

An Explanation of

# ACTS



BEHOLD, A PEOPLE





# **The Book of Acts**



# The Book of Acts

Behold, a People

Ger de Koning

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# Contents

<b>Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible</b>	<b>13</b>
Old Testament	13
New Testament	14
<b>Explanation of general format</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The book of Acts</b>	<b>16</b>
Introduction	16
<b>Acts 1</b>	<b>20</b>
Acts 1:1-3   A Look Back	20
Acts 1:4-5   The Promise of the Holy Spirit	22
Acts 1:6-8   The Kingdom and Witnesses	23
Acts 1:9-11   The Ascension	25
Acts 1:12-14   Persevering in Prayer	26
Acts 1:15-19   The End of Judas	27
Acts 1:20-26   Choosing the Successor of Judas	29
<b>Acts 2</b>	<b>32</b>
Acts 2:1   The Day of Pentecost	32
Acts 2:2-4   The Coming of the Holy Spirit	32
Acts 2:5-13   Speaking in Other Languages	35
Acts 2:14-15   Peter Begins His Speech	36
Acts 2:16-21   The Prophecy of Joel	37
Acts 2:22-24   The Acts of God and of Man	40
Acts 2:25-32   The Resurrection Foretold by David	42
Acts 2:33-36   Jesus Made Both Lord and Christ	44
Acts 2:37-41   The Effect of the Preaching	46
Acts 2:42-47   The First Church Life	49
<b>Acts 3</b>	<b>53</b>
Acts 3:1   To the Temple to Pray	53
Acts 3:2-7   Healing of a Lame	53
Acts 3:8-11   Effect of Healing	56

Acts 3:12-16   Peter Preaches Christ	57
Acts 3:17-21   Call to Repentance and Return	60
Acts 3:22-26   The Prophet Raised Up by God	62
<b>Acts 4</b>	<b>65</b>
Acts 4:1-4   Peter and John Arrested	65
Acts 4:5-7   Interrogation by the Council	66
Acts 4:8-12   Accountability by Peter	67
Acts 4:13-17   Deliberation of the Council	70
Acts 4:18-22   Command and Threat of the Council	72
Acts 4:23   Their Own	74
Acts 4:24-28   The Need Presented to the Lord	74
Acts 4:29-31   Question to the Lord and His Answer	76
Acts 4:32-35   Church Unity	78
Acts 4:36-37   Barnabas	80
<b>Acts 5</b>	<b>81</b>
Acts 5:1-2   The Deceit of Ananias and Sapphira	81
Acts 5:3-6   The Deceit of Ananias Judged	82
Acts 5:7-11   The Deceit of Sapphira Judged	84
Acts 5:12-16   Signs and Wonders	85
Acts 5:17-25   Arrested and Released	88
Acts 5:26-28   Arrested the Second Time	91
Acts 5:29-32   Testimony of Peter and the Apostles	92
Acts 5:33-39   The Advice of Gamaliel	93
Acts 5:40-42   Flogged, Released and Keeping Right on	95
<b>Acts 6</b>	<b>97</b>
Acts 6:1-2   Complaints in the Church	97
Acts 6:3-7   The Seven Deacons Chosen	99
Acts 6:8-10   The Performance of Stephen	102
Acts 6:11-15   Arresting of Stephen	103
<b>Acts 7</b>	<b>105</b>
Acts 7:1   Introduction to Stephen's Speech	105
Acts 7:2-8   God's Way With Abraham	105
Acts 7:9-16   Rejection and Reign of Joseph	108
Acts 7:17-22   Moses' Birth and Nurturing	110

---

Acts 7:23-29   Moses Visits His Brethren and Flees	112
Acts 7:30-35   God Appears to Moses	113
Acts 7:36-43   Moses Rejected; Idols; Judgment	116
Acts 7:44-50   The Dwelling Place of God	118
Acts 7:51-53   Stephen's Indictment	119
Acts 7:54-60   Stephen Is Stoned	121
<b>Acts 8</b>	<b>124</b>
Acts 8:1-4   Persecution – Stephen Buried	124
Acts 8:5-8   Preaching of Philip in Samaria	125
Acts 8:9-13   Simon the Magician	127
Acts 8:14-17   Peter and John in Samaria	129
Acts 8:18-25   Peter Sees Through and Judges Simon	130
Acts 8:26-29   A New Order for Philip	132
Acts 8:30-35   Philip Preaches Jesus to Him	135
Acts 8:36-39   Philip Baptizes the Eunuch	138
Acts 8:40   Further Service of Philip	139
<b>Acts 9</b>	<b>140</b>
Acts 9:1-9   The Conversion of Saul	140
Acts 9:10-16   Conversation Between the Lord and Ananias	143
Acts 9:17-19   Ananias With Saul	145
Acts 9:20-25   Preaching of Saul and an Attack	146
Acts 9:26-30   Saul in Jerusalem	148
Acts 9:31   The Church Has Peace and Increases	150
Acts 9:32-35   Healing of Aeneas	151
Acts 9:36-43   Resurrection of Dorcas	153
<b>Acts 10</b>	<b>156</b>
Acts 10:1-8   Cornelius Is Visited by an Angel	156
Acts 10:9-16   Peter's Vision	158
Acts 10:17-23   The Messengers of Cornelius	161
Acts 10:24-27   Peter Comes to Cornelius	162
Acts 10:28-29   Peter Tells Why He Has Come	163
Acts 10:30-33   Cornelius Explains the Invitation	164
Acts 10:34-43   The Preaching of Peter	165
Acts 10:44-48   Consequences of the Speech	168

<b>Acts 11</b>	<b>170</b>
Acts 11:1-3   Peter Accused	170
Acts 11:4-18   Peter Responds	171
Acts 11:19-21   Preaching of the Scattered	175
Acts 11:22-24   Barnabas and the Church in Antioch	176
Acts 11:25-26   Barnabas and Saul in Antioch	178
Acts 11:27-30   Agabus Predicts a Famine	179
<b>Acts 12</b>	<b>182</b>
Acts 12:1-2   James Put to Death	182
Acts 12:3-6   Peter Arrested	183
Acts 12:7-11   Peter Delivered	185
Acts 12:12-17   Peter Goes to the Church	187
Acts 12:18-19   Herod's Reaction	189
Acts 12:20-23   The Death of Herod	190
Acts 12:24-25   Transition to Paul's Service	192
<b>Acts 13</b>	<b>193</b>
Acts 13:1-3   Calling of Barnabas and Saul	193
Acts 13:4-5   Beginning of the First Missionary Journey	195
Acts 13:6-12   Elymas and Sergius Paulus	195
Acts 13:13-15   From Cyprus to Antioch in Pisidia	198
Acts 13:16-21   Period From the Fathers to Saul	199
Acts 13:22-25   Period From David to the Lord Jesus	200
Acts 13:26-31   What Happened to Christ	202
Acts 13:32-39   The Proclamation of the Promise	203
Acts 13:40-41   A Warning at the End	204
Acts 13:42-44   Effect of the Preaching	205
Acts 13:45-52   Driven Out by the Jews	206
<b>Acts 14</b>	<b>210</b>
Acts 14:1-7   Preaching in and Fleeing From Iconium	210
Acts 14:8-10   Healing a Lame in Lystra	211
Acts 14:11-18   Preaching of Paul in Lystra	212
Acts 14:19-20   Paul Stoned	214
Acts 14:21-25   Back to Antioch in Syria	215
Acts 14:26-28   Arrival and Report in Antioch	218

