God had triumphantly *undone*. The collision between their programme and God's was complete. It presaged their own complete undoing and overthrow in due season; particularly as the resurrection had been foreseen by God, and foretold through David in Psalm 16. Now David could not possibly have been speaking of himself, for he had been buried and his grave was well known amongst them at that day. When he spoke of One, whose soul was not left in hades and whose flesh did not see corruption, he spoke of Christ. What he said had been fulfilled: Jesus was not only raised but exalted to heaven.

As the exalted Man, Jesus had received of the Father the promised Holy Ghost, and had shed Him forth upon His disciples. At His baptism He received the Holy Ghost *for Himself* as the dependent Man; now He receives the same Holy Ghost *on behalf of others* as their Representative. By shedding forth the Spirit these others were baptized into one body and became His members. This we learn from later scriptures.

In verses 34-36, Peter carries his argument a step further to its climax. David had prophesied of his Lord, who should be exalted to God's right hand. David himself was not ascended to the heavens any more than he was risen from the dead. The One of whom David spoke was to sit in the seat of administration and power until His foes were made His footstool; therefore the conclusion of the whole matter was this:- the shedding forth of the Spirit, which they had seen and heard, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that God had made the crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ.

As Lord He is the great *Administrator* on God's behalf, whether in blessing or in judgment. His shedding forth the Spirit had been an act of administration, which had revealed His Lordship.

As Christ He is the anointed *Head* of all things, and particularly of the little handful of His own left upon earth. His reception from the Father of the Spirit on their behalf, preliminary to shedding Him forth, had revealed His Christhood.

Being "made" Lord and Christ is quite consistent with His having been both during His sojourn on earth. These things were ever His, but now He was officially installed as such, as the risen and glorified Man. Wonderful news for us; but terrible news for those who had been guilty of His crucifixion. It simply guaranteed their dreadful damnation, if they persisted on their course.

The Spirit, who had just fallen upon the disciples, now began to work in the consciences of many of the hearers. As they began to realize the desperate situation in which they were placed by the resurrection of the Lord, they were pricked in the heart and cried out for direction. Peter indicated repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as the way to remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit; for, as he points out in verse 39, the promise in Joel is to repentant Israel, and to the children of such, and even to distant Gentiles. Thus in the first Christian sermon the extension of Gospel blessing to Gentiles is contemplated. Remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit carry with them all Christian blessings.

It may strike us as remarkable that Peter does not mention faith. But it is inferred, for no one would submit to baptism in the name of Jesus Christ except they believed in Him. Baptism signifies death, and consequently dissociation from the old life and connections. They would not be prepared to cut their links with the old life unless they really believed in Him who was Lord of the new life. With many words Peter testified, and exhorted them to cut their links, and thus save themselves from that "untoward generation."

Faith was present, for no less than three thousand received Peter's word. An hour before they knew the anguish of being pricked to the heart. Now they received the Gospel and cut their links by baptism. Having thus dissociated themselves from the mass of their nation, who had crucified their Lord, they took their stand by the side of the original 120, who were multiplied twenty-six times in one day. Further, not only did they *begin*, but they were marked by *stedfast continuance*.

The four things that marked them, according to verse 42, are worthy of note. First comes the apostles' doctrine or teaching. This lies at the foundation of things. The apostles were the men to whom the Lord had said, "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into *all truth*" (John 16:13). Their doctrine was consequently the fruit of the Spirit's guiding. The church was now in being, and the first thing that

marked it was *subjection to the Spirit's teaching through the apostles*. The church does not teach; it is taught, and is subject to the Word as given by the Spirit.

Continuing in apostolic doctrine, they continued also in apostolic fellowship. *They found their practical life and society in apostolic company*. Formerly they had everything in common with the world; now their communion with the world had disappeared and communion with apostolic circles had been established - and the apostolic communion was "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

They continued also in the breaking of bread, which was the sign of their Lord's death, and also incidentally-as we learn from 1 Corinthians 10:17 - *an expression of fellowship*. Thus they were in constant remembrance of their Lord who died, and preserved from reverting to the old associations.

Finally, they continued in prayers. They had no power in themselves; all was vested in their Lord on high and in the Spirit given to them. Hence *constant dependence on God* was necessary for the maintenance of their spiritual life and testimony.

These things marked the primitive church, and should no less mark the church today. The things mentioned in the closing verses of the chapter were of a less permanent character. The apostles, with signs and wonders are gone. The Christian communism, which prevailed at the outset, also passed away; as did the continuing with one accord in the temple, and the being in favour with all the people. Yet all was over-ruled of God. The selling of their possessions led to much poverty amongst the saints when years later the famine came, and thus was the occasion for that ministry of relief from Gentile assemblies (see, Acts 11:27-30) which did so much to bind together the Jewish and Gentile elements in the church of God.

For the moment there was simplicity, gladness and singleness of heart with much praise to God. And the work of God, adding the believing remnant to the church, still went on.

ACTS 3

THE ACTS is an historical book, but it is not mere history. An immense amount of apostolic service is left unrecorded, and mention is made of just a few incidents which serve to show the way the Spirit of God operated in bearing witness to the risen and exalted Jesus, and in conducting the disciples into the fulness of Christian blessing. The book covers a period of transition from the beginning of the church at Jerusalem to the full ingathering from among the Gentiles.

This chapter opens with the healing of the man who, lame from his birth, lay at the Beautiful gate of the temple. As the next chapter tells us he was above forty years old—the complete period of probation had been fulfilled in him. The man had not been healed by the Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh, though He so frequently taught in the temple; but he was healed by the power of His Name, now that He was glorified in heaven. Peter had neither silver nor gold, but the power of the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth he could wield, and the man was instantly healed in most triumphant fashion. Today many earnest Christian folk are mostly concerned about collecting the silver and gold for the support of the work of the Lord, and the power of the Name lies largely unused. This is to our reproach.

By reason of his deformity the lame man had lain under certain disabilities according to the law; now grace had removed his deformity and with it the disability, so that he could enter the temple with freedom; and holding on to the Apostles there was no hiding those who had been the instruments of his deliverance. This gave Peter the opportunity of testimony. He at once put himself and John out of the picture, in order that the glorified Jesus might fill it.

Peter's boldness is remarkable. He charged the people with their denial of "the Holy One and the Just," though he himself not many weeks before had denied his Lord. They had had before them "the Prince [Author] of life" and "a murderer;" that is a taker of life. They killed the One, and chose the other; yet He, whom they killed, God had raised from the dead, and thus they were caught in red-handed rebellion against God. Moreover this "perfect soundness" has been granted to the lame man in the power of His Name, through faith.

They could not see the glory of Jesus in heaven, but they could see the miracle wrought in His Name upon earth. The soundness on earth was linked with the glory in heaven.

Verse 17 shows that God was prepared to treat their dreadful crime as a sin of ignorance - as manslaughter, for which a city of refuge is provided, and not as murder. This was a direct answer to the prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." By their sinful act God had accomplished His purpose as to the suffering of Christ, and hence there was still an offer of mercy for them as a nation. That offer Peter made, as recorded in verses 19-26 of our chapter. Everything hinged upon their repentance and conversion.

Whether Isaiah 35:6-7, was in Peter's mind as he spoke about "the times of refreshing," we cannot say, but it does seem as if it must have been in the mind of the Spirit who was speaking through him. When "the lame man" shall "leap as an hart," then, "in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert." But all this refreshing predicted by Isaiah is for "the ransomed of the Lord." and for no others. Hence only repentance and a complete turning round would bring such times; if that took place God would send Jesus Christ to bring them to pass.

The term, "restitution of all things," has been misused in the service of the idea that God is going ultimately to save and restore everybody-even the devil himself. But the passage reads, "the restitution of all things, which God hath spoken." It is things, not persons, and things which from the outset He had spoken by His prophets. God is going to make good every word, and to establish in Christ everything which has broken down in the hands of men. That time will not come till Jesus Himself comes, and since He is the Prophet of whom Moses spoke, all things will be brought to an issue when He does come, and everyone who disregards Him will be destroyed from among the people. There will be a time of blessing established, the like of which has not been since the world began.

In these words, then, Peter made the definite offer on God's behalf that if at this point there was repentance and turning to God on a national scale, Jesus would return and establish the predicted times of blessing. In the last verse of the chapter he also added that, whatever their response was, God had raised up Jesus to bless them in turning them from their sins. These two things we all need: first, the judicial blotting out of our sins; second, to be turned away from our sins, so

that they lose their power over us.

ACTS 4

AS WE READ the opening verses we find the answer to this offer, which was given by the official heads of the nation. The offer being based on the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, it was particularly obnoxious to the Sadducees and to the priests, who were of that party. They gave it an unqualified rejection by arresting the apostles. The work of God, in converting power, went on however, as verse 4 records; and the next day, when examined before the council, Peter found fresh opportunity for testimony, in answering their question as to the power and Name in which he had acted. The Name and power was that of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom they had crucified and whom God had exalted. Psalm 118:22 had been fulfilled in Him, and Peter proceeded to widen out the testimony from that which was particular to that which is universal. The power of the Name was right before their eyes in the particular case of the lame man healed: it was no less potent for the salvation of men universally. The physical healing of the man was just a sign of the spiritual healing which the Name of Jesus brings. The despised Jesus of Nazareth is the only door into salvation.

Verses 13-22, show most strikingly how Peter's testimony was vindicated. The apostles were unlearned and ignorant according to worldly standards, yet they had been with Jesus and were bold, and this impressed the council, who would fain have condemned them. Three things hindered however:

- (1) "They could say nothing against it" (verse 14);
- (2) They had to confess, "we cannot deny it" (verse 16);
- (3) They found "nothing how they might punish them" (verse 21).

When men wish to discredit anything, they usually in the first place deny it, if that be at all possible. If that be not possible, they find some way of speaking against it, misrepresenting it, if need be. Lastly, if that be not possible, they attack the persons involved in the thing, blackening their characters and punishing them. These three well-known devices were in the minds of the council, but all failed them since they were fighting against God. They could merely threaten

them and demand that they ceased to proclaim the name of Jesus. Peter repudiated their demand, since God had commanded them to preach in the name of Jesus, and as He was infinitely the higher Authority, they must obey Him rather than them.

There follows, verses 23-37, a beautiful picture of the early church in Jerusalem. Released by the council, the apostles went to "their own company." This shows us that at the outset the church was a "*company*" *distinct and apart from the world*, even from the religious world of Judaism. This point needs much emphasis in days when the world and the church have so largely been mixed together.

The early church found its resource in *prayer*. In the emergency they turned to God and not to men. They might have wished for a council less Sadducean in character with more liberality and breadth of outlook, but they did not agitate to get it; they simply sought the face of God, the sovereign Ruler of men. In their prayer they were led to the Word of God. Psalm 2 shed its light on the situation that confronted them. The interpretation of it would refer it to the last days, but they saw the application of it which referred to their days. The early church was marked by *subjection to the Word*, finding in it all the light and guidance they needed. This also is a very important and instructive feature.

They were marked too by far more concern for the honour of the Name of Jesus than for their own ease and comfort. They did not request a cessation of persecution and opposition, but that they might have boldness in speaking the word, and that miraculous support which would exalt His Name. The church is the place where *that Name is held dear*.

As a result of this there was an exceptional manifestation of *the power of the Spirit*. All of them were filled with Him; the very building where they met was shaken, and their prayer for especial boldness was instantly answered. And not only this, that which they had not requested was granted to them, they all were "*of one heart and of one soul*." This of course flowed out of the fact that the "one Spirit" was filling every one of them. If all believers today were filled with the Spirit oneness of mind and heart would mark them. It is the only way in which such oneness can be brought to pass. Out of this flowed the next feature which verse 33 mentions. There was *great power in the Apostles' testimony to the world*. The church did not preach, but filled with grace and power it supported those who did. The preaching then,

as always, lay in the hands of those called of God to do it, but the power with which they did it was largely influenced by the state that characterized the whole church.

The closing verses show that just as there was powerful testimony flowing without so there was the circulation of *love and care within*. The Christian communism, mentioned at the end of chapter 2, still continued. The distribution was made to each, "according as he had need." Not people's wants, but their needs were met, and so nobody lacked. At a later date Paul could say, "I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need" (Phil. 4:12), but at this time such experiences were unknown by the saints in Jerusalem. Whether, by escaping such experiences, they profited more than Paul did, by having them, may be an open question, though we incline to think they did not. At any rate, the action of Barnabas was very beautiful, and the love and care found in the church then should be known today, though there may be some variation in the exact mode of expressing it.

ACTS 5

THIS CHAPTER OPENS with a solemn incident which throws up in striking relief one last feature which characterized the early church: there was *the exercise of a holy discipline* by the power of God. The case of Ananias and Sapphira was exceptional without a doubt. When God institutes anything new, it seems to be His way to signalize His holiness by making an example of any who challenge it. He did so with the man who broke the sabbath in the wilderness (see Num. 15:32-36), and also with Achan when Israel began to enter Canaan (see Josh. 7:18-26), and so with Ananias and his wife here. Later in Israel's history many broke the sabbath and took forbidden Babylonish things without incurring similar penalties, just as during the church's history many have acted lies or told them without falling dead.

What lay behind the lie in this case were the twin evils of covetousness and vainglory. Ananias wanted to keep part of the money for himself, and yet gain the reputation of having devoted all to the Lord, as Barnabas had done. Such is the mind of the flesh, even in a saint. How many of us have never had the workings of similar evils in our own hearts? But in this case Satan had been at work, and by the unhappy couple he issued a direct challenge to the Holy Ghost present in the church. The Holy Ghost accepted the challenge, and demonstrated His presence in this drastic and unmistakable fashion. Peter recognized that this was the position, when to Sapphira he spoke of their doings as an agreement "to tempt the Spirit of the Lord."

In result Satan's challenge was made to serve the interests of the Lord and His gospel, as the following verses show. In the first place, this episode put great fear upon all who heard of it, and even upon the church itself. Here is indicated something which is very lacking in the church today-to say nothing of men generally. The fear of God is a very wholesome thing in the hearts of saints, and it is quite compatible with a deep sense of the love of God. Paul had that fear in the light of the judgment seat (see 2 Cor. 5:10-11), though for the unbeliever it will go beyond fear to positive terror. A godly fear, springing from a deep sense of the holiness of God, is much to be desired.

Then, as the early part of verse 12, and verses 15 and 16 show, there

was no slackening in the miraculous power of God, ministered through the Apostles. Indeed the power increased, so that the mere shadow of Peter wrought wonders. Within the parenthesis printed in brackets (verses 12-14) we get the statement that after such an happening men were afraid to join themselves to the Christian company; yet this was no real loss, for it stopped anything in the nature of a mass movement, that would have swept a good deal of unreality into the church. The real work of God was not hindered, as verse 14 states. People may be added to the church who are mere professors, but no one is "added to the Lord" save those in whom there is a vital work of God. Thus the sad business of Ananias and Sapphira was overruled for good, though to a superficial observer it might have seemed a heavy blow to the church's prospects.

God having wrought in this striking way for blessing, we see, in verse 17, the next counter-stroke of Satan. The priests and Sadducees, filled with indignation, again arrest them. This is met by God sending an angel to open the prison doors and liberate them. The next day, their escape being discovered, they are arrested, but in much more gentle fashion. The words of the priests confess the power with which God had been at work, for they admit that Jerusalem had been filled with the teaching; yet they manifest the awful hardness of their hearts in saying, "ye . . . intend to bring this Man's blood upon us." Why, they had themselves said, "His blood be on us, and on our children." The truth was that God was going to take them at their word, and do it.

Peter's answer was short and simple. They were going to obey God rather than men. Then he again summarized their testimony and repeated it. The Holy Ghost and they were witnesses to the resurrection of the Jesus, whom they slew. But God had exalted Him, not to be at that time a Judge, meting out damnation upon their guilty heads, but a Prince and a Saviour, giving repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. Repentance as well as forgiveness is viewed as a gift.

Though mercy and forgiveness was still the burden of Peter's message, the proclamation of it only stirred them to fury. Mercy presupposes sin and guilt, and that they were not disposed to admit; hence they took counsel to slay them. Satan is a murderer from the beginning, and under his influence murder filled their hearts. Yet God has many ways of checkmating the evil designs of men, and in this case He used the worldly wisdom of the renowned Gamaliel, who had

Saul of Tarsus as his pupil.

Gamaliel cited two recent cases of men who had risen up pretending to be somebody; the type of man to whom the Lord alluded in John 10, when He spoke of those who climbed up some other way, and who were but thieves and robbers. They came to nought indeed, and Gamaliel thought that Jesus might have been one of these spurious shepherds, instead of the true Shepherd of Israel. Had He been such, His cause also would have come to nought. Gamaliel's warning took effect and the Apostles were released, though with a beating and the demand that they ceased their testimony.

Truly the council was fighting against God, for the Apostles rejoiced in their suffering for His Name, and diligently pursued their witness both publicly in the temple and more privately in every house.

ACTS 6

BEHIND ALL THE attacks and difficulties which confronted the early church in Jerusalem lay the great adversary, Satan himself. He it was that stirred the Sadducees to violence and attempts to intimidate. He filled the heart of Ananias to lie, and thus bring in corruption, tempting the Spirit of the Lord. Now, these earlier attacks having been defeated, he moves in a more subtle way, exploiting small differences that existed within the church itself. The "Grecians" of whom the first verse of this chapter speaks, were not Gentiles but Greek-speaking Jews, coming from the lands of their dispersion, whereas the "Hebrews" were the home-born Jews of Jerusalem and Palestine.

The first and greater trouble within the church—that of Ananias—was about money. If the second was not about money, it was over a matter very akin to it; being as to the distribution of daily necessities, entailed by having all things common. The first was about getting the money *in*: the second about doling out the money, or its equivalent. Those from a distance thought that partiality was being shown in favour of the local people. The greater trouble created only a small difficulty, for it was met instantaneously in the Spirit's power: the smaller trouble created the greater difficulty, as we see in our chapter. This, we believe, has nearly always been the way in the church's history: the most difficult cases to settle are those in which at the bottom there is very little to be settled.

It was only a "murmuring" that arose, but the apostles did not wait for it to become a formidable outcry. They discerned that Satan's object in it was to divert them from the preaching of the Word to social service, so they took steps to end any possible objections. They instructed the church to select seven men to undertake the business, who should be, "of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." Their administration was to be marked by wisdom and honesty that should be above all reproach.

In this business the church was to select its own officers; but then the business was the distribution of the funds and food that the church had itself provided. We never read of the church being called upon to select or appoint its elders or bishops or ministers of the Word,

inasmuch as the spiritual grace and gifts which they distribute are not provided by the church but by God. The selection and ordination of these consequently lies in the hands of God. To the elders at Ephesus Paul said, "The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers." *God appoints those who are to administer His bounty.*

So the apostles continued to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. For those who are taught the Word comes first (see 1 Tim. 4 5), for we only pray rightly as we are instructed in the Word. For those who minister prayer comes first, for apart from prayer they will not speak the Word aright.

Just as wisdom prevailed with the apostles, so grace prevailed in the church, for all the seven men chosen bore names which would suggest a Grecian rather than a Hebrew origin, and one of them is said to have been a proselyte, which infers that he came even of Gentile extraction. In this way the multitude took care that all murmurings and questionings, whether well-founded or not, should be hushed to silence. The apostles identified themselves with the church's choice, by laying their hands on the chosen men, with prayer. The adversary behind the scenes was again foiled.

He was more than foiled really; for instead of the apostles being diverted from the Word of God, it increased greatly, and many fresh conversions took place, even many priests being reached. Moreover one of the seven, Stephen, became a special vessel of the grace and power of the Spirit of God; so much so, that for the rest of our chapter, and the whole of Acts 7, we follow that which God wrought through him, until the time of his martyrdom.

The power operating in Stephen was so marked that it stirred up opposition in fresh quarters. The men of the various synagogues, mentioned in verse 9, were apparently all of the Grecian class, to which Stephen himself belonged. All their argumentative skill was as nothing when pitted against the power of the Spirit in Stephen, so they had recourse to the usual device of lying witnesses and violence. In verse 11 they put Moses in front of God; but then they knew what would most appeal to the passions of the crowd, to whom Moses, being a man, was more real than the invisible God. So also, in verse 13, "this holy place" which was before their eyes, takes precedence of the law; and finally, "the customs which Moses delivered us," were perhaps dearer to them than all. Dragging Stephen before the council, they charged him with blasphemy, and with proclaiming Jesus of

Nazareth as a destroyer of their holy place and customs. There was this much truth in this charge, that the advent of Jesus had indeed inaugurated a new departure in the ways of God.

In this public way the controversy between the nation and God was carried a step further. They threw down the gauntlet, and God accepted their challenge by so filling Stephen with the Spirit that even the fashion of his face was altered, and everybody saw it. Through his lips the Holy Ghost proceeded to give a closing word of testimony against the nation. The council found themselves arraigned at the bar of God by the Holy Ghost, speaking through the very man that was being arraigned at their bar.

ACTS 7

THEIR HISTORY BEGAN with God calling Abraham out of his old place and associations, that he might go to the land of God's choice and there be made a great nation. This is shown in Genesis 12:1-3, and it was an epoch-making event, as is evident when we note that a rather longer period of time is compressed into Genesis 1-11, than the period expanded to fill all the rest of the Old Testament. The call of Abraham marked a new departure in God's ways with the earth, and with that new departure Stephen began his address.

Genesis tells us that Jehovah appeared to Abraham, but Stephen knew Him and spoke of Him in a new light. The Jehovah who appeared to Abraham was the God of glory, the God of far more glorious scenes than can be afforded by this world, even at its fairest and best. This it is, doubtless, which accounts for Abraham's faith embracing such heavenly things as are spoken of in Hebrews 11:10-16. Called by the God of glory, he at least had glimpses of the city and country where glory dwells. On this high note Stephen began, and he ended, as we know, with Jesus in the glory of God.

The main drift of his remarkable address was evidently to bring to the people the conviction of the way in which their fathers and they had been guilty of resisting the operations of God by His Spirit all through their history. He dwells particularly upon what happened when God had raised up servants to institute something new in their history. There had been a series of new departures, of greater or less significance. The original one had been with Abraham, but then followed Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon; all of whom he refers to, though giving far more attention to the first three than to the second three. To none of these had they really responded, and Joseph and Moses they had definitely refused to start with. He ends with the seventh intervention, which threw all the others into the shade - the coming of the Just One - and Him they had just slain.

Stephen made it very plain that the Jewish rulers of his day were but repeating in a worse form the sin of their forefathers. The patriarchs sold Joseph into Egypt because they were "moved with envy;" and Matthew records the efforts of Pilate to deliver Jesus, "for he knew

that for envy they had delivered Him." So too with Moses; the saying at which he fled, "Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?" was uttered by one of his brethren, and not by an Egyptian. The rejection came from amongst his own people, and not from outside. Thus too it had been with Jesus.

Exodus 2 does not give us such an insight into the fame and prowess of Moses at the end of his first forty years as is given in verse 22 of our chapter. He was a man of learning, oratory and action, when it came into his heart to identify himself with his own people, who were the people of God. Having made the plunge, it must have come to him as a terrible shock to be refused by them. At that saying he fled. He did not fear the wrath of the king, as Hebrews 11:27 tells us, but he could not stand this refusal. He had acted in the consciousness of his own exceptional powers, and now needed forty years of Divine tuition at the back side of the desert to learn that his powers were nothing and the power of God everything. In all this he stands in contrast to our Lord, though he typified Him in the rejection he had to endure.

This Moses was again rejected by their fathers, when he had brought them out of captivity and into the wilderness. In rejecting him, they really rejected Jehovah, and they turned aside into idolatry of a very gross kind. Even in the wilderness, and not only when in the land, they were slack about Jehovah's sacrifices, and tampered with idols, thus paving the way to the Babylonish captivity. Still God had raised up David, and then Solomon built the house. Now in the house they boasted (see Jer. 7:4) as though the mere possession of these buildings guaranteed everything, when really God dwelt in the Heaven of heavens, far above the most gorgeous buildings on earth.

Stephen's closing words - verses 51-53 - are marked by great power. They are like an appendix to the Lord's own words, recorded in Matthew 23:31-36, carrying the indictment on to its dreadful conclusion in the betrayal and murder of the Just One. Their standing before God was on the basis of the law, and though they had received it by the disposition of angels, they had not kept it. The law broken by flagrant idolatry, and the Messiah murdered; there were the two great counts in the indictment against the Jew, and both are prominent in Stephen's closing words.

The Holy Ghost, by the lips of Stephen, had completely turned the tables upon his persecutors, and they found themselves arraigned, as though they were in the dock instead of sitting upon the judicial bench.

The very suddenness with which Stephen dropped his historic recital, and launched God's accusation against them, must have added tremendous power to his words. They were cut to the heart and stirred to fury.

The only calm person evidently was Stephen. Filled with the Spirit, he had a supernatural sight of the glory of God, and of Jesus in that glory, and he testified at once of that which he saw. Ezekiel had seen, "the likeness of a throne" and "the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it" (Ezek. 1:26), but Stephen saw not a mere "likeness" or "appearance," but rather the MAN Himself, standing on the right hand of God. Jesus, once crucified, is now the Man of God's right hand: He is the mighty Executive, by whom God will administrate the universe!

In his address Stephen had pointed out that though Joseph had been refused by his brethren, he became their saviour and ultimately they all had to bow down to him. He also reminded them that though Moses was at first rejected, he ultimately became both ruler and deliverer of Israel. Now he testifies a similar, but vastly greater thing in connection with Jesus. The Just One whom they had murdered, is to become their Judge, and ultimately, for those who receive Him, their great and final Deliverer. In token thereof He was in glory, and Stephen saw Him.

Utterly unable to refute or resist his words, the Jewish leaders rushed into the murder of Stephen, thus fulfilling the Lord's words, recorded in Luke 19:14, as to the citizens hating the departed nobleman and sending a message after him saying, "We will not have this Man to reign over us." Jesus was still "standing" in glory, ready to fulfil what Peter had said in Acts 3:20, if only they had repented. They did not repent, but gave a violent refusal by stoning Stephen and sending him after his Master. Prominent in connection with this wicked act was a young man named Saul, who consented to his death, and acted as a kind of superintendent at his execution. Thus where the history of Stephen ends, the story of Saul begins.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, ended his short but striking career in the likeness of his Lord. Filled with the Spirit, his vision was filled with Jesus in glory. He had nothing more to say to men; his last words were addressed to his Lord. To the Lord he committed his spirit, and assuming the attitude of prayer, he desired mercy for his murderers. Who could have anticipated so astounding an answer as was given by

his exalted Lord in the conversion of Saul, the arch-murderer? The prayer of the Lord Jesus from the cross for His murderers was answered by the sending forth of the Gospel, to begin at Jerusalem: the prayer of Stephen was answered in the conversion of Saul. That Saul himself never forgot it, is shown by Acts 22:20.

ACTS 8

NOT CONTENT WITH slaying Stephen, the religious leaders in Jerusalem at this point launched the first great persecution against the church, and in this Saul was especially prominent. He ravaged the church like a wolf, invading the privacy of homes to secure his victims. In result, the disciples were scattered abroad through the provinces of Judaea and Samaria. Now, according to the Lord's words to His disciples in Acts 1:8, these provinces were to come after Jerusalem, and before their mission widened out to the uttermost parts of the earth; so again it was a case of God making man's wrath to serve His purpose. Yet, remarkably enough, the Apostles, to whom the commission was given, were the exceptions to the rule. They still remained in Jerusalem.

This being so, the narrative leaves them unnoticed and continues with those who went everywhere evangelizing, and particularly with Philip, another of the seven. He went to the city of Samaria and preached; the power of God was with him, and wonderful blessing followed, as is always the way when a servant of God moves in the direct line of God's purpose. The sowing among the Samaritans had been done by the Lord Himself, as recorded in John 4. Then many had said not only, "Is not this the Christ?" but also, "This is indeed the Christ." Now Philip, coming to them, "preached Christ," as the One who had died, was risen again, and now in glory; as a consequence, a great time of reaping took place. There was great joy in that city.

Philip's message being received, he began to preach among them, "the things concerning the kingdom of God," and this led to multitudes being baptized. Amongst them was Simon the sorcerer, who also "believed" and was baptized. He found himself, as verse 7 shows, in the presence of a Power far mightier than the unclean spirits, with whom he formerly had traffic.

The remarkable thing about the work in Samaria was that although so many had believed the Gospel, and been baptized, none had received the gift of the Holy Ghost. The order that Peter had propounded in Acts 2:38, was not observed in the case of the Samaritans. God so ordered, we believe, for a special reason. There had been religious

rivalry between Jerusalem and Samaria, as John 4 witnesses, and therefore there must have been a strong tendency to carry over into the new conditions this ancient prejudice. This would have meant a Samaritan church independent of, if not in rivalry to, a Jerusalem church; and thus any practical expression of the "one body" would have been imperilled even before the truth of it had been revealed. As things were, they only received the Spirit when Peter and John had come down and laid hands on them, thus formally identifying the Apostles and the church in Jerusalem with these new believers in Samaria. The oneness of the church was preserved.

When the Holy Ghost was given, there was the drawing of the line between reality and unreality. Not all baptized prove to be real, but the Spirit is only given to those that are real. Hence at Samaria the baptized Simon was left without the Holy Spirit. Verses 12 and 16 show us that the baptized person professes an entrance into the kingdom of God, and to take upon himself the name of the Lord Jesus, as his new Master, just as Israel of old were baptized to Moses - see 1 Corinthians 10:2. Simon submitted to all this, nevertheless, when the test came, reality was not found in him. He would never have said, "Give me also this power," had he already possessed it. Nor did he understand it, as proved by his offer of money.

It must have been a great blow to Simon, who formerly had dominated the people of Samaria by his supernatural doings, to find a multitude now possessing a power, in the presence of which his own dark acts were as nothing. They possessed the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he had been left out. This led him to expose himself very thoroughly by offering money to the Apostles. He wished to purchase not only the Spirit for himself but also the power to convey Him to others by the imposition of his hands. He felt doubtless that if such a power as that could be his, any money laid out in its purchase would prove a very profitable investment.

This is the third recorded uprising of evil within the circle of those who had been baptized: first, Ananias; second, the murmuring as to the neglected widows; third, Simon the sorcerer. In each case, you notice, *money* was involved. In this third case we see the beginning of the Satanic endeavour to turn the pure faith of Christ into a money-making religion. In Samaria it was but a trickling stream, flowing through one man. It soon increased into a flood, sweeping immense riches to Rome. In the religious system which has its centre there, everything

which is supposed to be a gift of God may be purchased with money.

Peter did not spare Simon the sorcerer. He told him plainly that this atrocious thought of his meant that his heart was not right with God, that he was entirely outside the true faith of Christ, and that both he and his money would perish. Peter's words surely were prophetic of the doom that ultimately will overtake the great ecclesiastical system, which through the centuries has turned Christianity into "the religion of money."

There was a ray of hope for Simon, which Peter held out for him, in verse 22. He might repent, and therefore forgiveness for him was still a possibility. Notice how the very thought of his heart is characterized as wickedness, without referring to his words; an illustration this, of the statement, that, "the thought of foolishness is sin." Being still in bondage to money, he was still in the bond of iniquity and bitterness. The love of money being "the root of *all evil*;" that is, of *every kind of evil*, a large part of the bitterness which fills the earth, springs from it. Peter told Simon to pray to God; but from his answer, recorded in verse 24, it looks as if he lacked the repentance which would lead him to pray for himself, and wished to make sure of Peter's intercession on his behalf without paying for it. Multitudes since that day have paid handsome sums hoping to obtain the intercession of Peter!

The Apostles had been slow to go forth from Jerusalem, as verse 1 of our chapter told us. Philip had been the pioneer at Samaria, but now that Peter and John had come down they further ministered the Word to the converts, and also evangelized in many Samaritan villages on their return journey. However there was more pioneer work to be done, and as to this the angel of the Lord spoke not to the Apostles but to Philip.

Philip's ready and simple obedience to the Lord's instructions is very striking. He was told to leave the place of his successful labours and depart to the desert region south west of Jerusalem. The record is that told to, "Arise and go," he "arose and went," though his brethren may have thought him misguided and eccentric in doing so. If he did not know, when starting, the object of his journey, he soon discovered it, for his steps were guided so that he should intercept an important Ethiopian official who was a seeker after God. This man had taken a toilsome journey to Jerusalem according to the little light he had. He arrived there too late to get any benefit from the temple, for as the house of God it had been disowned. He was too late to find the Lord,

for He had been rejected and had gone to heaven. He did however get an important book of Old Testament scripture, and he was on his return journey needing but one thing more.

That one thing more Philip was sent to supply, for God was not going to allow an Ethiopian to stretch out his hands to Him without getting an answer. He needed New Testament light, so, as the New Testament was not yet written, Philip was sent with the New Testament message. The Spirit of God was in control, hence everything moved to time with smooth perfection. The Ethiopian had just reached the middle of Isaiah 53 when Philip addressed him, and his keen mind was filled with the question which that chapter inevitably raises in the thoughts of every intelligent reader- Is the prophet speaking of himself, or of "some other man?" The Ethiopian raised his question: Philip found there his text, and preached unto him "JESUS."

All that Philip told the Ethiopian is summed up for us by Luke in that sacred Name, and this is easily understood when we remember how Matthew 1:21 introduces us to it and to its significance. All that the man needed-the light and the salvation-was found in JESUS; and while Philip was speaking he found it! Now Isaiah 53 presents Jesus as the One who died an atoning and substitutionary death, the One whose life was taken from the earth, and the Ethiopian, who evidently knew something of baptism and its significance, desired to be identified with Him in His death. In baptism we are "identified with Him in the likeness of His death" (Rom. 6:5), and he felt that nothing hindered him being identified in this way with the One on whom he now believed. Verse 37 is to be omitted as lacking any real manuscript authority: nevertheless nothing did hinder, though he was not a Jew, and Philip baptized him.

In this way the first Gentile was reached and baptized and sent on his way back to his own people with the knowledge of the Saviour. Philip disappeared from his sight more rapidly than he had appeared but, since he had believed not on Philip but on Jesus, this did not unduly disturb him, and he went on his way *rejoicing*. His faith was not entwined around Philip but around the One whom he had preached. For him it was not Jerusalem but Jesus, and also it was not Philip but Jesus. To be enamoured of the preacher makes for weakness: to be enamoured of the Saviour makes for spiritual strength.

As for Philip, the supernatural way in which he was removed to Azotus did not disturb him. He travelled north to Caesarea preaching in the

cities as he went. Seven times in this chapter is preaching mentioned, and in five of these occasions the word used is one we have carried over into our language as, "evangelize." The occasions are in verses 4, 12, 25 (second occurrence), 35, and 40. In three out of the five it is Philip who evangelizes, so we need not be surprised that presently he is designated, "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21:8).

The conversion of the Ethiopian was a sign that the time for the blessing of the Gentiles was at hand. He was like the lonely swallow in transit, betokening the advent of summer. In chapter 9, is recounted the call and conversion of the man who is to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. As is so often the case the Lord's choice fell upon the most unlikely person. The arch-persecutor of the saints is to become the pattern servant of the Lord. To this end he was dealt with in an unprecedented way. The Lord Himself dealt with him directly, excluding in all essential things any human instrumentality.

ACTS 9

SAUL WAS STILL filled with furious, persecuting zeal when the Lord intercepted him on the road to Damascus, and revealed Himself to him in a blaze of heavenly light, which shone not only round about him but into his conscience as well. We may discern in the record the essential features which mark every true conversion. There was the light which penetrates to the conscience, the revelation of the Lord Jesus to the heart, the conviction of sin in the words, "Why persecutest thou Me?" and the collapse of all opposition and self-importance in the humble-words, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?" When Jesus is discovered, when the conscience is convicted of sin, when there is humble submission to Jesus as Lord, then there is a true conversion, though there is very much that the soul has yet to learn. The Lord's dealings were intensely personal to Saul, for his companions, though amazed, understood nothing of what had happened.