<b>Acts 15</b>	<b>220</b>
Acts 15:1-2   Salvation and Circumcision?	220
Acts 15:3-6   To and at Jerusalem	222
Acts 15:7-11   Reaction of Peter	224
Acts 15:12   Report of Barnabas and Paul	225
Acts 15:13-18   Reaction of James	226
Acts 15:19-21   The Judgment of James	228
Acts 15:22-29   The Letter for the Gentiles	229
Acts 15:30-35   Delivering the Letter in Antioch	232
Acts 15:36-39   Separation Between Paul and Barnabas	233
Acts 15:40-41   Beginning of the Second Missionary Journey	235
 <b>Acts 16</b>	 <b>237</b>
Acts 16:1-4   Timothy, Paul's New Travel Companion	237
Acts 16:5   Strengthening and Increase of Churches	239
Acts 16:6-10   Come Over ... and Help Us	239
Acts 16:11-15   Conversion of Lydia	241
Acts 16:16-18   A Spirit of Divination Cast Out	244
Acts 16:19-24   Thrown Into Prison	245
Acts 16:25-26   Praying and Singing in Prison	247
Acts 16:27-34   Conversion of the Jailer	248
Acts 16:35-40   Release of Paul and Silas	250
 <b>Acts 17</b>	 <b>253</b>
Acts 17:1-3   Preaching of Paul in Thessalonica	253
Acts 17:4-9   Reactions on the Preaching	254
Acts 17:10-15   Paul and Silas in Berea	257
Acts 17:16-18   Paul in Athens	258
Acts 17:19-21   Paul Brought to the Areopagus	261
Acts 17:22-29   Speech to the Men of Athens	261
Acts 17:30-31   Call to Repentance	265
Acts 17:32-34   Reactions to the Preaching	266
 <b>Acts 18</b>	 <b>267</b>
Acts 18:1   Paul Comes in Corinth	267
Acts 18:2-3   Paul and Aquila and Priscilla	267
Acts 18:4-8   Paul's Preaching in Corinth	269
Acts 18:9-11   The Lord Encourages Paul	271

Acts 18:12-17   The Case Law of Gallio	272
Acts 18:18-21   Brief Visit of Paul to Ephesus	274
Acts 18:22-23   End of the Second and Start of the Third Missionary Journey	276
Acts 18:24-28   Apollos in Ephesus	277
<b>Acts 19</b>	<b>281</b>
Acts 19:1-7   The First Disciples in Ephesus	281
Acts 19:8-10   The Synagogue and the School of Tyrannus	284
Acts 19:11-17   Powers of God and Devilish Counterfeiting	285
Acts 19:18-20   Effects of the Word of the Lord	288
Acts 19:21-22   Jerusalem and Rome	289
Acts 19:23-32   Demétrius Instigates a Riot	290
Acts 19:33-41   Calming the Popular Rage	292
<b>Acts 20</b>	<b>295</b>
Acts 20:1-6   From Ephesus to Troas	295
Acts 20:7   The First Day of the Week	297
Acts 20:8-9   The Fall of Eutychus	298
Acts 20:10-12   Recovery of Eutychus	300
Acts 20:13-16   From Troas to Miletus	301
Acts 20:17   Paul Calls the Elders of Ephesus to Him	302
Acts 20:18-21   Paul's Service With the Ephesians	303
Acts 20:22-24   The Gospel of the Grace of God	306
Acts 20:25-27   The Kingdom and Purpose of God	307
Acts 20:28-31   Warnings	308
Acts 20:32   God and the Word of His Grace	310
Acts 20:33-35   Paul Again Points to His Example	311
Acts 20:36-38   The Farewell	312
<b>Acts 21</b>	<b>314</b>
Acts 21:1-3   From Miletus to Tyre	314
Acts 21:4-7   With the Believers in Tyre and in Ptolemais	315
Acts 21:8-14   With Philip and the Believers in Caesarea	317
Acts 21:15-16   From Caesarea to Jerusalem	319
Acts 21:17-19   Paul Visits James	320
Acts 21:20-21   Reactions to Paul's Report	321
Acts 21:22-24   The Proposal to Paul	322
Acts 21:25-26   Paul Accepts the Proposal	324

---

Acts 21:27-30   Paul Seized the Temple	325
Acts 21:31-36   Paul Freed by the Romans	327
Acts 21:37-40   Paul Wants to Speak to the People	328
<b>Acts 22</b>	<b>330</b>
Acts 22:1-5   Origin and Former Life Walk	330
Acts 22:6-10   Paul Meets the Glorified Lord	332
Acts 22:11-16   Paul in Damascus With Ananias	333
Acts 22:17-21   Paul's Missionary Commission	336
Acts 22:22-23   The Reaction of the Jews	337
Acts 22:24-30   Appeal to Roman Civil Right	338
<b>Acts 23</b>	<b>340</b>
Acts 23:1-5   Paul in Conflict With the High Priest	340
Acts 23:6-10   Paul Causes Division in the Council	342
Acts 23:11   Paul Is Encouraged by the Lord	344
Acts 23:12-15   A Conspiracy Against Paul	345
Acts 23:16-22   Paul's Nephew Discovers the Conspiracy	346
Acts 23:23-30   Lysias' Letter to Felix	348
Acts 23:31-35   Paul Sent to Felix	349
<b>Acts 24</b>	<b>351</b>
Acts 24:1-9   Paul Charged Before Felix	351
Acts 24:10-13   Paul Refutes the Accusations	353
Acts 24:14-21   Paul Declares his Orthodox Faith	354
Acts 24:22-27   Felix and Paul	356
<b>Acts 25</b>	<b>359</b>
Acts 25:1-5   Paul Charged Before Festus	359
Acts 25:6-12   Paul Appeals to the Emperor	360
Acts 25:13-22   Festus Brings the Case Before Agrippa	363
Acts 25:23-27   Paul Brought Before Agrippa	365
<b>Acts 26</b>	<b>367</b>
Acts 26:1-3   Beginning of Paul's Defense	367
Acts 26:4-8   Paul's Youth as a Jew	368
Acts 26:9-11   Paul's Zeal Against Christendom	369
Acts 26:12-15   Paul's Conversion	370

## Contents

---

Acts 26:16-18   The Lord's Command to Paul	372
Acts 26:19-23   Paul's Work as an Apostle	374
Acts 26:24-26   Interruption by Festus	375
Acts 26:27-32   Agrippa Must Choose	376
<b>Acts 27</b>	<b>379</b>
Introduction	379
Acts 27:1-5   A Calm Start and Headwind	382
Acts 27:6-10   A Difficult Voyage	383
Acts 27:11-20   Deprived of All Hope of Salvation	384
Acts 27:21-26   Hope Is Glowing	387
Acts 27:27-32   Around Midnight	389
Acts 27:33-37   Paul Encourages All to Take Food	390
Acts 27:38-41   The Ship Perishes	392
Acts 27:42-44   All Are Brought Safely to Land	394
<b>Acts 28</b>	<b>395</b>
Acts 28:1-2   Reception on Malta	395
Acts 28:3-6   Paul Bitten by a Viper	395
Acts 28:7-10   Healings on Malta	397
Acts 28:11-16   Arrival at Rome	398
Acts 28:17-22   First Discussion With the Jews	400
Acts 28:23-28   Second Discussion With the Jews	402
Acts 28:29-31   Paul Continues to Preach, Unhindered	404
<b>Other Publications</b>	<b>406</b>

## Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

### **Old Testament**

Gen – Genesis

Exo – Exodus

Lev – Leviticus

Num – Numbers

Deu – Deuteronomy

Jos – Joshua

Jdg – Judges

Rth – Ruth

1Sam – First Samuel

2Sam – Second Samuel

1Kgs – First Kings

2Kgs – Second Kings

1Chr – First Chronicles

2Chr – Second Chronicles

Ezra – Ezra

Neh – Nehemiah

Est – Esther

Job – Job

Psa – Psalms

Pro – Proverbs

Ecc – Ecclesiastes

Song – Song of Songs

Isa – Isaiah

Jer – Jeremiah

Lam – Lamentations

Eze – Ezekiel

Dan – Daniel

Hos – Hosea

Joel – Joel

Amos – Amos

Oba – Obadiah

Jona – Jonah

Mic – Micah  
Nah – Nahum  
Hab – Habakkuk  
Zep – Zephaniah  
Hag – Haggai  
Zec – Zechariah  
Mal – Malachi