By this tremendous revelation of the Lord, Saul was literally blinded to the world. Led into Damascus, he spent three days which he would never forget, days in which the significance of the revelation sank into his soul. Being blind, nothing distracted his mind, and his thoughts were not even turned aside to food or drink. As a preliminary to his service, Ezekiel had sat among the captives at Chebar and "remained there astonished among them seven days" (Ezek. 3:15). Saul sat astonished in Damascus for only three days, but his experiences were of a far deeper order. We may get a glimpse of them by reading 1 Timothy 1:12-17. He was astonished at his own colossal guilt as the "chief of sinners," and even more at the exceeding abundance of the grace of the Lord, so that he obtained mercy. In those three days he evidently passed through a spiritual process of death and resurrection. The foundations were laid in his soul of that which later on he expressed thus: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20).

During the three days Saul had a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying his hands on him that he might receive his sight, and at the end of them the vision materialized. Ananias arrived, doing what he was told, and telling Saul he was but the messenger of the

Lord, even Jesus, and that he was not only to receive his sight but be filled with the Holy Ghost. By this time Saul was a believer, for only to believers is the Spirit given.

The essential work in Saul's soul having been accomplished, a human servant is used by the Lord. Two things about that servant are worthy of note. First, he was just "a certain disciple," evidently of no special prominence. It was fitting that the only man to help Saul in any way was a very humble one. Saul had been very prominent as an adversary and was soon to be very prominent as a servant of the Lord. He was helped by a disciple who was undistinguished and retiring, yet who was near enough to the Lord to receive His instructions and hold converse with Him. It is often thus in God's ways. Second, Ananias dwelt in Damascus, and thus was one of those against whom Saul had been breathing out threatenings and slaughter. So one of those that Saul would have murdered was sent to call him, "Brother Saul," to open his eyes, and that he might be filled with the Holy Ghost. Saul's evil was requited with good in this overwhelming fashion.

Saul's days of blindness, both physical and mental, were now over: he was baptized in the Name of the One he had formerly despised and hated, and he consorted with the very people he had thought to destroy, for he had become one of them. He had been called as "a chosen vessel," so straightway his service began. Jesus had been revealed to him as the Christ, and as the Son of God, so he preached Him thus and proved by the Scriptures that He was the Christ, to the confounding of his former friends. The friends however speedily became his bitter foes and took counsel to kill him, even as not long before he had thought to kill the saints. He had anticipated entering Damascus with some measure of pomp as the plenipotentiary of the hierarchy in Jerusalem. Actually, he entered as a humbled and blinded man; and he left it in undignified fashion, huddled in a basket, as a fugitive from Jewish hate.

From the outset Saul had thus to taste for himself the very things he had been inflicting upon others. Arrived back in Jerusalem, he was distrusted by the disciples, as was very natural, and the intervention of Barnabas was needed before they received him. Barnabas could vouch for the Lord's intervention and his conversion, and he acted as his letter of commendation. In Jerusalem he witnessed boldly and came into conflict with the Grecians, possibly the very men who had

been so responsible in the matter of Stephen's death. Now they would slay the man who held the clothes of those that slew Stephen. In all this we can see the working of the government of God. The fact, that the Lord had shown such amazing mercy in his conversion, did not exempt him from reaping in this governmental way that which he had sown.

Threatened again with death, Saul had to depart to Tarsus, his native city. It may be wondered where came in that visit to Arabia, of which he writes in Galatians 1:17. We think it was probably during the "many days," of which verse 23 of our chapter speaks, for he tells us that he "returned again to Damascus." If this is so, the flight from Damascus over the wall took place after his return from Arabia. Be that as it may, it was his departure to distant Tarsus that inaugurated the period of rest and edification for the churches, which led to a multiplication of their numbers.

In verse 32 we return to the activities of Peter, that we may see that the Spirit of God had not ceased to work through him while working so powerfully elsewhere. There had been, first, a great work in Lydda through the raising up of the palsied man. Then at Joppa Peter was used to bring Dorcas to life, and this led to many in that town believing on the Lord. It also led to Peter making a lengthy stay there in the house of Simon a tanner.

Meanwhile also the Spirit of God had been at work in the heart of Cornelius the Roman centurion, as the fruit of which he was marked by piety and the fear of God, with almsgiving and prayer to God. The time had now come to bring this man and his like-minded friends into the light of the Gospel. Now to Peter had been given "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19), so just as he had used the keys on the day of Pentecost to admit the election from among the Jews, now it is his to admit this election from among the Gentiles. This chapter has recounted how God called and converted the man who was to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, the next tells how Peter was delivered from his prejudices and led to open the door of faith to the Gentiles, thus paving the way for subsequent ministry of the Apostle Paul.

ACTS 10

THE FIRST THING in the chapter is the angelic ministry to Cornelius by which he is directed to send to Joppa and call Peter. No difficulty arose here, for Cornelius immediately did as he was told. The angel, you notice, did not cut a rather lengthy story short by himself telling the message to Cornelius. The *message* of grace can only be rightly told by a man who is himself a *subject* of grace. So Peter must be called. God had respect to the prayers and alms of Cornelius, since they expressed the sincere seeking of his heart after God. If, after hearing the Gospel, he had ignored its message and gone on with his prayers and alms, it would have been a different matter. Then they would not have "come up for a memorial before God."

Next comes the account of God's preliminary dealings with Peter by means of a trance. There was more difficulty here, for he was still bound by his Jewish thoughts, and from these he had to be delivered. The hearers were ready, but the preacher had to be made ready to go. The record is that he "went up upon the housetop to pray," consequently he was in the right attitude to receive the necessary guidance. There was not only a *praying seeker* but a *praying servant* also. Hence remarkable results followed.

The great sheet which Peter saw descended out of an opened heaven. It embraced within its folds all manner of creatures both clean and unclean. It was received up into heaven. Peter was bidden to satisfy his hunger by partaking, and he might have done this by selecting a clean animal for his food. Yet they were all jumbled up together, so he declined. He was told however that God could cleanse the unclean: that in fact He had done so, and what He had cleansed he was not to call common. This happened three times so that the significance of it might sink into Peter's mind. We can see in the vision an apt figure of the Gospel, which comes from an opened heaven, which embraces in its folds a multitude, amongst which are found many Gentiles, who were ceremonially unclean; but all of them cleansed by grace, and ultimately taken up into heaven.

Peter at first doubted the meaning of all this, for ancient prejudices die slowly; but, as he continued to ponder, the situation was cleared by

the arrival of the messengers from Cornelius. The Spirit distinctly instructed him to go with them and thus carry the Gospel to the seeking Roman. The "unclean" Gentile was to be saved.

In Acts 8, we saw how accurately God timed Philip's interception of the Ethiopian's chariot. Now we see the servants of Cornelius arriving at the precise moment to clinch the Divine instructions to Peter's mind. The thing was of God, and Peter was irresistibly carried forward.

Arrived at Caesarea, all was ready in the house of Cornelius. He too was conscious the thing was of God, and so he had no doubt as to Peter coming, and he had called together a number of people who like himself were seekers after God. Verse 25 reveals to us the reverential and submissive frame of mind that marked Cornelius. He carried his reverence too far; still it was no small thing that the haughty Roman should fall at the feet of a humble Galilean fisherman.

Peter now found himself in the presence of a large number of Gentiles, and his opening words to Cornelius show how he had accepted the instruction conveyed to him by the vision. The reply of Cornelius reveals how simply he had believed the angel's message and promptly obeyed it. He had accepted Peter's gentle rebuke when he asserted, "I myself also am a *man*:" yet he knew that *God* was at work and that the meeting was to be held as in His presence. He therefore placed himself and the whole audience as "here present before God," ready to hear from the preacher "all things that are commanded thee of God." They were ready to hear ALL. Plenty of folk do not mind hearing pleasant and comforting things, while objecting to the sterner announcements that the Gospel makes.

Peter opened his address with a further acknowledgment that he now perceived that God would have respect to every soul that sincerely sought Him, according to the light he might have, no matter to what nation he belonged. The grace of God was now about to flow richly beyond the boundaries of Israel, though the word which God had sent in connection with Jesus Christ, personally present amongst men, had been addressed to the children of Israel only. Still that word had been well published through Galilee and Judaea, and so Cornelius and his friends knew all about it, being resident in those parts. The things that happened in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth were well known to them.

So Peter could say, "That word . . . *ye know*." There were however,

things that *they did not know*; and these all-essential matters he proceeded to unfold. The death of Jesus had been a public spectacle and everybody knew about it. His resurrection had been witnessed by only a few, and common report denied it, the denial having the backing of the religious authorities, as we learn from Matthew 28:11-15. Hence Peter now announced the astonishing news that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead by an act of God, that he and his fellow Apostles had actually seen Him, eaten with Him, and received from Him a command what they were to preach to others. In verses 42 and 43 Peter made the announcements he was commanded to make.

These verses give us the two themes of his preaching, two announcements which must have come with great power to his Gentile hearers. First, the Jesus, whom men crucified, is ordained of God to be the Judge both of the living and the dead. His crucifixion was the act of both Jew and Gentile. Cornelius must have been familiar with the details, and known some who participated in it, if not actually involved in it himself. He was acquainted with His shame and dishonour and apparent failure. Well, the despised Jesus is to come forth in due season as the universal Judge. The destinies of all men rest in His hands. What an astounding declaration! Calculated to overwhelm every adversary with terror!

But second, before this Judge seats Himself on the judgment throne, all the prophets bear witness that there is forgiveness offered in His Name. That forgiveness is received by "whosoever believeth in Him." Forgiveness through the Name of the Judge! Could anything be more stable and satisfactory than that? The Judge has become the Surety for sinful men, and hence the believer in Him receives the remission of sins, *before* the day dawns when will be held the great assizes for the living and for the dead.

Cornelius and his friends *did* believe. Faith was present in their hearts before ever they heard the message. Hearing it, their faith instantly embraced it, and God signalized that fact by instantly bestowing on them the gift of the Holy Ghost. Their faith leapt forth like the lightning-flash, and was at once followed by the thunder-clap of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was poured upon these believing Gentiles just as He had been at the beginning upon believing Jews, with the sign of tongues following. The two cases were identical, and in this way "they of the circumcision" who had come with Peter had every doubt dispelled.

There was nothing for it but to baptize these Gentiles. If God had baptized them by the Spirit into the one body, men could not deny them entrance among believers on earth by water baptism.

There is just this difference between Acts 2 and this chapter, that there the enquirers had to submit first to baptism by water, and then they were to receive the promise of the Spirit. They had to cut their links with the rebellious mass of their nation before they were blessed. Here God bestowed the Spirit first, for had He not done so Jewish prejudices would have raised a wall against their baptism and reception. So God forestalled them: indeed the whole chapter shows us how this opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles was the moving of God's hand in the fulfilment of His purpose. It shows us too that no rigid law can be laid down as to the reception of the Spirit. It is *always* the result of faith, but it may be *with* or *without* baptism, *with* or *without* the laying on of apostolic hands - see Acts 19:6.

ACTS 11

THIS CHAPTER OPENS with the stir which was created in Jerusalem by these happenings in Caesarea. Those who had strong Jewish prejudices contended with Peter over his actions. This led Peter to rehearse the matter from the beginning and set it forth in order, so that all might see that the thing was distinctly of God. It is remarkable that the Spirit of God has thought it well to put on record Peter's own account, as well as that given us by Luke as an historian, in the previous chapter. This emphasizes the importance of what happened so obscurely in the house of the Roman officer. It was in truth an epoch-making event.

In Peter's account we naturally have his side of the story rather than that of Cornelius. Yet he does furnish us with one detail as to the angel's message to Cornelius, which is not mentioned in the previous chapter. Peter was to tell him "words," whereby he and all his house should be "saved." The law *demands works* from men: the Gospel *brings words* to men, and those words lead them to salvation, if believed. Note also that they were not "saved" until they had heard the Gospel, and believed it; although without a doubt there had been a work of God in the hearts of these people, which led them to seek after God.

In verses 15 and 16 we see that Peter recognized in the gift of the Spirit to Cornelius a baptism of the Spirit, supplementary to that which had been realized in Jerusalem at the beginning. It was God doing for believing Gentiles what He had previously done for believing Jews. God put both on the same footing, and who was Peter or anyone else to withstand God?

This plain and straightforward account given by Peter silenced all opposition: indeed grace so wrought in the hearts of those who had objected, that they not only recognized that God had granted to the Gentiles "repentance unto life," but they glorified God for doing it. They attributed repentance to the gift of God, just as faith is attributed to His gift in Ephesians 2:8.

With verse 19, we leave Peter and pick up the thread from Acts 8:1. In between, we have had Philip's evangelistic labours, the conversion of

Saul, who is to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter's activities, culminating in his opening in a formal way the door of faith to the Gentiles. We now discover that while the mass of believers scattered by persecution carried the Gospel with them, but preached it only to the Jews, there were some from Cyprus and Cyrene who, arrived at Antioch, began to preach to Greeks, declaring Jesus as Lord, for indeed He is *Lord of ALL*. These men, then, began to evangelize Gentiles, which was exactly the special business which the Holy Ghost now had on hand. As a consequence surprising results followed. God's hand worked with them, though they were men of no particular note, and a great multitude believed and turned to the Lord.

Thus the first Gentile church was formed, and the work speedily reached such dimensions as to attract attention from the church in Jerusalem, and lead them to depute Barnabas to visit them. Barnabas came and instantly recognized a true work of the grace of God. Instead of being jealous that others than himself or the leaders in Jerusalem had been used of God for this, he was glad and he furthered the work by his exhortations. But then he was a good man and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, and so he cared not for his own reputation but for the glory of Christ. His exhortation was that as they had begun with *faith in the Lord* so they should continue to *cleave to the Lord* with purpose of heart. The working of God's grace was the great thing with Barnabas, no matter through whom it was effected. How good it would have been had the spirit of Barnabas prevailed all through the church's history.

Another thing characterized this good man, Barnabas. He evidently recognised his own limitations. He felt that another than himself was the one to be specially used to instruct these Gentile converts, and so he went off to fetch Saul. Barnabas appears to have been the exhorter and Saul the teacher, and for a whole year they gave themselves to this work. And at Antioch, significantly enough, the name "Christian" first sprang up. It is to be noted how the Lordship of Christ is stressed in this account of the work at Antioch; and where Christ is heartily and consistently owned as Lord, there believers so behave themselves as to provoke the onlookers to name them Christians. By the time Acts 26 is reached we find that Agrippa knows the name. In 1 Peter 4:16 we find the Spirit of God accepting the name as a satisfactory one.

At the end of this chapter we are permitted to see how freely servants of God, such as prophets, moved about between the various

churches. Gifts, granted in the church, are to be used in a universal and not merely a local way. So it came to pass that through Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, the church at Antioch was apprized of a coming famine, and took steps in advance to meet the anticipated need of the saints in Judaea. Thus early did the Gentile believers have opportunity to express love towards their Jewish brethren.

ACTS 12

THIS CHAPTER HAS somewhat the nature of a parenthesis. We are again carried back to Jerusalem, to hear of Herod's persecution of the saints, and of how God dealt with him. James the brother of John fell a victim. He was one of the three specially favoured on the mount of Transfiguration, in Gethsemane, and on other occasions. Why the Lord did not interfere on his behalf, as He did for Peter, who can tell? But He did not, and the first of the Apostolic band fell. Herod was cultivating the favour of the Jews, just as Pilate was when he crucified the Lord; and, seeing that the Jews were pleased, he proceeded to arrest Peter. So again we find the Jew playing the part which has brought upon them "wrath...to the uttermost," according to 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.

Peter's arrest sent the church to its knees. Their appeal was to God and not to man. The last twelve words of verse 5 set forth in a remarkable way the essentials of effectual prayer. It was "to God," and therefore *real* prayer. It was "of the church," and therefore *united* prayer. It was "for him," and therefore *definite*-not wandering away over a hundred and one requests, but concentrated on a special object. It was "without ceasing," and therefore fervent and importunate-the kind of prayer that obtains answers, according to Luke 18:1 and James 5:16. The prayer of the church brought an angel from heaven to deliver.

Herod had his prisoner in the hands of sixteen soldiers, in chains and behind bars and bolts: rumours as to previous deliverances had possibly reached his ears. All these things were as nothing before the angel, and Peter was conducted forth to freedom. Many were still praying in the house of Mary, mother of Mark and sister of Barnabas. Thither Peter betook himself. While they were still beseeching God for Peter's deliverance the delivered man knocked at the door. Lo! the answer to their prayer was there. They could hardly credit it, and in this they were very like to ourselves. God's answer went beyond their faith.

The Jews were disappointed and Herod was balked of his prey. The only people who died the next day were the unfortunate soldiers

responsible for Peter's safe keeping. But God had not finished with Herod, though Herod was finished with Peter. The wretched king glorified himself before the people of Tyre and Sidon with the throne and apparel of royalty and a public oration. It was a huge diplomatic success, and the people accorded to him, and he accepted, honours due to "a god." At that moment the angel of the Lord smote him. He, a mere mortal, accepted honours that were due to God. Today powerful, yet mortal, men are coming very near to doing the same thing, and we may yet see them also disappear in miserable fashion from the stage of life.

Twice in this chapter do we get the angel of the Lord smiting. He "smote Peter on the side," and in result he "*raised him up.*" He smote Herod, and instantly *laid him low*, for "he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." Human flesh has often been eaten of worms after death, but in Herod's case it was before death. A more horrible end could hardly be conceived. With James, Herod was allowed to have his fling; with Peter, he was foiled; and then God made a fool of him, requiring his soul amid scenes of indescribable misery and anguish.

Verse 24 supplies us with a striking contrast. As the worms grew and multiplied in Herod's wretched body so did the Word of God grow and multiply in the hearts of many. When it pleases God to overthrow an adversary He need not exert Himself: a few worms will suffice to accomplish His end. The Word of God is that which accomplishes His end of blessing in the souls of men.

Verse 25 picks up the thread from the last verse of the previous chapter. Barnabas and Saul had gone to Jerusalem with the gift from the Antioch saints, and having fulfilled this service they returned, taking Mark with them. As we open the next chapter, our thoughts are centred once more on Antioch and the work there.