**New Testament**

Mt – Gospel of Matthew  
Mk – Gospel of Mark  
Lk – Gospel of Luke  
Jn – Gospel of John  
Acts – Acts of the Apostles  
Rom – Letter to the Romans  
1Cor – First Letter to the Corinthians  
2Cor – Second Letter to the Corinthians  
Gal – Letter to the Galatians  
Eph – Letter to the Ephesians  
Phil – Letter to the Philippians  
Col – Letter to the Colossians  
1Thes – First Letter to the Thessalonians  
2Thes – Second Letter to the Thessalonians  
1Tim – First Letter to Timothy  
2Tim – Second Letter to Timothy  
Tit – Letter to Titus  
Phlm – Letter to Philemon  
Heb – Letter to the Hebrews  
Jam – Letter of James  
1Pet – First Letter of Peter  
2Pet – Second Letter of Peter  
1Jn – First Letter of John  
2Jn – Second Letter of John  
3Jn – Third Letter of John  
Jude – Letter of Jude  
Rev – Revelation

## Explanation of general format

**PERSONAL PRONOUNS** are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

**BRACKETS** [ ] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

**SHARP BRACKETS** < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When **ASTERISKS** \* are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

**ALL CAPS** in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

# The book of Acts

## **Introduction**

### **Preface**

The book of Acts describes the birth and formation of the church, God's heavenly people. That the church could come into being and be formed, is the impressive result of the work of the Lord Jesus as described in the Gospels. The coming into being and the formation happen because God the Holy Spirit comes to live in the church.

Balaam once, under the mighty action of God's Spirit, proclaimed: "Behold, a people [who] dwells apart, and will not be reckoned among the nations" (Num 23:9b). His exclamation concerned God's earthly people, Israel. Just as Israel was formerly set apart by God from all nations as a people for Himself, so it is now with the church. God has taken a people from among the nations for Himself, for His Name (Acts 15:14).

The church consists of all those who have turned to God with confession and repentance about their sins. They have accepted the Lord Jesus as Savior with their heart in faith and acknowledge Him in the practice of their life as Lord (Rom 10:8-10). That people is a heavenly people, connected with a Lord in heaven and a future in the Father's house.

In Acts we see how this people of God is becoming more and more manifest in a world in which they are, but where they are not part of and do not belong to (Jn 17:16). The history of this people is determined by the Holy Spirit in this book of the Bible. That is why the call, as it used to sound from the top of the rocks about Israel, can now sound about the church from the high, where the Lord Jesus is: "Behold, a people." If we accept the teaching of this book, we will wholeheartedly agree to this.

Ger de Koning

Middelburg, December 2009 – new version 2020, translated 2020

## **Introduction to the book of Acts**

The book of Acts can be roughly divided according to the ministry of the two main persons whose ministry is described in this book. They are the special instruments of the Holy Spirit. Prior to that description we find the starting point for that service: the resurrected and glorified Lord in heaven.

1. The risen and glorified Lord (Acts 1).
2. The ministry of Peter for Jews and Samaritans (Acts 2-12).
3. Paul's ministry to the nations (Acts 13-28).

The book of Acts is the transition between the Gospels and the Letters. We could call this book the book of Exodus of the New Testament (whereby the Gospels can then be understood as the book of Genesis, the beginning). We read in Acts as well as in Exodus about a people delivered by God from a slave yoke. God delivers a people from the world to be His people and delivers them from the yoke of the law (Jew) and the yoke of sin (Gentile and Jew). As in Exodus, God's goal in Acts is the deliverance of this people to dwell among them. God comes to dwell in the Holy Spirit in the church – the name of God's people in the New Testament.

God can only dwell with a redeemed people. God did not dwell with Adam or Abraham, but with Israel after the people were delivered from Egypt. God the Holy Spirit could only come to earth to dwell in the church after the Lord Jesus had accomplished the work of redemption and returned to heaven (Jn 7:39). The new starting point of God's action is the resurrected and glorified Man Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit has worked on earth since the foundation of the world. Thus He was moving over the surface of the waters (Gen 1:2) and inspired the prophets (2Pet 1:21). Through Him God did everything on earth and in heaven. But, as said, He could only come to dwell on earth after the Lord Jesus had been glorified. He now dwells in the church as a whole (1Cor 3:16) and in each believer individually (Eph 1:13; 1Cor 6:19).

Luke, the author of this book, tells in the Gospel written by him about the birth, life, death and ascension of the Founder of the church. In Acts he tells about the birth and first life of the church. He tells about the birth of local churches and what kind of churches they are. Because of this we better

understand the letters that have been written to some of those churches. These are the letters we find in the New Testament after the book of Acts. The book shows the development and expansion of a small Jewish movement to a worldwide religious community. Thereby, so to speak, the Jewish burial cloths are, removed from the New Testament church and its special character as a community, in which Jew and Gentile are one body in Christ, is confirmed.

It is good to see that Luke begins Acts with the event with which he ends his Gospel: the ascension of the Lord Jesus. Acts does not seamlessly connect to the Gospel to Luke, but there is an overlap. At the end of his Gospel, Luke presents the Lord Jesus as the glorified Man Who enters heaven as the crowning of His ministry and His accomplished work on the cross. Luke starts his book of Acts with the ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven and taking His place there as the glorified Man.

The position the Lord Jesus holds there is the starting point of the work of God's Spirit on earth. All its consequences are unfolded in this book, starting with the sending of the Holy Spirit through which the formation of the church is immediate.

In all actions described in this book we see Christ acting from the glory. For example, we see that He designates the twelfth apostle from heaven, that He sends the Holy Spirit, that He adds to the church, that healing and deliverance happen through His Name. In Exodus God, while performing signs and wonders, leads His earthly people out of Egypt to be His people in the period of the Old Testament. In the same way, God's heavenly people are led out of the world during the New Testament period, while performing signs and wonders, to be His people.

The book deals with the wondrous works of God in the new creation. He wants to testify of this in the old creation by a Witness Who is none other than His own Spirit.

The book begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. There is the man, who is the chosen instrument of the Spirit to bear the testimony of the glorified Man in heaven in the world, in captivity. That brings us to yet another aspect of this impressive book. In this book, Luke gives us a precise description of the history of the origins of Christendom. But in the last chap-

ter we read about the situation that has arisen over the years, namely that Christendom is called a 'sect' that 'is spoken against everywhere' (Acts 28:22).

That is why we can also see this book that Luke has written as a defense of Christendom. In this sense, it also has great practical significance for anyone who is or wants to be convinced that the truth of God and His Son can only be found in Christendom.

## Acts 1

### Acts 1:1-3 | A Look Back

*1 The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up [to heaven], after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over [a period of] forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.*

“The first account” Luke “composed” is his Gospel, which, like this book of Acts, he wrote to a certain “Theophilus”. The contents of his Gospel concern everything the Lord Jesus both did and taught when He was bodily on earth. Luke speaks in this context about what the Lord “began” to do and teach. This means that He still continues to do so, even though He is no longer bodily visible and tangibly present. The work is not yet finished. We see that in this book, which describes how He works in a powerful way from heaven through His Spirit on earth. He still does that, today also through us.

Luke has described in his Gospel what the Lord began “to do and teach”. Doing and teaching belong together. With Him ‘doing’ comes first. He was the vivid embodiment of what He taught. He Himself did what He taught others. His actions were no different than His words. We often say more than we show in practice. Our words often go beyond our actions. A holy life gives tremendous power to what we preach.

Luke has described in his Gospel the life of the Lord on earth until the day of His ascension. In this first chapter of Acts he describes that ascension again because it is the starting point for this book. The ascension of the Lord is decisive for everything else that happens on earth through and for Him. The importance of His ascension is also shown by the fact that the expression “taken up”, or “lifted up”, appears four times in this chapter (verses 2,9,11,22).

Luke also points out that after His resurrection, just as during His life until His death, the Lord Jesus did everything “by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 10:38; Heb 9:14). It reminds us that we too will possess the Holy Spirit after our resurrection as before (Jn 14:16). By the Holy Spirit, He gave His orders to the apostles chosen by Him when He began to travel through Israel (Lk 6:13). To encourage them in that mission, He manifested Himself to them alive after He had suffered.

His disciples needed that encouragement because they were depressed by what had happened to Him. They had believed that He was the Messiah Who would establish His promised kingdom. But instead of reigning, He suffered and died. They thought it was all over, but He presented Himself alive to them and to many others as well.

He also gave “many convincing proofs” that it was really Him. He appeared on all sorts of occasions, also showing in words and deeds that He was the same Lord Who was dead, but is now alive. We can read in the Gospels how He made Himself known to the two disciples going to Emmaus, how He appeared to His disciples several times, how He restored Peter in his service for Him, how He comforted Mary Magdalene.

It is also our calling to present ourselves ‘alive’. This means for us to manifest Christ in our life. It means that we live for God, that we are visible to people and that we do not resemble the dead (Eph 5:14).

The period in which the Lord presented Himself to His disciples was “forty days”. The number forty is the number of trial. For example, Israel was in the wilderness for forty years and the Lord Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. During those forty days, the Lord spoke with them about “the things concerning the kingdom of God”. The kingdom of God is the kingdom over which God rules through His Son. That kingdom was promised in the Old Testament, but when the kingdom came in the Person of His King, He was rejected.

Thus, the kingdom has been postponed as far as its public appearance on earth is concerned. Until it will be established publicly on earth, it takes on a hidden form. The kingdom of God has been established since the ascension of Christ in the hearts of people who acknowledge Him as their Lord. His reign over their lives becomes visible when they let themselves

be guided by the Holy Spirit. In such lives “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” becomes visible (Rom 14:17b).

### **Acts 1:4-5 | The Promise of the Holy Spirit**

*4 Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” [He said], “you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

The Lord commands His disciples to remain in Jerusalem. He gives that command while He is gathered with them. He knows His disciples. If it would take a little too long, they would become impatient again and go back to their daily work (cf. Jn 21:3). But they must wait patiently for the promise of the Father. He reminds them that He has already spoken to them about this on a previous occasion (Jn 14:16-17,26; 15:26).

John the baptist also spoke about baptism with the Holy Spirit (Mt 3:11). On that occasion he also pointed out the difference between his baptism with water and the baptism with the Holy Spirit with which the Lord Jesus baptizes. The Lord makes that comparison here as well. The coming of the Holy Spirit is also a baptism, but it is of a completely different nature than that of John. John baptized with water. That was tangible water, on earth and of the earth, in which someone was immersed.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit does take place on earth, but it comes from heaven and connects to heaven. It is not a tangible event, although there are visible accompanying signs. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is above all an inner happening: the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the believers. At the same time it is also an external event: the Holy Spirit is poured out, so to speak, immersing the whole company in the Holy Spirit. Nowhere is there any mention of an individual being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The Lord does not mention here the baptism with fire of which John the baptist does speak (Mt 3:11). Baptism with fire is not connected with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but represents judgment and is only for the unbelievers. This judgment will come when the Lord returns to earth.

## Acts 1:6-8 | The Kingdom and Witnesses

*6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."*

A meeting with the Lord is a great opportunity to ask questions. The disciples make use of it. They do not ask questions about the Holy Spirit, but about the kingdom. They would like to know if He is going to do now what they have always looked forward to.

Their question shows that they still think of an earthly kingdom, perhaps precisely because He has risen. With His resurrection their old expectations have also risen again. Perhaps they have thought of Joel 2 where the coming of the Spirit is connected with the coming of the kingdom (Joel 2:28). The Christian form of the kingdom, the hidden form, is not discussed here.

Their question gives the Lord the opportunity to tell them what is going to happen and how much the situation has changed compared to the time before His suffering. The kingdom in its public form has been postponed until a time that the Father has fixed. The Lord Jesus has for them a task that suits the situation that has arisen. They should not worry about the time of the restoration of the kingdom. Nor should we speculate about the duration of the new period of time that began with the ascension of the Lord Jesus.

We also find the expression "the times and the epochs" in 1 Thessalonians 5 (1Thes 5:1; cf. Dan 2:21; Ecc 3:1). There it is about the question what will happen to the earth according to God's plan. Here it is about the question when the kingdom will be established. Both 'times' and 'epochs' refer to certain periods of time. They are synonyms which complement each other. But there is a remarkable difference.

'Times' are about duration, about something that happens after a certain period of time. In Greek, the word *chronos* is used. We recognize that word in our word 'chronometer', a device that measures how long something has lasted. For example, we read in Galatians 4 that God sent His Son in

“the fullness of time (*chronos*)” (Gal 4:4). This means that the Lord Jesus came to earth after a certain time had passed and God considered the time had come for sending His Son.

On ‘epochs’ it is not about duration, but about what typifies a particular time, about the character of that time. In Greek, the word *kairos* is used here. Thus, there is a time when man lived without law (Rom 5:13). After some time God gave His people the law through Moses and they lived under it (Jn 7:19). In “the times of the Gentiles” (Lk 21:24) He let the nations go their own way. These different periods of time, which sometimes succeed each other and sometimes run together, all have their own characteristics. Each time has made clear who man is and that he fails completely in serving God. All these different times end in the “fullness of the times” (plural form of *kairos*) (Eph 1:10), that is the time of the millennial realm of peace. That time will be characterized by peace, because then the Prince of peace will reign. Then will come the “times [plural form of *kairos*] of refreshing” (Acts 3:19).

After the Lord has said what they should not be concerned with, He indicates what they should be concerned with, namely, being His witnesses. Before He gives them that command, He first promises them that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit. He has already promised them the coming of the Holy Spirit in verses 4-5, but here (verse 8) He says that the Holy Spirit will enable them to fulfill their commission. The power of the Holy Spirit is needed to give a truly Christian testimony.

‘Witness’ is a key word in this book of the Bible. It occurs around thirty times. We do not all have the gift of an evangelist, but we can all be witnesses. The result is that we save people (Pro 14:25a).

The Lord says that they should start with witnessing in Jerusalem, the city where He was crucified. Then the circle widens and also Judea and Samaria come under the reach of God’s Word. Finally, He lets the light of His gospel shine even to the remotest part of the earth (cf. Isa 49:6).

Practically for us, it means that we must first give our testimony in the house and street where we live and in the place where we work (cf. Lk 8:39). Then the Lord can put us into a wider circle as His witnesses. The light that shines brightest at home shines the farthest. By mentioning the

ever-growing circle where the testimony concerning Him is given, the Lord also gives a subdivision of the book of Acts:

1. The testimony in Jerusalem we have in chapters 1-7.
2. The testimony in Judea and Samaria runs from chapter 8:1 till chapter 9:31.
3. The testimony to the end of the earth can be found in the rest of the book, in chapter 9:32 till chapter 28:31.

### **Acts 1:9-11 | The Ascension**

*9 And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11 They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*

With the command to His disciples to be His witnesses, the Lord's task on earth is complete. He is lifted up before the eyes of the disciples. It is a spectacular event that is described in a simple and calm way. It is not a sudden taking away as with Enoch (Heb 11:5) or being picked up by a fiery chariot and fiery horses as with Elijah (2Kgs 2:1,11). The cloud that takes Him away from their eyes will be the cloud that some disciples also saw when they were with Him on the mountain of transfiguration (Lk 9:34). The cloud is the symbol of the glory of God.

Seeing the Lord Jesus ascending to heaven like this, must have been an extraordinary sight. They gaze at Him until He enters the cloud. Did they look sad, adoring, surprised? It must have been a mixture of these feelings. Gazing into the sky, looking at the Lord Who is going away from them, two men joined them. They are two angels. We read nothing of the disciples' amazement at the appearance and words of the angels. The angels call them back to order.

The question "why do you stand looking into the sky?" can perhaps be taken as an admonition that also applies to us. It is not meant that we, now that the Lord is in heaven, should wait for His return with our arms

crossed. There is work to be done. Certainly, it is important to keep expecting Him, but a living expectation of Him will encourage us to be active.