ACTS 13

This large church, composed mainly of Gentiles, had no less than five prophets and teachers in its midst. Their names are given and prove very instructive; for one had a surname which probably indicates that he was a black man (Niger means Black), one was sufficiently distinguished to have been a foster-brother of Herod, Barnabas was a Hellenistic Jew, Saul had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees, and Lucius may have been a Gentile. Thus it was quite early manifest that race and breeding are not the things that count most decisively in the church, but the gift which is bestowed from on high. These men not only ministered to the saints for their instruction, but also to the Lord in thanksgiving, intercession and fasting; and it was in one of these private seasons that the Holy Ghost gave definite instructions that Barnabas and Saul should be set apart specially to go forth with the Gospel into the Gentile world.

The first and last of the five were chosen for this mission. The others prayed for them and identified themselves with them in their coming service by the laying on of hands. This laying on of hands was not what is today called "ordination," for the two chosen men were already in the full exercise of their ministry. The laying on of hands does uniformly express identification. The others said in effect, "We are entirely with you in your mission;" so that in full fellowship, and without jealousy or rivalry, they sent them forth.

Even so, it was really the Holy Ghost who sent them forth, as verse 4 says; and to Cyprus, the old home of Barnabas, they went first of all, Mark his nephew accompanying them. Arrived at Paphos, they had the encouragement of finding the chief ruler of the island ready for the Word of God; but at the same time they ran into Satanic opposition. Opposition from the powers of darkness is an encouraging sign, rather than the reverse.

Elymas was an apostate Jew, who had sold himself to the service of the devil, and he became the chief opponent of the Gospel at Paphos. But just as Satan's power was expressed in him, so the power of the Holy Spirit energized Saul, and there was a very striking and drastic proof given that, "greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the

world" (1 John 4:4). The true character of the man was unmasked, and the hand of the Lord laid upon him in judgment. It is striking that Saul should now be used to bring upon another something similar to that which had fallen on himself. After three days the scales had fallen from the eyes of Saul. On Elymas there descended a mist and darkness, which fitly matched the misty darkness of his mind. The deputy believed, and it was the *teaching* of the Lord that impressed him rather than the miracle.

From this point in the narrative Luke gives Saul his new name of Paul (meaning, Little), and at the same time we see the Spirit thrusting him into the leading position in service and ministry, so that in verse 13, "Paul and his company," is the phrase used. There is a designed connection, we think, between the change of name and the change of position. He who is *Little* becomes the *Leader*; and this illustrates the Lord's words in Matthew 18:4. Did this have something to do with John Mark leaving the company at this juncture, we wonder? Barnabas, his uncle, was being somewhat overshadowed.

At Antioch in Pisidia the rulers of the synagogue invited a message from the visitors, and again Paul is the one to seize upon the opportunity and speak. The record of his preaching is given – verses 17 to 41 – so here we have a valuable insight to his presentation of the Gospel to a mixed audience of Jews and proselytes.

He began with God's choice of their fathers in Egypt and His bringing them out of it, and from that point led them up to God's choice of David, and His promise of a Saviour from that man's seed. He then presented Jesus as being the promised Seed, as borne witness to by John the Baptist. Now the tidings of the salvation which is centred in that Saviour was sent to all his hearers, including, "whosoever among you feareth God;" that is, the Gentile proselytes among them.

He then proceeded to speak of the death and resurrection of Jesus: His death the wicked act of the Jerusalem Jews; His resurrection the act of God, and that resurrection amply verified by the testimony of credible witnesses. Hence he brought them "glad tidings," in a twofold way. First there was the good news of God fulfilling His promise in raising up Jesus. The word, "again," should not occur in the middle of verse 33: that verse refers to our Lord's coming into the world, according to the second Psalm. Then, second, there was the good news that when men had consigned Jesus to death, God had raised Him up from the dead, never to die again. Paul found an allusion to

resurrection in “the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:3), as well as in the well-known words, he quotes from Psalm 16. The one was written *about* David, and the other written *by* David; but in neither case did the Spirit of God really refer *to* David, as verse 36 says. David having “in his own age served the will of God,” (margin), did see corruption, and the words of his Psalm could only refer to Christ.

Having thus established the resurrection of Christ, Paul brought his address to a climax by the announcement of forgiveness of sins through “this Man,” risen from the dead. The announcement was made in oracular fashion as a Divine proclamation. There was no quoting of Old Testament Scripture for this. “Be it known,” he said. What he announced they were to know, for really it was God who was speaking through his lips. In 1 Corinthians 2:13, we find Paul claiming the inspiration of the Holy Ghost for his spoken words; and this being so we have no hesitation in according the same inspiration to his writings, preserved for us in the New Testament. When Paul said, “*Be it known,*” then those who believed might *know*. And in just the same way *we know*, when we believe the Holy Scriptures.

Paul not only made plain this general announcement of forgiveness; he also declared the positive result which would follow belief in the Gospel message. By Christ the believer is *justified* from all things. By the works of the law not one of us can be justified at all: by the faith of Christ we are justified from all. We are cleared from every charge that would have stood against us, and invested with “the righteousness which is of God by faith.” All this hinges upon faith in Christ, risen from the dead. It is “through this Man,” and “by Him.”

Paul closed his address with a word of warning, and this was in keeping with what he states in Romans 1:16-18. In the Gospel “righteousness of God” is revealed, as we have just seen in verse 39 of our chapter; but it is revealed against the dark background of the “wrath of God.” Hence his solemn words in verses 40 and 41. The way he quotes from Habakkuk 1:5 is very striking, for the allusion there is plainly to the Chaldeans. However though the Chaldeans were an immediate fulfilment of the prophecy, it evidently is going to have a larger, ultimate fulfilment in the judgment of the Day of the Lord. No prophecy of the Scripture is of any “private interpretation.”

Verses 43-48 show that the Gospel is indeed the “power of God” unto salvation to all who believe. Jews and proselytes were first reached; but when the mass of the Jews, filled with envy, began violent

opposition, the Apostles definitely turned to the Gentiles with the offer of salvation, finding in Isaiah 49:6 a plain command of the Lord to do so. Light and salvation for the Gentiles had been God's purpose from the days of old. Many Gentiles did believe, and thereby it became manifest that they had been ordained to eternal life. *We do not know* who are ordained to eternal life, so we cannot foretell who will believe. When we find anyone really believing, *we know at once* that they are ordained to eternal life.

Not only in Antioch was the Word preached, but also in all the surrounding region; and the prosperity of the work stirred up such a persecution that Paul and Barnabas had to depart. We might have considered it disastrous that these new disciples should *get* persecution and *lose* the preachers. The work in their souls however was of so solid a character that instead of being depressed they were filled with joy and with the Holy Ghost. Without a doubt disciples are more frequently damaged by prosperity than by persecution.

ACTS 14

In Iconium, the next place visited, the work was similar to that at Antioch. The synagogue was visited and the Word so preached that a multitude of both Jews and Gentiles believed. Again the Jews became the opposers and persecutors, and in view of riotous doings the Apostles fled to other cities.

At Lystra a remarkable miracle was wrought through Paul. A man lame from birth was healed; a miracle almost the exact counterpart of the one wrought by Peter, which we read of in chapter 3. That was done in the very heart of Judaism, and while it gave a great opening for testimony it also brought upon the Apostles the wrath of the Jewish leaders. This was done in the presence of the heathen, who interpreted the wonderful happening in the light of their false beliefs, and would have made an idolatrous festival, had not the Apostles protested, seizing the opportunity to declare to them the true and living God, who is the Creator. The Lycaonians would have done exactly what Paul charges the heathen with doing in Romans 1:25, saying they “worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever.”

The fickleness of men is illustrated in verse 19. The people who would have deified Paul are very easily persuaded against him by certain Jews who followed his footsteps, and they stone him, as they thought, to death. Paul now undergoes the very thing he had helped to bring upon Stephen. In the case of Stephen God did not intervene; in Paul's case He did. Whether Paul was really dead, or whether only battered nearly to the point of death, we have no means of knowing: whichever it was, his restoration, almost in an instant, to ordinary health and strength, was a miracle. The next day he journeyed forth to preach the Gospel in another city, just as though nothing had happened to him.

Their outward journey terminated at Derbe, having been one of evangelistic labours and sufferings. On the return journey they gave themselves to pastoral work, so that the souls of the disciples might be confirmed and established in the faith. It is worthy of note that they did not hide from the disciples that suffering was before them, but rather they told them that it was inevitable. They did not say that we

may through *some* tribulation enter the Kingdom, but that we *must* through *much* tribulation.

That saying stands true today. We may try to evade the tribulation, but we do not succeed. If through cowardice we shrink from conflict with the world, we get the trouble in our daily circumstances, or even in the bosom of the church of God . The Apostle Paul himself wrote, “Our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; *without* were *fightings*, *within* were *fears* ” (2 Cor. 7:5). Today we have to say something similar, only we so often have to reverse the latter clause and say that we have too many fears as to the “without” to do much fighting, and consequently we are too often involved in fightings within the circle of the saints of God – it is, “*without* were *fears*, *within* were *fightings*.” Either way, however, the tribulation is ours.

On the return journey they also found that amongst the older converts some were manifesting the character that marked them out as fit to exercise spiritual supervision, and these men they ordained as elders. Apostolic discernment was needed in making the choice, and also a real spirit of dependence on God – hence, prayer – and a refusal of the desires of the flesh – hence, fasting. And when the elders were chosen so that all might recognize them, they did not commit the rest of the believers into the hands of the elders. No, they “commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” Each believer was set in direct connection and communion with the Lord by faith. Elders were instituted, not to *intercept* the faith of the saints, but to *incite* it to more reality and depth.

Cyprus was not touched on the return journey, and from Attalia they took ship for Antioch direct; and there, the church being gathered together, they told the story of their mission. They had not been sent by the church at Antioch but by the Holy Ghost, yet the church had a very deep interest in these servants who had gone forth from their midst. On their part the servants told what “God had done with them.” God was the worker, and they but the instruments He had been pleased to use; and it was God who had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. The first missionary journey had proved this beyond all dispute.

Yet, though this was so, the manner of their service was not beyond all dispute. No one challenged them in Antioch itself during their long stay there, but then most in that church were of Gentile extraction. When certain men came down from the Jerusalem area, all was

changed by the teaching that the observance of circumcision was absolutely necessary for salvation, and Paul and Barnabas had not practised this. When reading the early part of chapter 11, we saw that the Judaizing party in Jerusalem had questioned Peter's action in evangelizing Gentiles, in the person of Cornelius and his friends. Their opposition was overruled, and it was accepted that the Gospel was to go to the Gentiles. The point now raised was that, even admitting that, they must submit to circumcision in order to be saved, and the circumcision must be "after the manner of Moses," thus definitely connecting it with the law system. This new demand was firmly resisted by Paul and Barnabas, and ultimately they and others went up to the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question.

ACTS 15

Fourteen years had passed since Paul's first brief visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, as recorded in Acts 9:26-29, and in Galatians 1:18. The whole of Galatians 2 furnishes us with remarkable insight to what was at stake in the discussion, which was started at Antioch and carried to its conclusion at Jerusalem; nothing short of *the truth and liberty of the Gospel*. We also discover that though in our chapter it says, "they determined" that Paul and others should go to Jerusalem, Paul himself went up "by revelation;" that is, the Lord distinctly revealed to him that he was to go. Also we find that Paul was led to take a very firm line in the matter; giving place to those who opposed him, "by subjection, no, not for an hour;" taking Titus, who was a Greek, with him, and declining to have any compulsion laid upon him as to his being circumcised. The Galatian epistle clearly shows that Paul was fully assured what was the mind of God in this matter, but that it was revealed to him that he should consent to it being referred to Jerusalem for settlement there.

In this of course we see the wisdom and power of God. Had Paul attempted to settle the matter, and act on his own apostolic authority at Antioch, there might easily have been a breach between himself and the other Apostles. As it was, the decision in favour of liberty being accorded to the Gentile converts, was reached in the very place where, had not God controlled by His Spirit, the decision would have gone the other way. But in saying this we are anticipating.

On the journey to Jerusalem the tidings of God's grace to the Gentiles caused great joy to the brethren, but in Jerusalem itself the issue was soon raised. Those who contended for the observance of the law by the converts from among the Gentiles, were believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. For the present they retained their Phariseeism, though believers. This occasioned a formal coming together of the Apostles and elders to go into the question as before God.

There was much "disputing," or "discussion," and then Peter made a decisive pronouncement, by referring to the case of Cornelius, in which he had himself been involved. He pointed out that the heart-

knowing God had borne witness to these Gentile converts by giving to them the Holy Spirit, just as He had given Him to themselves on the Day of Pentecost. These Gentiles had been *cleansed*, as the vision of the great sheet indicated, and God had wrought the purification in their hearts *by faith*, and not as a matter of mere ceremonial cleansing. The fact was that God had already decided the point in principle by what He did in the case of Cornelius. We can now understand why so much space is devoted to that case in the Acts; for this is the third time that we have it brought before us.

The law was a yoke, which God had placed upon the neck of the Jew, and both they and their fathers had found its weight to be crushing. To endeavour to impose it upon necks, that had never been subjected to it by God, would be to tempt God Himself. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ was the only hope of salvation, whether to Jew or Gentile. The way verse 11 reads is quite remarkable. It is not, "they, Gentiles, shall be saved even as we, Jews," but, "we shall be saved even as they." The salvation of the Gentiles could not be on any other ground than grace; and the Jew must come in on this ground too.

Let us not miss the lovely contrast between Matthew 11:29, and verse 10 of our chapter. The crushing yoke of the law is not to be laid upon our Gentile necks, but because of that we are not left yokeless. We take upon us the light and easy yoke of the blessed Jesus, who has become to us the Revealer of the Father.

From Peter's words it is evident how thoroughly he had learned the lesson he was taught in connection with Cornelius. He pointed out how the thing had been settled there; and so the way was cleared for Barnabas and Paul to rehearse how God had worked in miraculous power among the Gentiles. Barnabas is now mentioned first, for evidently he, free, from any jealousy or envy, could speak more freely of the things done, mainly through Paul. Their testimony was that what God had done in *practice* through them agreed with what He established *in principle* through Peter.

Peter, Barnabas and Paul having had their say, James spoke. He seems to have had a place of special responsibility in Jerusalem, and Galatians 2:12 indicates that he was noted as holding strict views as to the measure of association that was permissible in the church of God between Jews and Gentiles. Yet he endorsed Peter's declaration and then pointed out that Old Testament scripture supported it. Amos had predicted how days would come when the Name of God would be

called upon Gentiles. If we turn to his prophecy we can see that he had millennial conditions in view, so James did not quote his words as though they were being fulfilled, but as being in *agreement with* what they had just heard.

The words in which James summarized Peter's testimony are worthy of special note. "God ... did *visit* the Gentiles, *to take out of them a people for His Name.*" This is God's programme for the present dispensation. The Gospel is not sent forth among the nations with the object of converting them as nations, and so making the earth a fit place for Christ to return to, but to convert individuals, who thereby are taken out from the nations to be His special possession – "a people for His Name." This is a fact of a most fundamental nature. If we are wrong on this point we shall be wrong as to the whole character of the dispensation in which we live. The nations will only be subdued when *God's judgments* are in the earth, as Isaiah 26:9 so plainly says. The Gospel goes forth in the earth in order that *an election* from both Jews and Gentiles may be called out; and *that election is the church of God*

Having stated this, James gave what he judged to be the mind of God as to the question at issue. His "sentence," or "judgment," was that the yoke of the law should not be placed on the neck of Gentile Christians, but that they should merely be told to observe certain restrictions in matters as to which they had been notoriously careless. Idolatry and fornication were known as evil, even before the law was given, and so too was the eating of blood, as Genesis 9:4 shows. God knows from the outset all that He will develop as time goes on. The calling and election from the Gentiles was new to them, but not to God. It was theirs to move on with God; and as for Moses, his words were well to the fore in every synagogue every sabbath day.

The judgment that James expressed carried the whole council with it. They had had before them first, Peter's testimony as to what God had done in connection with Cornelius: second, through Barnabas and Paul an account of God's actings during their missionary journey: third, the voice of Scripture, as quoted by James. *What God had said agreed with what God had done.* They had come together to seek His mind, and by His word and His actions they plainly discerned it; and all were of one accord. Thus a difficult question, which might have divided the whole church, was settled, and ended by drawing them together. When Barnabas and Paul went up to Jerusalem, it was as

men whose service was open to challenge and suspicion. When they left they were bearers of a letter in which they were spoken of as “our beloved Barnabas and Paul.”

They were also spoken of as “men that have hazarded [or *delivered up*] their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To hazard one’s life is to risk it, as a gambler risks his money on a throw of the dice: to deliver up one’s life is to accept death as a certainty rather than a risk. Anyone who delivers up his life in this fashion should be esteemed as beloved in the church of God. This letter from Jewish believers to Gentile believers breathes throughout a spirit of love and fellowship and unity. They were able to say, “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us;” so sure were they that the Holy Spirit had governed their decision. To put the Gentiles under the law would have had the effect of “subverting” their souls.

All this is very much to the point for us today. The same kind of trouble cropped up amongst the Galatians a little later, and the attempt to mix law and grace is often seen in our day. It cannot be done without destroying the fulness of grace and subverting the souls of those who imbibe such teaching. Verses 30-33 of our chapter show how the vindication of grace and the liberty that it brings, contributed to the establishment and joy of the Gentile believers at Antioch. Also Judas and Silas, the delegates from Jerusalem, exercised their prophetic ministry and strengthened the brethren. This shows how freely those who had gift were permitted to exercise it in any place, and in the presence of men whose gift might be in many ways superior to their own – for Paul and Barnabas were now back in Antioch.