The angels speak of the return of the Lord Jesus as a promise. This promise does not concern His coming for the believers to take them up (1Thes 4:15-18), but concerns His return on earth. He Who then returns is “this Jesus”, and no one else. He will also return to the same place from where He went to heaven, the Mount of Olives (Zec 14:4). He will come back visibly; He will come back in the clouds and He will return with power and great glory (Mt 24:30). All this is presented to them as hope in addition to the command of verse 8.

### **Acts 1:12-14 | Persevering in Prayer**

*12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered [the city], they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James [the son] of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas [the son] of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with [the] women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*

The disciples do what the Lord has told them to do. They do not go to their own homes again (cf. Jn 20:10), but they leave the Mount of Olives and go to Jerusalem. They do not have to walk far. The distance is given according to the Jewish way of measuring, a sabbatical journey. It is the distance the Jews were allowed to walk on the Sabbath, about eight hundred meters. Everything still breathes the atmosphere of Judaism.

The place where they go is a well-known place. In that room the Lord Jesus showed them that He wants to have fellowship with them and stated the conditions for this (Jn 13:1-20). There He also told them about the house of the Father and the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:1-12). It is “the upper room”, that is to say an exalted place. It is the place where He makes His thoughts known.

In the first place the eleven apostles are gathered there. Luke mentions the name of all eleven. Peter is again mentioned as the first of the whole group and therefore also as the first of the first group of four, Philip as the first

of the second group of four and James as the first of the third group which now consists of only three men because Judas Iscariot is missing. For Judas Iscariot another one will be chosen.

The first thing that is mentioned about the apostles is that they persist in prayer. That is a beautiful beginning. The first meeting after the ascension of the Lord Jesus is devoted to prayer. All the apostles are present. They are praying continuously and also with one mind. The expression “with one mind” appears eleven times in the New Testament, of which ten times in Acts (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29). The eleventh time we read it in Romans 15 (Rom 15:6). One-mindedness is the practice of Psalm 133 (Psa 133:1-3). There is no question now as to who is the greatest.

This togetherness so beautifully experienced in persistent prayer together is the prelude to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus they are together for ten days, to pray, among other things, for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13). This is no different for us if we want to experience His mighty workings. No service goes well without being preceded by prayer.

N.B. In the book of Acts prayer often occurs. It runs like a thread through the book: Acts 1:14,24; 2:42; 4:24; 6:4,6; 7:60; 8:15; 9:11,40; 10:2,9; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; 16:13,25; 20:36; 21:5; 27:35; 28:8.

At this prayer of the apostles there are also some women present, of whom Mary, the mother of the Lord, is mentioned by name. It is the last time she is mentioned in the New Testament. She prays with them. There are no prayers to her, as is very wrongly taught and done in the roman-catholic church. She is called “the mother of Jesus” and not “mother of God”, as the roman-catholic church so wrongly teaches.

Apart from the apostles and the women also the brothers of the Lord are present. At first they were unbelievers (Jn 7:5), but later they accepted Him as the Son of God. It seems that they have been convinced of this by His resurrection.

### **Acts 1:15-19 | The End of Judas**

15 *At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said,* 16 *“Brethren,*

*the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17 For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry." 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. 19 And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)*

During the meeting, at which about one hundred and twenty people are present, Peter stands up. He stands up "in the midst of the brethren". It is clear from the rest of the report that 'brethren' refers above all to the apostles, because it is to them that he speaks. Peter did not take the floor to break the silence. What he has to say is a message from Scripture. He is guided by Scripture. His mind is open (Lk 24:45) and therefore he understands Scripture, although the Holy Spirit has not yet been poured out. He has received the understanding of the new man from the Lord when He breathed on him (Jn 20:22).

He also believes unconditionally in the inspiration of the Old Testament by the Holy Spirit. What David said (Psa 41:9; Jn 13:18), Peter attributes to the Holy Spirit Who used David's mouth to foretell the betrayal of Judas. This does not mean that David was aware that he was talking about Judas, but the Holy Spirit gives an application which goes beyond the actual situation which David brought to his statement. What David said, he said about someone who at first was his friend, on whom he trusted, but who later became his opponent. Through the understanding of the same Holy Spirit, Peter correctly applies what David said and states that Judas was the Lord's main adversary. He was the leader of the gang that came to arrest Him.

It may have been difficult for Peter to say that Judas was counted "among us". Judas had gone after the Lord together with them and also had his part in the service the Lord had given to them. As apostles they never had any suspicion against Judas. That he manifested himself in this way must have been shocking for the apostles.

It is not clear whether verses 18-19, which deal with the dramatic end of Judas, are words of Peter or an explanation of Luke. We read that this false

apostle was guided by money, which is called “the price of his wickedness”. It is the same wages as the one Balaam loved (2Pet 2:15). It is the wages a person earns when he leaves the straight path.

By these wages, Judas has acquired a field, without having possessed it in person. It is the field that the chief priests bought from the money that Judas had earned with his betrayal and that he had thrown back into the temple sanctuary (Mt 27:3-8). However, the money remained his money and the field became his field.

Judas, the false apostle, comes to his end dramatically. He hanged himself, fell headlong, and burst open in the middle so that all his intestines gushed out (Mt 27:3-8). His depraved inner being came out in all its horror in this judgment. The terrible end of Judas has become known throughout Jerusalem.

In their own language they then speak of that field as “Hakeldama”. The meaning of this word is: Field of Blood. Twice there is a history that reminds us of a field of blood, both times (in pictures) in connection with the blood of Christ: in Genesis 4 (Gen 4:8-15) and in Deuteronomy 21 (Deu 21:1-9).

### Acts 1:20-26 | Choosing the Successor of Judas

20 *“For it is written in the book of Psalms,  
‘LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE,  
AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT’;*

*and,*

*‘LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.’*

21 *Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— 22 beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these [must] become a witness with us of His resurrection.” 23 So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen 25 to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And*

*they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.*

Peter knows that the words “written in the book of Psalms” (Psa 69:25; 109:8) apply to Judas, although his name is not mentioned there. This also means that what happened to Judas is not a victory of satan. Judas was only used to fulfill the Word of God. That does not detract from the personal responsibility that Judas had. He opened himself to satan.

The quotation from Psalm 69 announces his judgment (Psa 69:25), while the quotation from Psalm 109 speaks about the succession of the vacant place among the twelve (Psa 109:8). In their choice of a successor, the apostles are guided by Scripture (verse 16) and they also want to obey it. They believe in the inspiration of Scripture and in its practical application in their situation.

This is also important to us. The power of Scripture to guide us in all kinds of situations in the church today is undiminished. However, the question is whether we still believe this with the same conviction as the disciples did back then. Judging by our knowledge of Scripture and giving our own interpretation of it, it is to be feared that we have deviated far from the faith of the first disciples.

Peter not only has insight in Scripture, but he also has insight in the conditions that the successor of Judas has to meet. He knows that there are men, apart from the twelve whom the Lord Jesus has chosen for a special service, who have also joined Him as His disciples. Such disciples have also come to know Him as Someone Who “went in and out” among them, indicating the free way of dealing the Lord had with His disciples.

The period of the public service of the Lord Jesus started at the baptism of John and continued until His ascension. To be counted among the apostles someone had to have stayed with Him all that time. If someone fulfilled that condition, he was also a witness of His resurrection and that is what it is mainly about.

It is not about being able to bear witness to the Lord’s walk, but to His resurrection. Here the importance of the resurrection is underlined. It must be possible to bear witness to it. The resurrection occupies an important

place in Acts. Without the resurrection, preaching and teaching have no power or clarity.

There are two men who meet the conditions to take the place of Judas. It is the privileged place from which Judas fell because he loved the money. His choice for the money was a fatal one and made him go to his own horrible place in eternal destruction (Jn 17:12). The two candidates are presented to the Lord. They may have been belonged of the seventy sent by Him (Lk 10:1).

After consulting the Scriptures and being guided by them and applying the conditions, they now submit the matter to the Lord in prayer. Reading God's Word and prayer always belong together. Supported by the Scriptures, they ask Him to choose one of the two who meet the conditions. The apostles do not determine themselves who should take the place of Judas. They leave the choice to the Lord. Just as He spent the night in prayer before He chose the twelve (Lk 6:12-13), so the disciples here pray for the right choice.

They address the Lord as the One "who know the hearts of all men" (cf. Acts 15:8). He alone knows the heart of every human being and knows what is in it for Him. This attitude of dependence and surrender to His will is of decisive importance for learning His will. They also say in their prayers why they come to this prayer. They justify themselves as it were by referring to the events. The Lord knows all that, but He wants us to tell Him why we ask Him to make a decision. It is important for us to put into words our motives to ask for something.

After having addressed the Lord in prayer as the One who knows the hearts of all men, they cast lots. At that time, it was still a lawful means to get to know God's will (Pro 16:33). It is also the last time we read about the use of castings lots in the Bible. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, there is no more mention of casting lots. When the Holy Spirit has come, He makes God's will clear (Acts 13:2).

The lot falls to Matthias. He is added to the eleven. As a result later can be spoken of "the twelve" again (Acts 6:2). By using the expression "the twelve", the Holy Spirit makes it clear that the choice has been acknowledged by God.

## Acts 2

### **Acts 2:1 | The Day of Pentecost**

*1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*

The believers still come together in the upper room. Then comes the day of Pentecost. On that day they receive an answer to their prayers, praying among other things for the Holy Spirit (Lk 11:13). Luke says of this day that it “had come”. This day of Pentecost is foretold in the Old Testament (Lev 23:15-21). It was one of the “feasts of the LORD”. The feast of Pentecost took place fifty days after the feast of the first fruits (Lev 23:9-14). The sheaf of the first fruits speaks of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He is “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (1Cor 15:20).

At the feast of Pentecost a ‘new grain offering’ of two loaves of bread was brought. Those two loaves of bread symbolize Jew and Gentile who have been baptized into a unity by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Just as we see that what the Passover represented was fulfilled in the death of Christ, so we see that what the Feast of Pentecost represented is fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps during the time that the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they spoke with each other about Leviticus 23. On this day of the fulfillment of the promise, they are all gathered together. They are together because they have a common interest that they want to share with each other. It is a special privilege, characteristic of the church, to come together to share the common faith in the Lord Jesus (1Cor 11:20; 14:26).

### **Acts 2:2-4 | The Coming of the Holy Spirit**

*2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.*

The Holy Spirit did not come in a visible, human form like the Lord Jesus. He could have come unseen and unnoticed, but God wanted His coming to be noticed and He used visible, outward signs to do so. From heaven, that is, from God, comes a noise like a violent rushing wind.

The wind is heard, not felt. The noticing of the coming of the Holy Spirit is not based on emotion, but on perception. Something is heard (verse 2), something is seen (verse 3) and there is a result (verse 4). The whole house is filled. We can well imagine that all who are present in the house are immersed, baptized, with the Holy Spirit.

In filling the whole house (verse 2) we see a picture of the truth that the Holy Spirit dwells in the church as a whole (1Cor 3:16). In verse 3 He comes to each of them in a phenomenon that resembles tongues of fire. In it we see a picture of the truth that the Holy Spirit also dwells in each individual believer (1Cor 6:19).

The coming of the Holy Spirit into the church to take up His residence and dwell in it is a one-time event. It takes place here. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a one-time event, just as the work of Christ on Calvary is a one-time event. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the individual believer, i.e. coming into the body of the believer as a dwelling place, happens at the moment that someone believes the gospel of his salvation (Eph 1:13). So this is something that happens just as often as people come to repentance and faith.

After noticing the noise of the coming of the Spirit with the ears, something is perceived with the eyes. Those present see tongues as of fire that distribute themselves and rest on each one of them. Here the baptism with the Holy Spirit takes place, to which reference is made in 1 Corinthians 12 (1Cor 12:13). This is not baptism with fire. That is for the unbelievers. When John addresses a group of believers and unbelievers, he mentions both baptisms (Mt 3:11-12; Lk 3:16-17).

The tongues that are placed on each of them are tongues "as of fire". So it is not fire, but it does remind of it. Fire represents judgment. Although it is not a baptism of fire, which means judgment, this baptism of the Spirit with which believers are baptized in a certain sense has to do with judgment. Indeed, it indicates that the coming of the Holy Spirit is the judgment of

the flesh. Where the Holy Spirit comes, the flesh is no longer allowed to assert itself and must be kept in death. The tongues point to our speaking, to what we say. If the Holy Spirit dwells in us, it must be reflected in our whole behavior.

Fulfillment with the Spirit must be distinguished from the outpouring or baptism with the Holy Spirit. If someone is filled with the Spirit, it means that he comes under the power of the Spirit in order to fulfill a particular service. Thus, fulfillment with the Spirit can happen several times. As already mentioned, baptism with the Holy Spirit is a one-time event at the birth of the church, just as receiving the Holy Spirit is a one-time event that takes place in someone who repents.

N.B. "Fulfillment with the Holy Spirit" still occurs in the New Testament in Lk 1:15,41,67; Acts 4:8,31; 9:17; 13:9. 'Full of the Spirit' indicates a state of permanently being filled with the Holy Spirit. We see this in the Lord Jesus (Lk 4:1) and in Stephen and Barnabas (Acts 6:3,5; 7:55; 11:24).

Another accompanying and perceptible phenomenon is that they "speak with other tongues" or better: "speak in other languages". The different languages are a consequence of sin and lead to division. The languages spoken by the Spirit remove the effects of sin. The believers thereby understand each other and they result in unity.

Here the judgment of the confusion of languages that God had exercised because of the building of the tower of Babel is removed (Gen 11:1-9). There, the proud building of a human structure was ended by the judgment of the confusion of languages, while God here shows the beginning of His spiritual building. At Babel there was scattering, here is uniting.

One of the characteristics of a Spirit-filled believer is that he speaks about the Lord Jesus. This happens here in an abundant and special way. The believers speak in languages about the great deeds of God (verse 11). To the Jew, it was unthinkable that God could be spoken of in a language other than Hebrew. That this happens here means that in making Himself known, God no longer limits Himself to one people, but that the gospel is for the whole world.

## Acts 2:5-13 | Speaking in Other Languages

*5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear [them] in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our [own] tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." 12 And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine."*

The wonder of the coming of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the upper room in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was inhabited by Jews from every nation under heaven. Because they are further referred to as "devout men", they will have returned to the city of God out of their love for it. When this wonder is heard in the city, it attracts the crowds.

After all the turmoil of the trial against and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, everyone will have taken up the thread of daily life again. For fifty days nothing spectacular has happened. The claims of Jesus as Messiah were carried to the tomb with Him, one must have thought. The soldiers have spread the lie about stealing His body (Mt 28:12-15) and that lie will be widely believed. The service in the temple will have returned to its normal course.

Then suddenly this event takes place and later even the conversion of several thousands of people. Everyone in the crowd, consisting of all kinds of nationalities, hears speaking in their own language. This confuses them. No mention is made of the fiery tongues on the disciples. It seems that the crowd has not seen them. In any case, the amazement is great. The poor handful of illiterate disciples, recognized as coming from the backward Galilee, emerges from the obscurity and oblivion into the open and gives testimony with irresistible force in languages they have not learned.

In the crowd, people talk to each other about the fact that everyone hears them speaking in the language in which they were born. Luke lists the peoples where these Jews came from. It gives an impression of the vastness of the scattering. But the fact that God makes His greatness and majesty known to all these peoples in the language of their native land, the language with which they grew up, is an unprecedented victory of God's grace. He had to scatter His people because of their unfaithfulness. Now He is merging them because of the greatness of His Son's work.

The disciples speak these different languages and even dialects without having learned them. It is a wonder of speech and not a wonder of hearing. The disciples know how to express themselves perfectly with the right accent in the language of each country where emigrants have come from.