Shortly after, Paul proposed to Barnabas that they take another journey with pastoral work in view. The words of verse 36 breathe the spirit of a true pastor, who desires to see how the believers are getting on. The welfare of their souls is the great point before him. The sad thing was that this excellent proposal became the occasion of a breach between these two devoted servants of the Lord. Barnabas proposed that Mark, his nephew, should again accompany them. Paul, remembering his early defection, was against it, and this difference of judgment generated such warm feeling that they parted company, as unable any longer to work together. Barnabas went to Cyprus, where their first journey had started, and Paul towards Asia Minor, where that journey had extended. Paul found a new companion in Silas, and left after the brethren had committed them to the grace of

God. It looks as if Barnabas left hurriedly, before the brethren had time to pray for him.

It ill becomes us to judge these eminent servants of our Lord, but the record certainly seems to infer that Barnabas was too much influenced by natural relationship, and that the sympathy of the brethren lay with Paul. Still the warm feeling and contention lay between them, and the Spirit of God does not hide it. We are not to conceive of Paul as other than a man of like passions to ourselves. He was not perfect, as was his Lord.

ACTS 16

This chapter opens with Paul back at Derbe and Lystra, back, that is, to the scenes where he had suffered the stoning. In those very places he now finds Timothy, who was to become in his latter years such a comfort to him. A happy illustration of how God's government acts in favour of the godly. We are apt to think of it only as acting against the ungodly. Out of the place of Paul's sufferings sprang one of his greatest comforts.

Now as Timothy's father was a Greek he had not been circumcised, and he would not have been acceptable in Jewish circles. Paul knew this and circumcised him; an action which on the surface seems totally at variance with his attitude in regard to Titus – see Galatians 2:3-5. But there the whole truth of the Gospel had been made to hinge on the question, whereas here there was no question at all involved. In Timothy's case it was just a matter of removing something which would have been a hindrance in his service for the Lord, and Paul was not concerned to maintain for himself an appearance of consistency which would have been only skin-deep. Here was a God-given helper in the work, and it was expedient to remove all that would hinder his labours.

Paul's somewhat lengthy sojourn in Asia Minor on this second journey is dismissed in five short verses (5-8). It comprised labours of a pastoral sort, for they went through regions where churches were already established through his earlier labours, and these they instructed to observe what had been settled at the conference in Jerusalem, and they were established and increased in number. Then they went into new regions, Phrygia, Galatia and Mysia, and in these of course they did the work of evangelists. This evidently was the occasion when he had so wonderful a reception from the Galatians, to which he alludes in Galatians 4:13-15. It was also a time in which God exercised very strong control over his movements. When Mysia was reached, Bithynia lay to the north or north-east, and Asia to the south. In both directions he would have gone, if permitted. In the former case he was directly *forbidden* by the Holy Spirit, and in the latter the Spirit did *not suffer* him to go, which apparently indicates guidance of a less direct kind, and more by way of circumstances.

Troas was on the sea coast of Mysia, and here Paul was given positive guidance as to his movements by means of the vision of the man of Macedonia. So here within the compass of five verses we find Divine guidance conveyed to Paul in *three* different ways, twice of a negative sort and once of a positive sort. This should furnish some guidance to any who, very desirous of Divine direction, expect to receive it in some *one* way of their own choosing.

Accepting the vision as giving them God's direction, Paul and his helpers immediately obeyed, and verse 11 shows that God turned the winds in their favour and they had a very rapid passage; for we see, in chapter 20:6, that when years after he took the journey in the reverse direction it occupied five days. At Troas, Luke, the writer of the book, evidently joined Paul, for in verses 4, 6, 7, 8, it is uniformly "they," whereas in verse 10 the pronoun suddenly becomes "we," and that and "us" continue well into the account of the doings at Philippi.

Philippi had the status of a Roman colony, so the Roman element was strong there, and perhaps correspondingly the Jewish element was weak. No synagogue existed, and all that was to be found was a spot outside the city by a river where prayer to the true God was offered. That spot they sought out, and finding only some women assembled they sat down and spoke to them. That did not seem a very promising beginning, but Paul was the kind of man that accepted and utilized small things. He attempted no formal preaching but just sat down and talked in an informal way. This humble beginning had a great ending. A church was established which above others was filled with grace and was a comfort to him.

The work began in the heart of Lydia, which was opened of God. The words, "which worshipped God," indicate that she was a seeker, and had become a proselyte, and now in the Gospel which Paul preached she found the full thing which she sought. The work was quiet but very real, for she was baptized and her household; and she at once identified herself with the Lord's servants by opening her house to them.

The next incident was the encounter with the female slave who had opened her heart to some dark agent of the devil. She made a pretence of approving Paul and his helpers, and this might have pleased some, who might have argued, "Well, we are servants of God, and if she likes to advertise us, let her!" Paul however was not short-sighted like this. He saw that the devil's patronage is no gain but

a disaster, and he refused her testimony by commanding the evil spirit to come out of her. The spirit had to obey, and her masters knew that their money-making scheme was spoiled. This raised their ire, and Paul and Silas were dragged before the magistrates on a charge worded so as to raise Roman prejudice against them. This stirred the crowd, and also moved the magistrates to excited and un-Romanlike action. No proper trial was held; they were flogged and cast into prison.

Under these circumstances even the jailor acted with extra severity, and night descended upon them in this sorry plight. Were they tempted to falter and doubt, thinking that the vision of the Macedonian man had been a little too visionary? Perhaps; for they were men of like weakness to ourselves. But, if they did, faith soon triumphed, and at the darkest hour they were not only praying but singing praises to God. Suddenly God intervened, and not only by the earthquake. Doors are more often jammed tight by earthquakes than opened; and no ordinary earthquake strikes the shackles from prisoners.

Knowing the severity of Roman law in regard to the custody of prisoners, the jailor was on the verge of suicide when Paul's shout reached his ears. The fact that "he called for a light," (v. 29), shows that they were all in the dark. How did Paul know what the jailor was about to do? Paul's sudden call was evidently inspired by the Spirit of God, and it came as a voice from God to the jailor. Here at last was the Macedonian man! He was trembling: he was on his face before his prisoners! Soon he was asking the great question, which since has been asked by millions of convicted sinners. He received the immortal answer, which has been used to the enlightenment and salvation of countless souls.

We often quote Acts 16:31, but too often we omit the last three words. God loves to identify a man's house with himself and include them in His offer of blessing. Why do we not more often embrace this fact in our faith? We have already had in the chapter the converted woman and her house: now we have the converted man and his house. This surely is most encouraging for all heads of houses who may be reached by the grace of God; since there is no respect of persons with God, and what He is to *one* He is to *all*.

The jailor believed, and showed his faith by his works without a moment's delay. Then, though it was still night, "he and all his" were baptized straightway. This is pretty clear evidence that baptism is not

an ordinance which is *intended* to be a confession of one's faith, and therefore to be observed in public. Had it been that, what an opportunity was missed here! How effectively the thing might have been done the next day when public opinion had veered somewhat in favour of Paul! All must have been confusion in the city after the earthquake, yet the jailor and his house had the links cut with the old life without any delay: for baptism signifies *dissociation*, through the death of Christ.

When the magistrates relented the next day, Paul seized the opportunity to point out to them how they themselves had transgressed, seeing he and Silas were Roman citizens. He did not push the point further, or in any way retaliate. Their way was smoothed however, and they had time to see the brethren and exhort them before taking their departure. From the Epistle to the Philippians we may see how well the work progressed after their departure.

ACTS 17

Luke gives us no details as to what transpired in Amphipolis and Apollonia, but passes on to the happenings in Thessalonica. In this chapter, we notice, the pronoun “we” is not used, so possibly Luke, not being as much involved as Paul and Silas were in the disturbances at Philippi, stayed on there to help the converts further.

Paul first addressed the Jews in their synagogue, as was his custom. Verse 3 gives us the line on which he approached them. He proved from their own Scriptures that the Messiah, when He came, must suffer death and rise from the dead. This established, it was simple to point to Jesus as unquestionably being the Messiah. So in one verse we are given the whole thing in a nut-shell. However long the discourses lasted, the whole point is summed up in these few words, and they stand as guidance for all who would approach the Jew today. Not all believed, but some did, and also many Greek proselytes, and some of the chief women.

At Philippi the riotous proceedings originated with disappointed, moneymaking Gentiles; at Thessalonica unbelieving Jews were at the bottom of even worse opposition and disorder. In stigmatizing Paul and Silas as, “These that have turned the world upside down,” they rendered involuntary tribute to the mighty power of the Gospel, preached with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. They might oppose, but they could not stop its advance.

Paul's service in Thessalonica was cut short by this riot, for he served in the spirit of the Lord's instruction recorded in Matthew 10:23. Hence a move was now made to Berea , where the Jews showed a very different spirit. They had an openness of mind, that is characterized as “more noble,” and when Paul showed them what the Scriptures had foretold, they searched them diligently, and thereby many believed. A mind that is ready and free from prejudice, and that gladly bows to Scripture, is indeed a *noble thing*.

Such hostility to the Word of God marked the Thessalonian Jews however that they pursued Paul to Berea, and in the face of further trouble, Paul slipped away to Athens, outwitting his pursuers by a simple ruse. Silas and Timothy remained at Berea, for evidently the

animosity was now specially directed against Paul. Hence it came to pass that in his visit to Athens, the great centre of Greek culture and wisdom, Paul was solitary and alone, as far as his service was concerned.

Athens was the great centre of Greek learning and philosophy; it was also full of idols. The highest human culture and the grossest idolatry can exist quite amicably side by side. Into the midst of this state of things Paul stepped, and the sight of it painfully excited his spirit. Though still without his companions he could not rest in the presence of it, and so began to testify to both Jews and Gentiles. In this way certain philosophers had their attention drawn to him, and these men, though belonging to opposing schools and treating him with contempt, had their curiosity sufficiently aroused to desire to hear more. Thus it came to pass that the opportunity was given to him to speak before an assemblage of the most cultured intellects of that time.

We are given a glimpse, in verses 18-21, of the conditions that prevailed in Athens. There was immense mental activity, and an insatiable enquiry into new ideas. They spent their time either in telling or hearing "some new thing;" not, of course, just gossip or tittle-tattle but the newest philosophic notions. Hence Paul's preaching of "Jesus and the resurrection" struck them as a great novelty connected with some deities to which hitherto they had been strangers. The Epicureans believed that the highest good was to be found in gratifying one's desires, and the Stoics that it was in repressing them, but what were these new ideas?

Paul opened his address on Mars' hill by telling them that they were too "superstitious" or "given up to demon worship." Amongst their many shrines they even had an altar dedicated to "The unknown god," lest there should be some demon, unknown to them, that needed to be propitiated. He seized upon this and made it the theme of his discourse, for it was perfectly true that the living God was utterly unknown to them. Paul announced to them the God that they knew not; and if we examine the brief report of his discourse we can see how he set God before them. As regards the things of God these cultured Athenians were simply pagans; so here we are instructed how the Gospel should be presented to the heathen.

Paul began by presenting Him as *the God of creation*. This lies at the foundation of everything. If we do not know Him thus, we do not know Him at all. That is why the evolutionary theory works so disastrously.

Its chief attraction to so many is that it enables one to dispense with God altogether, or at least to push Him so far into a remote background as to make Him not worth thinking about. Paul brought Him right into the forefront of the picture he presented; He not only made the world but all things in it. He cannot be contained in men's buildings, nor worshipped as though He needed anything from men's hands. He is Himself the Giver of Life and all things. All men are His creatures, made of one blood, and their times and boundaries determined by Him.

There had remained some glimmerings of light as to this amongst them, and Paul was able to quote some of their own poets as having spoken of mankind as being the offspring of God. In this they were right. Only by faith in Christ Jesus do we become *children* of God, but all men are His *offspring* as His creatures. This being so we ought not to conceive of God as something less than ourselves or as the work of our own hands; and we should be those who seek after Him. His *immanence* is recognized in the words that "In Him we live, and move, and have our being;" yet Paul preached Him as the *transcendent* One, who is Lord of heaven and earth.

But this God of creation is also a *God of forbearance*. Men had not liked to retain God in their knowledge, and so the nations had fallen into ignorance of God. For some centuries the Athenians had been priding themselves on their culture and learning, yet all through they had been in "the times of this *ignorance*," – this ignorance of God – and Paul told them so plainly. Yet God had "winked at," or "overlooked" this ignorance, acting in forbearance, in view of that which He was going to do through Christ.

But now Christ is come, and God proclaims Himself as a *God of righteous judgment*. He has appointed the day when He will take up the reins of government by the Man of His choice, and the whole earth shall be judged and administered in righteousness. In view of this repentance is the only seemly thing for unrighteous men wherever they may be. It is the only right thing, and God commands it.

The pledge of the coming of this day of righteous judgment has been given in the resurrection of the Man of God's choice. Thus finally Paul set God forth as *the God of resurrection*. Something entirely outside all human calculations had taken place. Jesus had been raised from the death into which man consigned Him! Paul started his work in Athens by announcing Jesus and the resurrection amongst the

workers in the market place; he ended on the same theme when speaking to the *thinkers* on Mars' hill.

Their busy brains were revolving in man's world, and hence resurrection lay right outside their field of view. To many of them it seemed an absurdity, and they mocked. Others manifested some interest yet deferred further consideration, as seeing no urgency in the matter. Some however believed, both men and women, and these threw in their lot with Paul. These three classes usually appear when the Gospel reaches any given place: there are the mockers, the procrastinators and the believers.

Paul's stay in Athens was a short one: he did not wait longer there for his companions but went on to Corinth. So it is probable that those who said, "We will hear thee again of this matter," had no opportunity of doing so.

ACTS 18

The chapter opens with Paul at Corinth, and there he met Aquila and Priscilla. The harsh decree of Claudias worked to throw them across Paul's path, and this led to their conversion and then their subsequent service, which earned the high praise of Romans 16:3,4. God overruled the decree of expulsion, for good, making the wrath of man to praise Him; and we may hope and pray that He will work in just the same way in regard to modern decrees against the Jews. With this couple Paul abode, and began his work in the synagogue. Here Silas and Timothy joined him, and Paul's testimony became stronger and more direct. Then, the Jews opposing, he turned to the Gentiles.

"He departed thence" (v. 7); that is, from the synagogue; and carried on his testimony in the house of one, Justus, that was close by. Yet a very definite and large work of God took place, even the ruler of the synagogue being converted. By a vision the Lord encouraged him to boldly speak, with the assurance that he should not be molested there, as he had been elsewhere. So for eighteen months he laboured on. There was an attempt made against him, but under God's hand this was frustrated by the cool indifference of Gallio, the Roman proconsul, who treated the whole matter as one of contentions about words and names, and cared for none of these things. So God can utilize the temperament of a governor, as well as the decree of a Cæsar, to serve His ends, and Paul did not leave Corinth till some time after.

With this long stay in Corinth Paul's second journey drew to its end, and he left for Jerusalem and Antioch via Ephesus, where his stay was but short; he promised to return, "if God will." That God did so will, we see in the next chapter. Verse 18 shows us that Paul still observed Jewish customs, as in the matter of a vow.

At Antioch he now spent "some time," an expression which indicates not a very long period: then he was off on his third journey, and first to scenes of former labours in order to strengthen the disciples. This is always a much needed work since there are so many influences which make for the weakening of disciples. We pick up Paul's story in the first verse of the next chapter, and verses 24-28 are a parenthesis

dealing with the full enlightenment of Apollos and his happy service, in which we discover that, though Paul had passed so quickly from Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla had remained there, and through them the Lord furnished Apollos with exactly what he needed.

Apollos possessed the natural endowment of eloquence – he was a master of words. By diligent study he had become “mighty in the Scriptures.” Yet, when he came to Ephesus he was not well-informed as to God's intervention in Christ. He only knew of things up to the introduction of Jesus by John's baptism. What he knew, he diligently taught in the synagogue. Aquila and Priscilla, hearing him, at once perceived his lack, and performed the delightful service of showing him hospitality, in order to instruct him more fully in what had come to pass through Christ. Thus God used these saints, of no particular public gift, to fairly launch a very gifted vessel on his career of service. From Ephesus he went to Corinth, and not only did he convince many Jews as to Christ, but also he much helped on the believers. How much of the reward of his effective service will go to the credit of Aquila and Priscilla, who shall say?

ACTS 19

As we open this chapter, we find Paul arriving at Ephesus after Apollos had left, and there finding certain disciples, who were in a similar state of ignorance as to the full gospel message. They were truly “disciples,” and they had believed as much of the facts concerning Christ as they had heard. The Holy Ghost is given to those who believe “the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). They had not believed it, because they had not heard it, and consequently they had not received the Spirit. Like Apollos, they had only heard the earliest beginnings of things, connected with John the Baptist, and had been baptised with his baptism. When Paul had instructed them further, and they had been baptised as owning the Lordship of Jesus, and Paul had laid his hands on them, the Spirit came on them and they both spoke with tongues and prophesied. Thus impressive evidence was granted that they had now entered into the full Christian state.

Paul did not in any way blame these twelve men. The transition to the full light of the Gospel was gradual in those days of slow communications. In the beginning of Hebrews 6, we do get things said which imply reproach. There were those amongst the Jewish believers who were blameworthy for not “leaving the word of the beginning of Christ” (margin), and going on to the perfection of the full Gospel. John’s ministry had a great deal to say as to “repentance from dead works,” and of “baptisms,” and of “eternal judgment,” but by the time that Epistle was written the full truth of Christ had been sounded abroad, and they ought to have embraced it, even if it cut across many of their Jewish thoughts. There is *no excuse for us*, if we do not go on to perfection.

These men being blessed, Paul turned his attention to the synagogue, where he had briefly testified on his earlier visit, and for three months he reasoned with the Jews, persuading them of the Gospel. At the end of that time he perceived that his work there was finished. The remnant according to the election of grace was manifest, and the rest were hardened, so he made the cleavage complete by leaving the synagogue and carrying the disciples with him, to continue his service in the school of Tyrannus – just as at Corinth he had left the

synagogue for the house of Justus. Thereby it was made quite manifest that what God was establishing was not a fresh group of enlightened believers amongst the Jews, but a new thing altogether, embracing both Jews and Gentiles.