N.B. Twice before, there has been talk of speaking in a language without having learned it. Adam and Eve are the first to speak a language without having learned it. The second case is the confusion of languages that God gave on the occasion of the building of the tower of Babel.

Again (verses 7,12) Luke tells what an enormous impression this event makes on the crowd. Every time he points out what it causes in the crowd. The coming of the Holy Spirit to earth is an event that does not take place in silence, but is accompanied by the necessary and appropriate display. Those who are impressed are those who have come from other countries and hear here the language of the country of their origin.

There are also "others" (verse 13). They probably belong to the indigenous Jews who do not understand these languages. They do not show themselves to be devout, but mock what is happening. For them it is the language of the drunk.

### **Acts 2:14-15 | Peter Begins His Speech**

*14 But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. 15 For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is [only] the third hour of the day;*

Peter, restored in fellowship with his Lord and with his fellow-brothers, can now take his stand and speak with boldness. Not only does Peter

takes his stand, but also the eleven other apostles do so with him. The eleven stand beside him to support his testimony in a way visible to all. He addressed the crowd as men of Judea and inhabitants of Jerusalem. His audience therefore consists of Jews. He also attunes his speech completely to this audience. He knows the thoughts and feelings of this audience through and through because he himself is a Jew. But through repentance and faith and the Holy Spirit Who dwells in him, he can give the right meaning to what the crowd has observed.

With the words “let this be known to you and give heed to my words”, he stimulates their interest and asks their undivided attention. In his speech, thus addressed to a group consisting only of Jewish listeners, Peter for the first time uses the keys given to him by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16 (Mt 16:19). He uses them to open up the kingdom of heaven to the Jews.

It becomes the first Christian speech, although addressed entirely to Jewish listeners and based on the Old Testament. The strength of his testimony is that he bases his speech on Scripture and facts. His listeners know Scripture. They also know the undeniable facts.

First Peter takes away the foolish assumption that they are drunk. He does so by a sober observation that it is still too early in the day to be drunk. He says what this new ‘movement’ is not: it’s not a drunken gang, not a passing case of emotional excitement. Then he starts a glowing speech in which he makes clear what this new movement is: it is something they can find in their own Scriptures.

### **Acts 2:16-21 | The Prophecy of Joel**

*16 but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:  
 17 ‘AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says,  
 ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND;  
 AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY,  
 AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS,  
 AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS;  
 18 EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN,  
 I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT  
 And they shall prophesy.*

19 *'AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE  
AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW,  
BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE.*

20 *'THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS  
AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD,  
BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL  
COME.*

21 *'AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME  
OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.'*

In order to explain what happened, Peter appeals to what is written by the prophet Joel about such an event. Joel has written about the outpouring of God's Spirit "in the last days". So do the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isa 32:15; Eze 39:29). Isaiah and Ezekiel speak about it in connection with the last days and as a blessing for Israel. Joel also speaks about the last days, but as a blessing for "all mankind". With this he goes beyond the borders of Israel. Peter knows, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to quote the correct Scripture. He also knows where to stop his quotation.

It is important to pay attention that he quotes Joel 2 without saying that it is the fulfillment of this prophecy (Joel 2:28-31). That indeed is not the case. He refers to Joel because what happens on Pentecost has the same character as what Joel announces. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is something reminiscent of what Joel has said. We could say that it is a pre-fulfillment of the prophecy, not the fulfillment itself. The fulfillment will take place after what Joel prophesied in the previous verses has been fulfilled. The words "after this" in Joel 2:28, show that there is a chronological connection with the preceding verses.

The main purpose of Peter in quoting this verse from Joel is to make it clear to the Jews that this wonder that took place so suddenly in their midst is fully confirmed by what Joel says about the outpouring of the Spirit. But the outpouring that has now taken place is not the full accomplishment of the event announced by Joel. The Holy Spirit has come to earth and through this the church has come into being, which He will continue to form, as this book of Acts shows. That outpouring happened in order to form a people for heaven. For that purpose, the Spirit is still on earth. What Joel writes about will take place in the last days, the days of the future,

when the enemies of Israel are defeated and the people themselves live in their land.

Furthermore, the expression “all mankind” is also important. This expression does not mean ‘all people living then’, but indicates that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is not an event limited to the Jews. That aspect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last days is also clearly present in what happens on Pentecost.

It was not that God enabled every new believer to speak the Jewish language, but He allowed His witnesses to speak the languages of their peasants who had been scattered among the Gentiles. This is a special testimony of the grace that goes out to the Gentiles. Believers from the Gentiles are not incorporated into the Jewish people, but as Gentiles they receive part in the blessing of the Holy Spirit. In a certain sense, this removes the judgment that God had brought on mankind in the confusion of languages. Language no longer forms a barrier.

According to Joel, the outpouring of the Spirit on all mankind results in prophecy. We also see this happening here through Peter. His speech has the effect of touching people’s hearts and making many people repent (verses 37,41). This is precisely the purpose of prophecy, for prophecy means speaking from the presence of God to the hearts and consciences of men.

Regarding the outpouring of the Spirit on all mankind, there is another remarkable difference with the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the Spirit as a gift seems to be reserved only for leaders such as kings and prophets. That the whole people would prophesy, then remained a wish, once expressed by Moses (Num 11:29). But this wish of Moses became with Joel a promise of Yahweh for all members of His people: “YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHESEY”, as well as His “BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN”. This will be the case for all who will enter the realm of peace.

This aspect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is also present in the church on and since Pentecost. The Spirit has come upon all believers, without distinction of position or rank. Likewise, everyone who repents

receives the Holy Spirit of promise, without distinction of gender, age or social status.

Although Peter also quotes the wonders and signs that Joel mentions in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit, they do not follow directly after the outpouring of the Spirit. This is because Israel as a nation did not repent, but remained disobedient. If they had repented, the “great and glorious day of the LORD” would have come immediately, accompanied by wonders and signs. Yahweh would have judged the enemies both inside and outside of Israel to deliver His people. His actions would have been accompanied by the phenomena mentioned here. Now that day is yet to come. That is why those phenomena are still future.

They will certainly take place after the church has been raptured. We find that in the book of Revelation, from Revelation 6 onward. Under the sixth seal mentioned there are judgments taking place which are very similar to what Joel says and Peter quotes here. All judgments that take place from Revelation 6 fall under what Joel calls the “great and glorious” day of Yahweh (Joel 2:31). These judgments pave the way for Christ’s return to earth to establish His kingdom of peace and righteousness. The “great and glorious day of the LORD” is the day of the return of the Lord Jesus (He is Yahweh) to earth and His reign that follows. That day is great because of the extensive consequences that His coming and government will have.

Because of the announced judgments and the blessing that will follow, Peter concludes his quotation by offering salvation to all who are aware of their hopeless situation. That salvation is only possible by calling on the Name of the Lord. He who approaches Him in trusting faith does not perish, but is saved.

Paul quotes this verse and declares it to be of general application for the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world (Rom 10:13). In the gospel there is no distinction in judgment, nor is there any distinction in offering salvation. It is for everyone. Throughout all the centuries, salvation can only be found through faith in the Lord Jesus.

### **Acts 2:22-24 | The Acts of God and of Man**

22 *“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed*

*through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know — 23 this [Man], delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put [Him] to death. 24 But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.*

Peter speaks to them as “men of Israel”, and not only as “men of Jerusalem”, or “men of Judea”, for he is going to speak of the general hope for the whole people. He is now going to tell why this baptism with the Holy Spirit took place. It was a direct act of the Lord Jesus Who is now exalted at the right hand of God.

Fifty days after the events during the Passover, events of which memories will surely have faded, Peter suddenly confronts the people again with the Man of Nazareth. He recalls how the Lord Jesus did works of power [“miracles” is literally: “works of power”] and wonders and signs in their midst. These were all proof that in Him God was present among them. God did it through Him. They knew that. Peter speaks to them as completely responsible people, as people who know that Christ did everything in God’s power. They have had to recognize God in Him.