So distinct and powerful a work was wrought there that Paul spent two years of labour in that city. God supported him by miraculous manifestations of a special nature, and the whole province was evangelised. As is ever the case, a powerful working of God unmasks the working of Satan, and excites his opposition. The rest of this chapter shows how this came about at Ephesus .

The first move was to oppose by way of imitation. The seven sons of Sceva thought that they too might cast out demons by using the name of the Lord Jesus. But they did not know Him. He was not really Lord to them, and so they could only speak of Him as "Jesus whom Paul preacheth," omitting His title as Lord. The demon at once showed that he did not know them, and he was not deceived by their second-hand use of the name of Jesus. The seven men were utterly discomfited, and their disgrace was known to all. In result the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

This led to a great and public triumph over Satan and the dark arts, by which men sought to maintain contact with him. Many that had believed were moved to confess how formerly they had been entangled, and the evil things they had done. Many others moved away from this dreadful evil and publicly burned the books that dealt with these things, in spite of their monetary value. The Word of God grew and prevailed, and this Satanic evil grew less and suffered defeat. It is a sorrowful reflection for us that in our day less attention than formerly is being paid to the Word, and spiritist practices are on the increase.

In these practices Satan approaches men with all the wiles of the serpent. Defeated thus, on this occasion, he had recourse to action in which he revealed himself as the roaring lion. He worked through the cupidity of men. The success of the Gospel had imperilled the trade of the silversmiths, and it was not difficult to attempt to revive their trade under cover of zeal for the reputation of their goddess Diana. Was her greatness to be despised and her magnificence to be destroyed? Here was excellent camouflage for their real concern as to their own money-making prospects!

Their cry of “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” was a spark that set the whole city alight, for Satan had been at work manufacturing the inflammable material. There ensued the alarming riot, to which the Apostle alludes in his second Epistle to the Corinthians, when he and his friends “were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life” (1:8). The excited Ephesians were ready to put the sentence of death *upon* Paul, but as he goes on to tell us, “we had the sentence of death *in ourselves*, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead.” God did deliver him “from so great a death,” but evidently the danger was so overwhelming that Paul likens his deliverance to a resurrection from the dead.

From the account in Acts we can see how God made use of one and another in working the deliverance – certain of the chiefs of Asia; Alexander, who distracted attention from Paul; the town clerk with his diplomatic talk. The majority of the wild demonstrators had no idea exactly why they were demonstrating, and the town clerk reminded them that the Roman authorities might turn the tables on them and accuse them of sedition. It is worthy of note that he was able to say of Paul and his companions, they are “neither temple-plunderers, nor speak injuriously of your goddess” (New Translation); which shows that they had carefully avoided all that might have given offence. They went in for the *positive* preaching of the Gospel rather than the *negative* work of exposing the follies of idolatry.

This great uproar ended Paul's service in Ephesus, and he departed for Macedonia, as the first verse of chapter 20 records. It is of interest at this point to turn again to 2 Corinthians, and read verses 12 and 13 of chapter 2, and then 5-7 of chapter 7. From these verses we gather that Paul made a short stay at Troas on his outward journey to Macedonia, but owing to his anxiety to meet Titus and hear news of the Corinthian saints, he left for Macedonia, in spite of the open door for service. Arrived in Macedonia, he was still in great disquietude and trouble, yet there Titus did appear and he was comforted. So, evidently the trouble in Ephesus was followed by further trouble both at Troas and in Macedonia. Yet all this side of things is passed over in silence as far as Acts is concerned. Luke could hardly put on record these more intimate details of the Apostle's experiences: we learn of them from his own pen.

ACTS 20

In Acts we are simply told that Paul gave much exhortation to the saints in Macedonia, that he visited Greece, and that to avoid the persecuting Jews he returned through Macedonia on his way back to Asia. Verse 4 gives us the names of his travelling companions on this return journey, though they went ahead across the sea and waited for him at Troas. In verse 5 Luke again uses the pronoun “us,” which shows that at this point he again made one of the party. Paul, Luke and others had a voyage of five days, which brought them again to Troas, where not long before “a door was opened ... of the Lord.” The following verses of our chapter show that a great interest in the things of God still was found in that place.

Paul only spent a week in Troas, yet during that time there occurred the memorable meeting recorded in verses 7-12, and we are furnished with a very delightful picture of the simplicity and zeal which characterized those days. It had become the custom of the disciples there to meet for the breaking of bread – the Lord's supper – on the first day of the week. Not the sabbath, but the following day, when the Lord rose from the dead, was selected for this, though it was not a day of leisure, such as the day before would have been for those who were Jews. Hence the Christians met in the evening when the work of the day was done. An upper chamber was their meeting place, “church buildings” being unknown. Paul, with so few days at his disposal, seized the opportunity to discourse to them; and they were so full of interest that they remained all night listening to his words.

It is easy to picture the scene. The crowded chamber; the youth perched in the window opening; the many lights adding to the hot oppression of the drowsy air floating out of the window; the sudden interruption as Eutychus collapses and falls. However the power of God was so manifested through Paul that instead of this episode breaking up the meeting and distracting everyone from Paul's message, their hearts were comforted and confirmed, to settle down and listen till daybreak. The Apostle was now starting his final journey to Jerusalem, the rightness of which may be open to question, but there can be no doubt that the Spirit of God was working through him just as of old. No more remarkable miracle than this was wrought

through Paul. The story is marked by the absence of what is ceremonial and official, but it pulsates with power. In popular Christianity today the ceremonial holds the field and the power is absent. Alas, that so it should be!

The day having come, Paul left Troas afoot; Luke and his other companions putting to sea and picking him up at Assos. Arrived at Miletus, he called to him the elders of the church at Ephesus that he might deliver a charge to them, under the conviction that he would not see them again. His touching address seems to fall naturally into three parts.

In the first part he reviews his own ministry among them; this extends over verses 18-27. His first words were, "Ye know, from the first ... after what manner I have been with you at all seasons." Then, after speaking of *the manner* of his work, he proceeds to *the matter* that characterized it. In both manner and matter we may take him as a model for ourselves.

In the first place his work was *service*. He was not a great ecclesiastical dignitary lording it over the flock of God, but a servant; serving the saints indeed, yet primarily serving the Lord in serving them, and doing it always from the earliest days to the last. Serving moreover with *all humility of mind*, as has been so evident in earlier chapters. He was not a man who expected everyone to give way to him or serve him: he was the helper of others, working with his own hands in order to do so. Again it was with *tears*, and in the midst of many *temptations* which came from the Jews. Tears speak of deep feeling and exercise of heart; whilst the temptations show that he was continually confronted by difficulties and opposition.

He was also marked by *faithfulness* in the declaration of the truth and in its application to the saints. He did not court that cheap popularity which comes from withholding things which may not be palatable, but always aimed at their profit. And further, he did not confine himself to public preaching, which often means a good bit of notice and approbation, but gave himself to that *house to house* work, which is much less noticed but often far more effectual. All this shows "what manner" he had been amongst them. But there is also that of which he speaks in verse 24; his utter *devotion* to the ministry committed to him, and to the One from whom he received it. He had delivered up his life for this purpose, and so no anticipation of trouble or even death itself was going to move him. When a servant of God adds to his

faithfulness a devotion that does not flinch at death, there is bound to be power in his ministry.

Then as to the matter that characterized his ministry, he mentions three themes. First the Gospel, which had been entrusted to him, and which involved his testifying everywhere and to all, “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Gospel announces “the grace of God,” which has been made known in Christ, in His death for our sins, His resurrection for our justification; it leads on our side to repentance and faith. That had been consistently the theme of his preaching.

He had also preached “the kingdom of God,” but this had been among, not “all,” but “*ye* all.” That is, he had everywhere preached the kingdom *amongst the disciples*. This evidently has a present bearing. No doubt he spoke of the kingdom which is to be publicly established, when he spoke of the things to come; but he also kept before them that they had been already brought under the authority of God in receiving Christ as Lord, and he showed them what it meant practically to be subject to God's holy will. It is noticeable for instance that in his epistles Paul is never content with setting forth truth in the abstract; he always proceeded to enforce the conduct which the truth indicated as being the will of God for them.

Then, thirdly, he declared to them “all the counsel of God.” He brought them into the light of all that God has counselled for Christ and the church and the world to come. This gave them the knowledge of what hitherto had been kept secret, and showed them that God had higher thoughts than His previously revealed purposes in regard to Israel . This third theme of his ministry was the one that stirred up such furious opposition on the part of many of his Jewish hearers and finally led to his imprisonment. Hence his saying, “I have *not shunned* to declare.” If only he had shunned this part of his ministry, he might have had a far more peaceful time in his service and avoided many troubles; for God's counsel involved the bringing in of the Gentiles, according to the truth of the church. He knew this, yet he did not flinch.

An all-round ministry of the Word of God today must include these three themes – the Gospel of God, the kingdom of God, the counsel of God.

In verses 28-31, we find the second part of his address, in which he

exhorts and warns them. The Holy Ghost had made them overseers amongst the flock which is the church of God. That flock was not theirs but God's by right of purchase, and they were to feed or shepherd it. But first they were to take heed to themselves, for if a man does not first take heed to himself how can he care for the flock? Moreover they were to watch and be on their guard against the adversaries, remembering how Paul himself had warned them with deep feeling for three years. Is it not a fact that this ministry of warning has almost lapsed through disuse?

Here Paul warns the elders of two main sources of mischief: first, the grievous wolves entering from without; second, the rising up of perverting men within. By "wolves" he meant without a doubt men who were real agents of the devil; the sort that Peter speaks of as bringing in "damnable heresies." How this prediction has been fulfilled church history bears witness; as it also witnesses to the mischief wrought by men who have risen up from the midst of the elders themselves, speaking "perverse" or "*perverted*" things. These are men who very possibly are true believers but they give a *twist* to their teachings which perverts the truth. Thus they make themselves leaders of parties and centres of attraction to those whom they mislead. They attract to themselves instead of leading to Christ. In these words Paul sketched the future of what we know as Christendom.

It is for this reason perhaps that we do not find in the Scripture any instruction as to the perpetuating of the elderhood in an official way beyond the lifetime of the Apostle. If out of the elders are to come these workers of mischief it is as well that we are left to thankfully recognize and accept those whom God may raise up, without their having an official appointment. In the case of men speaking perverted things, their official appointment would only be used to sanction what is wrong.

In the third part of his address Paul indicated the resources that would remain in spite of all that would happen. His *words* were brief and comprised in one verse, but his *matter* of the utmost weight and importance. Our great resource is in God and not in man. He did not commend them to the other apostles: he certainly could not to the elderhood, for he was addressing elders, and out of their midst workers of mischief were to come. God, and God alone, is the resource of His people. But then He has given His Word, which reveals Himself. Formerly He spoke through Moses, as recorded in

the Old Testament: that was the Word of *His demand* upon men. Now He has spoken in Christ, as recorded in the New Testament; and that is the Word of *His grace*. To this Word we are specially commended, for it is able to build us up in the faith, and to give us in spiritual power and enjoyment that inheritance along with all the sanctified, which is ours. The inheritance is ours by faith in Christ (see Acts 26:18), but it is ministered to us in present power by the Word of His grace.

The importance of this thirty-second verse for us today can hardly be exaggerated. God and His Word remain for us, whatever may betide. No power of evil can touch God. He remains, and we may keep in touch with Him in prayer, in communion, in thanksgiving and worship. His Word remains, for He has watched over it in His providence and preserved it to us. Yet, of course, it is the object of ceaseless attacks by the enemy. All too soon it was nearly smothered by the traditions of the Fathers; then it was buried in an unknown tongue and withdrawn from the people; now that it is freely available it is violently criticised, and every attempt is made to destroy its authority. Following in the steps of Judas, great men greet it with a kiss, saying, "Hail, master of beautiful language!" but only to betray it to those who would tear from it every vestige of Divine authority. And, in spite of all, it remains as the resource of the believing and obedient heart.

Paul closed his address by again referring to the uprightness and sincerity that had marked him. Far from desiring to acquire, he had been a giver to others. He put on record a word of the Lord Jesus which is not recorded in the Gospels, and that word he had exemplified. He had earlier spoken of having shewed them as well as having taught them (v. 20), and he repeats that he had shewed them all things. He practised before them what he preached to them. And it is the shewing that tells so effectively.

Paul was called to be a pattern to us both as saint and servant, hence we are given this inspired record of his review of his service, and measuring ourselves against it we are deeply humbled. His words to men over, he went to his knees in prayer with them all, amidst their tears. It must have been an affecting scene. The word used for "kissed" is one which means to kiss ardently, the word which is used for the kisses bestowed by the father on the prodigal in Luke 15. Yet perhaps we detect an element of weakness in the fact that they sorrowed most of all that they could not hope to see him again. Might they not have sorrowed even more that God's fair church was to be

ravaged by wolves and damaged by perverting men?

ACTS 21

As we start this chapter, we see that Luke was still with Paul and his company, and we trace their journey up to Jerusalem. Arrived at Tyre, they evidently sought for disciples, if any were there, and found some. Through these unnamed men the Spirit gave a message to Paul to the effect that he should not go on to Jerusalem. To the Ephesians he had spoken of being bound in his own spirit to go up. Evidently his own inward conviction was so strong that he did not accept the word through the humble men of Tyre. It seems to be a case of his allowing powerful convictions to override the voice of the Spirit reaching him from without. There we must leave it, only observing that if so, we are permitted to see in the succeeding history how God overruled the mistake for ultimate good, though it meant much trouble for Paul.

Leaving Tyre there was another of these beautiful impromptu prayer meetings, just as, arrived at Cæsarea, we have a glimpse of the Christian hospitality of those days. Philip, the evangelist of chapter 8, was their host. His daughters furnish us with examples of women having prophetic gifts, which they exercised doubtless in accord with Scriptural instructions for the service of women.

In that city further testimony was rendered through the prophet Agabus as to what lay before Paul at Jerusalem. Again we see a touching display of affection for Paul, on the part both of his companions and the saints at Cæsarea: a display also of Paul's readiness to lay down his life for the name of the Lord Jesus. Incidentally we see indicated the wise course when a difference of opinion exists which cannot be removed. We all have *to hold our peace*, only desiring that in the matter *the will of the Lord*, whatever it is, may be done.

Having reached Jerusalem, Paul reported to James and the elders what God had wrought through him among the Gentiles. They glorified the Lord in this, for they were prepared to acknowledge them in Christ, in keeping with what had been decided at the conference, of which we read in chapter 15. The Gentiles were not to be put under the yoke of the law. But whether believing Jews should observe their old customs was another question. The Jerusalem brethren urged upon Paul that

he should take the opportunity of four men having a vow to associate himself with them, especially as it was alleged against him that he had been teaching Jews to forsake their customs. They felt it was expedient that he should contradict these rumours in this fashion.

Another thing that lay behind the suggestion was that there were now thousands of Jews believing in Christ, but they were all zealous of the law. We should have thought that they would have been zealous of the Gospel and its heavenly hopes, but evidently they had as yet failed to apprehend the true character of that into which they had been brought. It was to such Jewish Christians as these that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written. They were indeed "dull of hearing," and had "need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God," needing "milk and not strong meat." They were consequently exhorted to "go on onto perfection" (Heb. 5:11–6:2).

The action recommended to Paul, and which he took, was hardly calculated to lead them on to perfection. It was an act of expediency, done to avoid trouble, and as is so often the case entirely failed of its object. It took Paul into the temple where his adversaries were most likely to be found. He ran into trouble instead of avoiding it. The riot against him was fomented by Jews of Asia, men who doubtless had been implicated in the riot at Ephesus. They acted under the supposition that Paul had desecrated the temple by taking into it an Ephesian Gentile. The supposition was evidently mistaken. He had not done this, but he had gone in himself, supposing that thereby he might disarm their prejudice, and this supposition also proved to be mistaken.

Nevertheless the hand of God was over all that happened. The prophecy of Agabus was fulfilled. Paul lost his liberty. Yet by the action of the Roman chief captain he was rescued from the violence of the people. The days of his free evangelistic labours were over – save perhaps for a short time just before the end. Now began the period in which he was to bear powerful witness to the populace in Jerusalem, to be followed by witness before governors and kings, and even before Nero himself. God knows how to make the wrath of man to praise Him, and to restrain the remainder of wrath. He knows also how to overrule any mistakes which His servants may make, and while closing before them certain lines of service to open out other lines, which ultimately may prove to be of even greater importance. It was Paul's imprisonment which led to his writing those inspired

epistles which have edified the church for nineteen centuries.

ACTS 22

In all that happened to Paul in Jerusalem it is not difficult to discern the hand of God controlling behind the scenes. Though the city was in an uproar no one struck a fatal blow until sufficient time had elapsed for the chief captain to intervene. Then the fact of Paul addressing him in Greek created the favourable impression which led to the permission to address the riotous crowds from the stairs of the castle. Then Paul's choice of Hebrew for his speech led to a complete silence and attention for what he had to say.

It is rather remarkable that we have two full accounts of the conversion of Cornelius in the Acts. In chapter 10, Luke records it as an historian; then in chapter 11, he records how Peter related it. In chapter 15, we have a very short third account of how Peter referred to it in the council of Jerusalem. Again we have three accounts of Paul's conversion. In chapter 9, Luke records it as an historian; in chapter 22, he records how Paul himself related it to his own people, and in chapter 26, how he related it to Gentile potentates. Both conversions were epoch-making and of the greatest significance. In the one case it was the definite and formal calling of Gentiles by the Gospel to the same blessings as Jews and on the same terms; in the other it was the calling of the arch-persecutor to be the chief instrument for the carrying of the Gospel to the Gentile world.

As we read the account in chapter 22, we cannot but see the Divinely-given skill with which Paul spoke. He began by stating what he had been in his early days, when his manner of life was altogether in accordance with their thoughts. He was perfect as to his pedigree, his education, his zeal, and his hatred of the Christians. Then came an intervention from heaven which was clearly an act of God. Now every true conversion is the result of an act of God, yet it usually comes to pass through some human instrument and the Divine act is only recognized by faith. In Paul's case there was no human instrument, but rather something quite supernatural, which appealed to both eye and ear – a great light and a voice of power so as to cast him prostrate to the ground. He tells the story in such a way as to impress his hearers with the fact that the change in him, which so offended them, had been wrought by God.

The voice that arrested him was the voice of Jesus, and here it is that we discover that the full sentence uttered from heaven was, "I am Jesus OF NAZARETH, whom thou persecutest." The two words are not inserted in chapter 9, nor do they appear when he speaks to Gentiles in chapter 26, but here speaking to Jews, they were full of tremendous significance. They had tacked those words on to His name as a slur and a reproach; and now *Jesus of Nazareth* is in heaven!

From this let us accept the warning not to divide up the names and titles of our Lord in any hard and fast way, though it is very helpful to discern the significance of each. We might have expected Him to say, "I am the One who was Jesus of Nazareth in the days of My flesh;" thus relegating that name to His sojourn on earth exclusively. But He did not say, "I was", He said, "I *am*." He does not shed His names, for He is one and indivisible.

Though Paul presents his conversion as being a pure act of God, he relates how Ananias was used of God for the restoration of his sight, and to convey to him the call to be a witness, and to be baptized: also he emphasizes the fact that the said Ananias was a devout and well respected member of the Jewish community in Damascus. Notice that Paul was both to see the glorified Saviour and to hear His voice; and of what he saw and heard he was to bear witness. Hence his speaking of the Gospel he preached as "the Gospel of the glory of the Christ."

Notice too how baptism and the washing away of sins are connected here, just as they are in chapter 2:38, and as they were in John's baptism. Ananias added, "calling on the name of the Lord," which shows that he pointed to Christian baptism and not John's. Baptism is specially significant in the case of the Jew, which accounts for the prominent place it had on the day of Pentecost and in the case of Paul. These rejectors of Christ must bow their proud heads, and go down symbolically into death, as acknowledging His Name. It was the token of their submission to the One whom they had refused, and only thus could their sins be washed away.

Paul then passed on to relate what happened on his first brief visit to Jerusalem, which is mentioned in chapter 9:26. No mention is made of this vision in chapter 9, nor in Galatians 1: we only read of it here. It is remarkable that both the Apostles Peter and Paul should have passed into a trance and seen a vision as to their service in regard to Gentiles

– Peter, in order that he might break through Jewish custom and open the kingdom to Gentiles; Paul, in order that he should accept the evangelization of Gentiles as his life-work. In this way it was doubly emphasized that the bringing in of the Gentiles was the deliberate will and purpose of God.

Owing to his past, Paul felt that he was pre-eminently fitted to evangelize his own nation, and ventured to tell the Lord this, only to be told that the Jews would not accept testimony from his lips, and that he was to be sent far hence unto the Gentiles. All this he told to the people, and as one reads the record one feels the convincing power of his words. Did he feel that at least some of his people must be convinced? Yet there stood that word of the Lord, spoken twenty or more years before, “They *will not* receive thy testimony concerning Me;” and this had been supported by the special message from the Holy Spirit that he should not go to Jerusalem. At that moment the Lord's words were verified. His mention of the Gentiles becoming objects of the Divine mercy stirred his hearers to frenzy. They *would not* receive his words. They demanded his death with almost uncontrollable violence. When Paul pursued his God-given mission to the Gentiles he was granted the joy of being used to reach the “remnant according to the election of grace” from his own people; when he turned aside, concentrating his attention upon his own people, his words bore no fruit in blessing.

The unreasoning fury of the people coupled with the use of the Hebrew language evidently baffled the chief captain, and examination under the lash was the recognized way of extorting evidence in those days. The mention by Paul of his Roman citizenship checked this, and under God's hand it became the occasion of Paul's further testimony before the leading men of his nation. The Sanhedrin was convoked the next day by the chief captain's orders.

ACTS 23

As we open this chapter, we find Paul standing before this august body, and we might have expected him to give the most striking and convincing address of his life. In result however there was a minimum of testimony and a maximum of confusion. Paul's opening remark was bitterly resented, though we can see that it was true. A "good" conscience is acquired and maintained as we sincerely and rigidly carry out all that conscience directs. The zealot with unenlightened or perverted conscience does the most outrageous things in order to preserve his "good" conscience. Thus had Paul acted in his unconverted days, and since his conversion he had with sincerity observed the warnings of his conscience, now enlightened and rectified. How clearly this shows us that conscience is *of itself* no safe guide: it must be enlightened by the Word of God. Its value depends entirely upon the measure in which it is controlled by the Word.

Angry at this opening statement, the high priest ordered that Paul should be smitten on the mouth, thus breaking the law which stipulated that an offender should only be beaten after a proper trial, and then only in a proper way (Deuteronomy 25:1-3). This manifest injustice moved Paul to a sharp retort; most appropriate, yet not admissible as addressed to the high priest. The council having been summoned in this hurried and informal way, probably there was nothing in his attire to distinguish him; yet, when the error was pointed out, Paul at once acknowledged his fault and quoted the passage which forbade what he had done. He was unable to ask with all assurance, "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" as his Lord had done.

There immediately followed an exceedingly astute move on Paul's part. He presented himself as a Pharisee, and as being called in question concerning the hope of resurrection. Without a doubt he was a Pharisee by birth and early training, and without a doubt resurrection lies at the very foundation of the Gospel. His cry had the effect he anticipated. It rallied the Pharisees to his aid, while violently antagonizing the Sadducees. They were all true party men, viewing everything from a party standpoint. Assuming him to be of their party, the Pharisees swung round in his favour. Truth and righteousness did

not count with them, but party did. The same kind of thing is very common today, and Christians are not immune from it; so let us accept the warning which is conveyed to us here.

All through the Acts the Sadducean party appear as the chief opponents of the Gospel. Their materialistic outlook, denying the resurrection, accounted for this. Here we have our last glimpse of them as they furiously protest against the sudden change of front with the Pharisees, and use such physical vigour that Paul might have been pulled in pieces. Their violence defeated their purpose, for it forced the chief captain to intervene, and Paul was for the second time rescued from the hands of his own people.

How very beautiful verse 11 is! We are not told anything as to Paul's feelings, but the Lord's message to him of good cheer certainly infers that he was depressed. We cannot help thinking that the whole of this Jerusalem episode had fallen below the high standard that had characterised all his earlier service; yet he certainly had testified of his Lord. His gracious Master fixed upon that fact, acknowledged it, and told him he was yet to bear witness in Rome – Jerusalem the religious centre, Rome the imperial and governmental centre of the earth of those days. What a refreshment for Paul's spirit!

The next day there was hatched the conspiracy on the part of more than forty men to kill Paul. The nature of the curse under which they bound themselves testifies to the ferocity of their hatred, so it looks as if they were of the Sadducean party who had been baulked of their prey the day before. The chief priests also were of that party, and so were nothing loth to implicate themselves in the business. They were to pretend that they wished to examine him further, and the forty men were ready to kill him.

Again we find the hand of God frustrating their devices. The story – as ever in Scripture – is told with brevity and restraint. We discover that Paul had a sister and a nephew in Jerusalem, but how the young man got information of the plot we are not told. God saw however that it reached his ears, though only concocted a few hours before, and also gave him the courage to reveal it. That he had such easy access to his uncle, and that Paul's request for his nephew to have access to the chief captain should have met with so courteous a response, we trace to God's overruling; though very probably the outrageous behaviour of the Jews had provoked a reaction in the mind of the chief captain in favour of Paul. In result he not only listened to the young

man but took him at his word without any hesitation, and immediately took steps to frustrate the plot.

The remainder of the chapter gives us a glimpse of the efficiency that marked the Roman military system. The chief captain acted with the utmost promptness in his decision to remit Paul to the civil governor at Cæsarea. He took care also to run no risks. He knew the vindictive fury of the Jews when matters of a religious sort were at stake; so he did not make the common mistake of underestimating the danger. The force that took charge of Paul must have numbered practically five hundred men, a ratio of twelve to one against would-be assassins. Every consideration was given to the prisoner, even to the extent of providing beasts for him to ride.

ACTS 24

The letter written by Claudius Lysias is quite a typical document, in which he presented his own actions in the most favourable light; but on the other hand it entirely exonerated Paul of anything really evil or worthy of death. The only accusations against him were as to "questions of their law." Thus it is made clear that the first Roman official into whose hands he fell was quickly convinced that the charges against him were as to his faith, and there was no fault in him as to matters of conduct. God evidently took care that this should be made abundantly plain.

Thus it was ordered that the forty men failed in their purpose in spite of their vow and curse. Paul was safely in the strong hands of Rome, and in due time would be able to state his case in a calmer atmosphere, and bear the Name of his Master before "the Gentiles, and kings," as well as the children of Israel, as had been predicted to Ananias. First of all he had to appear before Felix, the governor.

The arraignment of Paul before him bears all the marks of bitter animus and prejudice. That not only elders but even Ananias the high priest should have thought it necessary to go down to appear against him, shows the importance they gave to his case. Then they employed an advocate who, to judge by his name, was a Roman and not a Jew. Tertullus, they doubtless felt, would know better than themselves what would appeal to the Roman mind, and so be more likely to secure a conviction. Tertullus *did* know, and began with fulsome flattery, for the account given of Felix's administration in secular history is in flat denial of what he stated. This he followed by a fourfold charge against Paul. All four charges were vague, particularly the first, that he was a pest, and the second that he was a mover of sedition. Vague charges were preferred, for he knew they could not be easily disproved as plain definite charges often can be.

The third and fourth charges were a little more definite. The fourth, as to profaning the temple was false, as the previous chapter showed: the third was the only one with some semblance of truth. He had proved himself a leader amongst the Christians, who were known by the Jews as the sect of the Nazarenes. They were indeed followers of

the despised Nazarene, but they were emphatically not just a new sect amongst the Jews. The book of Acts was written to show us they were not this but rather something entirely new. The world never understands any genuine work of God.

Tertullus took care to present the action of Lysias in an unfavourable light, since he had baulked the violence of the Jews; and the Jews supported the assertions of their advocate. The Jews supplied the animus and used the Gentile as their tool, as they did in the case of the Lord.

Paul's answer was in every way a contrast to the oration of Tertullus. He acknowledged that Felix had had many years experience as judge among the Jews, but he refrained from flattery. He avoided vague assertions, denying explicitly any disputations and sedition, and pointing out that only twelve days had elapsed from the moment he had set foot in Jerusalem. He showed that while they had made plenty of accusations they had furnished no proofs, and could not do so. Then by making a plain and simple confession of what had characterized him, and what lay really at the bottom of their hostility, he threw into relief that which lay at the foundation of the Gospel that he preached. They called it heresy, but it was the very foundation of the truth.

In this skilful way did Paul announce his belief in all that had been written in the Old Testament, and show that all Christian hopes are based upon the resurrection, which of course has been verified in Christ. And it is just as certain that there shall be a resurrection for the unjust. That was evidently a shot directed at the conscience of Felix, as well as all others present. No one shall remain buried in the grave to escape the mighty hand of God in judgment.

Having proclaimed his faith in the Scriptures and in the resurrection, Paul went on to affirm that his conduct had been in keeping with what he believed. His conscience was clear, and he had only come up to Jerusalem on a mission of mercy, and when in the temple his behaviour had been perfectly orderly and correct. It was the Jews from Asia who stirred up the tumult, not he; and now that there was opportunity for them to present their charges against him in an orderly way, they were not there to do so.

But there were Jews present who had seen him appear before the council, and he knew that they found no fault in him, save that he

avowed his belief in the resurrection. Paul knew no doubt that it was the Sadducean faction who were pursuing him so relentlessly and appearing against him, and he took care to make it very plain to Felix that his belief in the resurrection of the dead, as verified in the resurrection of Christ, was the real matter at issue. It may be also that Paul wished to acknowledge that the way in which he had cried out in the council had not been quite free from blame.

Felix, as we learn from verse 24, had a Jewess as wife, and so was well informed as to things, and realized at once that there was nothing evil in Paul. He adjourned the court under pretext of waiting for Lysias the chief captain, so once more the accusers were foiled, especially as the adjournment was *sine die*, as our courts put it. Meanwhile Paul was given an extraordinary measure of liberty, in which again we may see the overruling hand of God.

There is no record of Lysias coming down, but we are told how Felix, with Drusilla his wife, sent for Paul and gave him a private audience while he testified of the faith in Christ. This was a great opportunity, and Paul evidently knew the weak and crooked character of the governor, and so he emphasized righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. We may take *righteousness* as summing up the Gospel message, as Romans 1:16-17, shows so clearly. Temperance or *self-restraint* is the result of the Gospel in the life of the one who receives it; and *judgment to come* is what awaits those who refuse it. So though the summary given of Paul's address is exceedingly brief, we can see that the three words are such as cover the salient facts of the Gospel.

There was great power with the message and Felix trembled, yet he deferred the matter to that "convenient season," which so often never comes as was so in this case. Though two years passed before Felix was superseded by Festus, and during that time there were a number of interviews, nothing came of them, and Felix left Paul bound in the effort to curry favour with the Jews. The real canker at the heart of Felix was the love of money. His case strikingly illustrates how there may be a powerful working of the Spirit through the Gospel from *without* upon a man, but how any working upon heart and conscience *within* may be smothered by some active lust, such as the love of money. True conversion takes place when the Spirit's work from without is supplemented and answered by the Spirit's work within.

ACTS 25

Festus having arrived, he went up to Jerusalem after three days, and such was the animosity against Paul that at once the high priest and other leaders accused him, and asked Festus to have him brought to Jerusalem. Though years had passed they would still fulfil their vow and wreak their vengeance. Such is religious rancour! Festus however declined this, so once more his accusers had to journey to Cæsarea. This second hearing was practically a repetition of the first, as is shown in verses 7 and 8. Paul had merely to rebut a large number of unproved assertions. Now Festus, as the next chapter shows, had not got any intimate knowledge of Jewish things; still, knowing them to be a people difficult to handle, he wished to gain their favour, and so suggested that after all Paul might go up to Jerusalem for his final trial.

In this sudden change on the part of Festus we may see the hand of God. During the night that followed the uproar in the council the Lord had appeared to Paul and told him that he must bear witness to Him in Rome, and now He controls circumstances to bring this to pass. The suggestion from Festus led Paul to appeal to Cæsar, a privilege that belonged to him as a Roman citizen. Paul knew that the proposed change of place was the prelude to his being handed over to his enemies, though Festus knew very well that he had done no wrong. If Festus began yielding to the clamour in order to placate the Jews, he would end by yielding everything. Paul's appeal settled everything. Having appealed to Cæsar, to Rome he must go. This is the third occasion on which we find Paul taking his stand on his Roman citizenship, and here most evidently it was made to serve and work out the purpose of his Lord.

The coming of Agrippa and Bernice to salute Festus became the occasion for Paul to bear a third testimony before governors and kings, and we are now given a much fuller insight into the mighty way in which he presented the truth. He had not failed previously to convey even to Festus that which lay at the heart of the whole matter, for in speaking to Agrippa of his case, Festus stated the controversy to rage around, "one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." This shows that, pagan though he was with no real understanding, he

had grasped the central fact of the Gospel. The death and resurrection of Christ are at the basis of all blessing, and the full declaration of the love of God. We know something of this, while he knew nothing of it. Still, Paul had made it plain.

That it was all a mystery to Festus, in spite of his having rightly seized the point at issue, is evident from his address to Agrippa, when the court had assembled and, Paul being brought forth, the proceedings commenced. He had no certain thing to write to his lord, the emperor in Rome. He hoped that Agrippa with his superior acquaintance with Jewish religion, might be able to help him to understand more clearly what was at stake, and know what to say.

ACTS 26

On this occasion there were no tedious preliminary proceedings. Agrippa immediately gave Paul permission to speak for himself. Thus set free, he was able to dispense with all mere details of self-defence, and come straight to the message with which God had entrusted him, after acknowledging Agrippa's expert knowledge, and beseeching for a patient hearing.

He began by stating that he had been brought up in the strictest form of Judaism amongst the Pharisees, and that what was now charged against him was in connection with the hope that all Israel had entertained from the days when God gave His promise. That hope they still held, but Paul maintained there had been a fulfilment of it in Christ, and particularly in His resurrection. So from the outset of his address he kept the resurrection well to the fore, as being the main point at issue. Yet resurrection lay beyond men's thoughts, whether Jewish or pagan; hence his question, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" It would be *utterly incredible* if only men were in question: bring God in – the real, true, living God – and *it is incredible that it should not be*.

In this third account of his conversion we find the Apostle greatly emphasizing the determined and furious opposition to Christ which characterized him at the beginning. He was indeed "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious," as he told Timothy: he carried it to the point of being "exceedingly mad against the disciples, and persecuting them even to distant cities. This was the way in which he did the many things "contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." It was at midday, when the sun shines most strongly, that another light brighter than the sun arrested him on the road to Damascus, and the voice of the Lord was heard. The uncreated light threw the created light into the shade.

Several interesting features, not mentioned in the earlier accounts, appear here. The light from heaven brought the whole company down into the dust, and not Paul only. Further, the voice was in the Hebrew tongue. This is remarkable, for we have been told earlier that though his companions heard the voice it conveyed nothing to them. It was in

their own language, yet they did not understand. They were affected *physically*, but only Paul was affected *spiritually*. The essential element in conversion is not great sights, nor wonderful sounds, but the life-giving work of the Holy Ghost. Jesus was manifested only to Paul, and that in such a way that he discovered Him to be his Lord.

When he owned Jesus to be his Lord, he was told plainly what he was to do as regards his own personal salvation. That we learned from the earlier accounts. Here only are we told that at the same time the Lord told him with equal plainness, that He was apprehending him to make him the servant of His will in a very special way. He was to be a witness to others of that which had just been revealed to him, and of further things that yet were to be made known to him by the Lord. Here only do we learn of the way in which the Lord commissioned him from the outset, and what the terms of that commission were. They are very striking, and they account very fully for the remarkable career which we have been tracing in the earlier chapters.

The Lord's purpose was that he should be "delivered", or "*taken out*" from among the people, and the Gentiles; that is, he was to be separated both from his own people, the Jews, and from the Gentiles, so as to stand in a place distinct from both. It has often been said that the Lord's words, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," were the first intimation that the saints were His body: we may perhaps say that the words we are now considering were the first intimation of the distinct place the church occupies, called out from both Jew and Gentile. Paul started by himself being put in the place into which were brought all those who believed the Gospel that he was commissioned to preach.

But, as the end of verse 17 says, he was specially sent to the Gentiles. As we have before noticed, he was blessed to many Jews as long as he followed his commission in the Gentile world; it was only when he turned aside from this to address himself specially to his Jewish brethren, that he failed to reach them. How fully this warns us that our Master must be supreme, and that our wisdom is to abide by His plan for our lives and service. To the Gentiles he was to go, that he might "open their eyes." This was a new departure in God's ways, for hitherto they had been left to go their own way. They had been in darkness and ignorance, but now their eyes were to be opened.

If, through Paul's labours, their eyes were effectually opened, they would turn from darkness and the power of Satan to light and God. This is what we mean by conversion. It must of course involve

conviction of sin, for none of us can come into the light of God without that conviction being wrought in us. But then as the result of turning there is the reception of forgiveness. There is the Divine act of forgiveness in which we may rejoice, and not only so, but we also enter into an inheritance which we share in common with all those who are set apart for God. Forgiveness is what we may call the *negative* blessing of the Gospel and the inheritance is the *positive*. Forgiveness is a loss rather than a gain – the loss of our sins; of the love of them as well as of the penalty they entail. The inheritance is what we gain.

And all this is “by faith that is in Me.” Here we have the way in which the blessing is reached. Not by works, but by faith; and of that faith Christ is the Object. The virtue is not in the faith but in the Object in whom faith rests. Thus from the very moment of his conversion Paul's future course and ministry was marked out for him, and by revelation from the Lord he was given the message that he was to preach. We have then in verse 18, a complete summary of the blessings that the Gospel brings to the one who receives it in faith. The eyes of his heart and mind are opened to the truth; he is brought out of darkness into light, and from Satan's power unto God; his sins are forgiven and he knows it; he shares in the inheritance common to those who with himself are set apart for God.

Having received these instructions, Paul had been faithful to his commission, and beginning where he was and widening out to the nations, he had showed to men everywhere what their response to the Gospel should be. They should repent; they should turn to God; they should do works in keeping with the repentance they professed. Repentance involves that coming into the light which enables one to see and judge one's own sinfulness, and then the confession of it before God. Now the more we see our own sin, the more we distrust ourselves; the more we distrust ourselves, the more we learn to trust in God: consequently turning to God follows this turning from ourselves. All this is an inward process of mind and heart of a more or less secret nature, but if it is real it soon produces actions and works in keeping with it. If there be no “works meet for repentance,” we may be sure that the repentance professed is not the genuine article. Paul insisted on all three things, and he knew of course that not only are they God's appointed way in which the blessings of the Gospel are received, but they are themselves produced by the Gospel, where it is received in faith.

Now it was just this which had so stirred up the animosity of the Jews, for if this was the way of entrance into God's favour, it was as much open to the Gentile as to the Jew. But he made very plain to Agrippa that what had been predicted by Moses and the prophets lay at the foundation of all that he had preached. He announced the suffering of Christ; His resurrection; and that as risen He should bring the light of God to all mankind – not only Jews, but Gentiles also. How clearly this last point is stated in Isaiah 49, just as the death and resurrection of Christ are predicted in Isaiah 53.

In verse 23 then we have a plain testimony rendered to Agrippa, Festus, and all others present, as to *the glorious basis of fact on which the Gospel rests*. Indeed we may say that primarily the preaching of the Gospel is the declaration of those facts, and we need to keep them in the forefront of our preaching today as much as in Paul's day. Then, as we have seen, verse 18 gives us *the blessings that the Gospel confers*; and verse 20 *the way in which the Gospel blessings are received*.

To the pagan mind of the Roman the idea of resurrection was simply incredible, as Paul had anticipated at the opening of his address, so the mention of Christ risen from the dead moved Festus to a loud exclamation. How often through the centuries has the Christian been charged with madness! Here is the first recorded instance of the taunt being flung by the man of the world. Yet it was not vulgar abuse, for Festus was a polished Roman. He did at least attribute Paul's "madness" to an excess of study and learning. But mad he thought him nevertheless!

Paul's reply was moving in its dignified simplicity. He addressed Festus in a way that became his high estate, and then asserted that on the contrary what he had said were "words of truth and soberness." To Festus it was all the romance of an intoxicated mind, for the gods that he venerated wielded no powers beyond the grave. Feeble man can kill and bring down to the grave – that is an easy thing: only of the living God can it be said, "The Lord killeth, *and maketh alive*: He bringeth down to the grave, *and bringeth up*" (1 Sam. 2:6). Let us all aim so to declare the Gospel that our hearers may recognize that we are speaking *the sober truth*.

Having answered Festus, Paul launched an appeal to Agrippa, knowing that he professed to believe the prophetic Scriptures, and would therefore know that what he preached as fact had been foretold

there. The appeal evidently went home. Agrippa's answer, we fear, was not a confession that he was very nearly convinced of the truth of the Gospel, but rather an attempt in a semi-jocular way to throw off the effect of the appeal. He said in effect, "In a little you will be making a Christian of me!" From his words it is evident that the term "Christian," first coined at Antioch, had by now obtained wide currency. By it the disciples were very accurately described. About Paul's rejoinder there is a moral elevation which is not easily surpassed. A poor prisoner stands in the midst of great pomp and magnificence and desires for his august judges that they might be just as he himself is, save for his bonds! As the angels looked down on that sight they saw an heir of everlasting and supernal glory standing before potsherds of the earth robed for a brief moment in tawdry display. Paul knew that, and that there was nothing better for any man than to be almost and altogether such as he was.

This closed the session. Paul had the last word; and we rejoice to note how, filled with the Holy Ghost, he is standing in the full height of the great calling that had reached him – the calling that has reached us too. Once more also is his innocence declared by competent authority. Had he not appealed to Cæsar he might have been free.

ACTS 27

While at Ephesus Paul had “purposed in the spirit” saying, “I must also see Rome ” (19:21); and, what is more important still, it was the Lord's purpose for him – “so must thou also bear witness at Rome” (23:11). We have just been tracing God's ways behind the scenes bringing to pass that “it was determined that we should sail into Italy.” Again Luke uses “we,” showing that he was now again a companion of Paul as they started on this journey, which was to be so full of disaster, and yet have so miraculous an ending.

Looking at second causes, Paul might have bitterly regretted his appeal to Cæsar, when Agrippa declared that but for it he might have been set at liberty. Looking to God, all was clear, and Paul with other prisoners started on the voyage. Yet though the journey was thus ordered of God, it did not follow that everything moved with ease and smoothness. The very opposite; for it is put on record from the beginning that “the winds were contrary” (v. 4). The fact that circumstances are against us is no proof that we are out of the way of God's will, nor do favouring circumstances necessarily mean that we are in the way of His will. We cannot safely deduce from circumstances what may or may not be His will for us.

Circumstances continued contrary and progress was tedious, “the wind not suffering us” (v. 7), and the dangerous time of year arrived when it was customary to suspend voyages in some safe harbour. The place called Fair Havens was reached, which in spite of its name was not a suitable spot, and here a conflict of opinion developed. The skipper was desirous of reaching Phenice, while Paul counselled that they were about to run into disaster and loss, not only for ship and cargo but also to their lives. The Roman centurion, in charge of the party of prisoners, held the casting vote, and having listened to the voice of worldly wisdom and nautical skill on the one hand, and that of spiritual understanding on the other, he decided in favour of the advice of the skipper.

Any ordinary person, without a doubt, would have decided as did the centurion; and when suddenly the wind veered and blew gently from the south, it looked as though God was favouring the centurion's

decision. But again we see that circumstances furnish no true guidance; for they set sail only to be caught in the dreaded Euroclydon, which upset all their plans. They proceeded by sight and not by faith, and all ended in disaster. They took all possible measures to work out their own salvation, but without effect, so that ultimately all hope was abandoned. It is easy to see that all this may be effectively used as a kind of allegory; representing the soul's struggles for deliverance, whether from the guilt or the power of sin. Nothing was right until God intervened, first by *His word* through Paul, and then by *His power* in the final shipwreck.

It was when they were nearly starved and quite hopeless that the angel of God appeared to Paul. Nearly a fortnight had passed since the storm began, and until this point Paul had not had anything authoritative to say. But now the word of God had reached him, stating that he must appear before Cæsar, and that he and all sailing with him were to be saved. God having spoken Paul could speak with authority and the utmost assurance. After a fortnight's tossing on the wild seas the feeling of one and all must have been deplorable and depressing. But what had feelings to do with the matter? *God had spoken*, and Paul's attitude was, "I believe God," in spite of all the feelings in the world.

All the probabilities of the situation also would have given a negative to what the angel had said. That a small sailing vessel, packed with 276 people, should be wrecked and destroyed, in days when there were no friendly lifeboats, and yet every one of the 276 be saved, was so highly improbable as to be pronounced impossible. But God had said it, so Paul laughed at the impossibility and said, "It shall be done." Moreover so strong was his faith that not only did he say this in his heart but he also said it aloud in the way of testimony to the other 275 people on board. His exact words were, "It shall be even as it was told me." The salvation of all had not yet happened, but he was as sure of it as if it had.

Faith has very simply been defined as "Believing what God says, because God says it," and this is well supported by Paul's words, "I believe God." In this case *feelings, reason, experience, the probabilities* of the situation, all would have contradicted the Divine statement, but faith accepted what God said, though all else denied it. Faith in our hearts will speak in just the same way. The Divine testimony to us deals with matters far greater than a salvation for time

only, and it reaches us not from the mouth of an angel but through the holy and inspired Writings, which we now have in print in our own tongue; but our reception of it is to be equally definite. We simply believe God, and thus set to our seal that God is true.

Verses 34-36 show us that Paul's attitude and actions corroborated his brave words of faith. Thus we see him exemplifying what James so stresses in his epistle: faith, if it is alive, must express itself in works. If, having uttered words of faith, he had remained depressed and dejected like the rest, no one would have paid much attention to his words. But rather, having announced words of good cheer, he was himself most evidently of good cheer. He gave thanks to God, he partook of food, and exhorted the others to do the same. His works thus attesting the reality of his faith, all were impressed by it. They too were of good cheer and took food. As yet the circumstances were not altered, but they were altered as the confidence of faith found a place in their hearts, for it furnished them with "the substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1 N.Tn). The whole episode is an excellent illustration of what faith is and how faith works.

It illustrates also how faith is vindicated. God was as good as His word, and every soul was saved. His promise was fulfilled literally and exactly, and not approximately and with tolerable accuracy, as is so common amongst men. We may take Him at His word with absolute certainty. Yet this does not mean that we can become fatalistic, and ignore ordinary measures of prudence. This also is illustrated in our story. After Paul had announced that all should be saved, he did not permit the sailors to flee out of the ship, since their presence was needed; and later, when all had eaten enough, they lightened the ship still further by casting the wheat into the sea. They did not fold their arms and do nothing as fatalism would have decreed, but took the ordinary measures of prudence, while trusting in God's word. The ending was really miraculous. In one way or another all were saved.

ACTS 28

We still see the protecting hand of God stretched over Paul and his companions when they had landed on Malta. Though the inhabitants were “barbarians” according to Roman thoughts, they showed exceptional kindness to the shipwrecked party, and things were so over-ruled that they soon discovered that one of the shipwrecked visitors was no ordinary person. Paul was busily engaged, doing what he could to help, when a viper fastened itself on his hand. The superstitious islanders placed their interpretation on this, but when the expected did not follow they changed their minds, jumping to the opposite conclusion. Superstition never comes to right conclusions. To Paul doubtless it was a very minor happening, seeing he had been through the long list of adventures which he catalogued in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. And when he wrote that list it was still unfinished. He had not, for instance, been through the shipwreck of which we have been reading. He had been shipwrecked three times before this happened. There are not many who have survived four shipwrecks, we venture to think, even if professional sailors, which he was not.

The chief man of the island taking a kindly interest in them in their need, Paul was enabled to repay him by prayer and the healing of his father. We do not read of any testimony that Paul rendered, yet his praying must have shown to all that the healing power he wielded was not his own but connected with God. The islanders, finding that the power of God was in their midst, were not slow to seek it for their bodies, and seeking they found it. All this, in the providence of God, led to a time of comfort after the fortnight of terrible testing, and even to a time of honour, and this lasted for three months. The Apostle has put on record, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound” (Phil. 4:12). These three months proved to be a time of abounding.

The same might be said of the rest of the journey, when it was resumed. All went favourably and arriving at Puteoli, and finding brethren there who begged Paul might be with them for a week, the visit was happily arranged. By this time evidently the centurion in charge had taken the measure of his prisoners, and was disposed to

accord him remarkable liberty. On the overland journey too, brethren came to meet him, having heard of his approach, and this was a great cheer to Paul. Spiritual man though he was, and thoroughly in touch with God and dependent upon Him, he was not above thanking God and taking courage from the love and fellowship of saints, whose spiritual stature may have been much beneath his own. It is striking to see this, and very encouraging for us. Let us be very careful not to despise, or even underestimate the value of the fellowship of saints.

Thus Paul arrived at Rome. His circumstances were very different from those that he had visualized when he wrote in advance of what he purposed to do (see Romans 15:22-32), but he *did* come to them with a certain measure of joy by the will of God, and he was marked by "the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ." God's hand was still over him, for though a prisoner he was permitted to dwell by himself under guard, and this gave him a measure of liberty for service and testimony.

Only three days after his arrival he was able to call together the chief of the Jewish colony in Rome and lay something of his case before them. He made it plain that he had no wish to be an accuser of his nation, but that his whole offence in Jewish eyes was connected with the, "hope of Israel; that is, the long promised Messiah. The Jews on their part professed ignorance of his case, but they knew of the Christ whom Paul preached, and to be a Christian meant to them belonging to a "sect ... everywhere ... spoken against." *Everywhere*, be it noted; not only amongst the Jews but amongst Gentiles also. Genuine Christianity never has been popular, and never will be. It cuts too deeply across the grain of human nature.

Still they professed a desire to hear what Paul had to say; and so a day being fixed, many came and for a whole day he was able to expound and testify and persuade. His theme was the kingdom of God and Jesus, as the One in whom that kingdom is centred and established; and all that he had to say was based upon the law of Moses and the prophets, for there all had been typified and foretold. The three verbs are worthy of note. First he *expounded* the Sacred Writings, showing what they had to say and making their force plain. Then he *testified* of Jesus, relating doubtless what he knew personally of His glory in heaven, and showing how exactly He had fulfilled all that the Scriptures had said concerning His advent in humiliation. Lastly he set himself to *persuade* his hearers of the truth of all he

advanced. Paul did not preach what has been called a “take it or leave it” Gospel, but laboured with loving zeal to reach the hearts of those who listened, and secure a response in faith from them. Let us see that we imitate him in this, for we have to remember that though nothing short of the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men is effectual, the Spirit is frequently pleased to work through the persuasiveness of servants of God, who are filled with love and zeal.

It was so in this case. The record here is that while some remained in unbelief, “some believed the things which were spoken.” When the Word is preached it is nearly always thus. Only in the Acts – when Peter preached to Cornelius – do we find everybody converted; but that is not the usual thing, for at the present moment God is calling an election out from both Jew and Gentile.

To the unbelieving Jews, ere they departed, Paul spoke a final word, quoting the passage from Isaiah 6, which the Lord Himself quoted in Matthew 13, and John quotes in chapter 12 of his Gospel. This sad and terrible process of hardening and spiritual death had set in even in the days of Isaiah some seven centuries before Christ. It was far more pronounced when Christ was on earth; and now the final stage was reached. Paul pronounced these words, realizing that during this Gospel age Israel's day as a nation was over. Nationally they are blinded and without understanding in the things of God, though very acute as to the things of the world. This does not of course conflict with the fact that God is still calling out a remnant according to the election of grace, as Romans 11 states.

It is worthy of note that in quoting this passage Paul says, “Well spake *the Holy Ghost*.” If we turn to Isaiah 6, we find the prophet saying in regard to this message, “Also I heard the voice of the Lord,” referring to *Jehovah of Hosts*; and turning to John 12, we find the comment, “These things said Esaias, when he saw His glory, and spake of Him,” and we have only to look at the preceding verses to discover that the “His” and “Him” refer to *Jesus*. How plain it is then that *Jehovah of hosts* is to be identified with both *Jesus* and the *Holy Ghost* – three Persons, yet one God.

Verse 28 gives us the last words of Paul, as recorded in the Acts. They are very significant, as giving us the point to which the book has conducted us. He proclaims as a definite message from God that His salvation is now sent to the Gentiles as the result of the blindness and hardness of the Jew; and he adds “they will hear it.” This does not

mean that all of them will do so, but rather that in contra-distinction from the Jew, a hearing ear is going to be found there. This, thank God! has proved true throughout the centuries.

When the Lord spoke to the Syro-Phenician woman about the children and the dogs, the poor woman, seeing the point, took the place of being but a Gentile dog, and yet claimed that God was good enough to permit that there should be some crumbs of mercy for her. She was right: the Lord called her faith great and honoured it by granting her desire. But here we find something more wonderful still. The children having despised and rejected the good things provided, not the crumbs merely but the whole meal is sent to the dogs. As Paul himself puts it in Romans 11, "the fall of them" is "the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles ... the casting away of them ... the reconciling of the world." This does not mean that all the world is definitely reconciled, but that God has now turned in favour towards the world, offering His salvation to all men.

Paul was still a prisoner, yet he was allowed to hire a house and dwell there and receive all who wished to see him. Thus he had opportunities for testimony, and the word of God was not bound. As far as this book is concerned we take leave of him spending two whole years preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ without any restraint. His trial was delayed in the providence of God, and a door of utterance was thus opened to him. During this time Onesimus was converted and doubtless others also; some of his Epistles also were written.

Closing the Acts, we finish apostolic *history*: passing to Romans we begin apostolic *doctrine*. It is the doctrine which enables us to understand the *significance* of the history; while the history enables us to appreciate the *authority* and *weight* of the doctrine.