Peter then tells them that they killed Him. They did not do that themselves, because they forced the Gentiles in the person of Pilate by manipulation to execute the death penalty on Him, but it does not make them any less guilty. On the contrary, they are even more guilty than Pilate (Jn 19:11b), although he too is completely guilty of the death of the Lord Jesus.

Yet the death of Christ is not a surprise, not a matter that got out of hand. It is the perfect fulfillment of God’s counsel. God has perfect foreknowledge of what would happen to His Son, how His people would surrender Him. In this verse we see that God knows how to use man’s iniquity for His glorification and the fulfillment of His counsel, which, incidentally, does not change man’s responsibility. What man thought to be evil, God has turned to good (Gen 50:20).

Peter doesn’t say a word about the lie of the stolen body. He completely ignores it and preaches the truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus by God. In doing so, he testifies to the pleasure of God in the work of His Son and the full acknowledgment of it. Because of the perfection of that work,

it was impossible for Him to be held by the agony of death. He tasted death for a short moment (Heb 2:7a,9a), but death could not hold Him in its power. Death had no hold on Him. He entered death voluntarily and overcame it. God dissolved the bonds of death, in which He had been for a short time. It would have been, speaking reverently, unjust of God if He had not done so and left His Son in death.

### Acts 2:25-32 | The Resurrection Foretold by David

*25 For David says of Him,  
'I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE;  
FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN.  
26 'THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULT-  
ED;  
MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE;  
27 BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES,  
NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.  
28 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE;  
YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.'  
29 "Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that  
he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 And so,  
because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH  
AN OATH TO SEAT [one] OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE,  
31 he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS  
NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DE-  
CAY. 32 This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.*

Again, Peter cites Scripture as proof of what happened. The earlier Scripture served to explain the coming of the Holy Spirit. This time the Scripture – from Psalm 16 – serves as an explanation of the resurrection of Christ (Psa 16:8-11). David wrote this psalm ten centuries earlier. He writes in the 'I' form. Yet he could not write about himself. He died, was buried and still has not risen. David is a prophet here and he writes about Someone else.

No one but the Lord Jesus has gone His way without for a moment turning His eye away from God, His Father. He always saw God, His Father in His presence. He also always knew Him beside Himself (Jn 8:29). He felt completely supported by Him, so that He did not shake. His fellowship

with His God gave Him joy in His heart, which He expressed with His mouth, even in the time when He experienced rejection (Mt 11:25).

Through His fellowship with His God, He had hope regarding the rest for His flesh, which is His body. He knew that He would die the death for the sinner, but He faced that death in the presence of His Father and His Father at His right hand, while looking at the joy that would come afterward (Heb 12:2). He knew that God would not “abandon” His soul to Hades. That means God would not give up His soul to the realm of death. God would not let his soul go there. Hades is the place where the souls of people who died in unbelief go (Lk 16:23), but Christ was the “Holy One” of God Who had lived in complete consecration to God’s glory.

The pains of death, which every unbeliever suffers in Hades and ultimately eternally in hell, He suffered for every believer in His soul in the three hours of darkness on the cross under God’s judgment. After He died, He was placed in the tomb, but His body would not be affected by the decay of death. Also in His death He was ‘the Holy One’ of God. Because of this He knew that He would not undergo decay. After a short stay in the tomb – “for a little while” (Heb 2:9) – He was raised up.

After hearing the Lord Jesus speak in the quote about His death and the safekeeping in it by God, we then hear how He speaks about life and joy. This is life and joy after having passed through death. After the resurrection ways of life are opened and made known.

That makes the resurrection of Christ different from the other resurrections in the Bible because those resurrected believers all died again. The life in the resurrection is a life full of joy, it is life with a view to the presence of God. In the spiritual sense this applies today to every believer who sees the Lord before him (verse 25). Such a person always goes on the way of life, even if it may lead through death.

After the quote, Peter asks his listeners again for attention by addressing them as “brethren”. He says that he may confidently say, that is to say, that he is free to speak with boldness to them about David, whom he calls “patriarch”, in the sense of ancestor of the royal family. He knows the great interest of his audience in this, in their eyes, unsurpassed king. But how-

ever great David may be, he is both dead and buried. David's tomb was still among them with his bones in it, which meant that he did see decay.

This makes it clear that the preceding quote cannot refer to David. The psalm is therefore not about David, but about the Messiah. David was not only king, but he was also a prophet. He spoke about future things, because God had assured him in the most powerful way possible, of a successor to his throne. That heir would be "[one] OF HIS DESCENDANTS", that is, a direct descendant of him. That Descendant is the Christ, the Messiah.

David has believed the promise of God concerning an heir to the throne. That made him see ahead. If God has promised that there will be an Offspring on his throne, then death cannot nullify that promise of God. Therefore, it could not be otherwise than that the Christ, having died, would also rise. He would not only rise from the dead, but He would rise without taking anything of death with Him in His resurrection. Everything that belongs to death would not affect Him.

He was not left by God to the power of the realm of death, which would mean that the realm of death would have power over Him. He entered the realm of death voluntarily in order to overcome death. He has gone into death as a Victor, a victory evidenced by His resurrection into an immortal life. His flesh, therefore, has not seen decay, for everything related to death, He negated by His death, so that it could not exercise its power over Him.

Peter does not let his listeners guess about the meaning of what he said about David and Christ. The Son of David and the Christ of God is "this Jesus". Again we hear the emphatic "this" Jesus (Acts 1:11). This Jesus, Who was raised up by God, is the same Who died.

Peter also vigorously establishes His resurrection by saying that they are all witnesses to that fact. There was no doubt about that. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus appeared again and again, among other people, to them, the disciples, and spoke with them for forty days (Acts 1:3).

### **Acts 2:33-36 | Jesus Made Both Lord and Christ**

*33 Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which*

*you both see and hear. 34 For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says:*

*'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD,*

*"SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,*

*35 UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.'"*

*36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."*

The Lord Jesus has not only been raised from the dead by God, but He has also been "exalted" by the power of God. Peter attributes everything to God to show how much God appreciates and has accepted the work of His Son. On earth people may have despised and rejected Him, but to God He is the perfect Delightful One Whom He joyfully gives the highest and most glorious place in heaven. As the Father, He has given to the Lord Jesus the Holy Spirit promised by Him that the Lord Jesus might pour Him out (Acts 1:4; Jn 14:16-17,26; 15:26). As glorified in heaven, Christ receives the Holy Spirit for the second time. At His baptism He received the Holy Spirit for Himself, now He receives the Spirit to pour Him out upon others.

As proof of the glorification of Christ, Peter quotes another verse from the Scriptures. This time the proof comes from Psalm 110 (Psa 110:1). Just as he said about Psalm 16 that it does not primarily refer to David, but to Christ (verse 31), here too he says that Psalm 110:1 is not about David, but about the Lord Jesus. [In the various psalms Peter quotes, we have a beautiful consecutive testimony of the death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Christ.]

David speaks in Psalm 110:1 about the glorification of the Lord Jesus as an act of Yahweh, that is God. The Lord Jesus is exalted by the right hand of God and God has given Him the place of honor at His right hand. That place belongs to Him, He has deserved that place. David speaks about Him as "my Lord". The Lord Jesus is the Son of David as Man, but He is also the Lord of David, because He is also the Son of God.

There is an "until" connected to that place of honor at God's right hand. There will come a time when the Lord Jesus leaves that place to return to earth. He will then judge the enemies of His people – and the enemies of

His people are also His enemies. He will place all those who have refused to repent and have constantly turned full of hatred against Him and His people as vanquished enemies under His feet so that He will rest on them. Then His wrath against all the injustice done to Him and His people will have found rest. Until that moment He remains in the glory of heaven. The outpouring of the Spirit is proof of the place He now occupies there (Jn 16:8-11).

Peter presents to the whole house of Israel the certainty of what God has done to His Son. He also confronts them with their crime. Again he speaks about “this” Jesus. The contrast between the place God gives Him and the place man gives Him is enormous. Man has rejected, mistreated and murdered Him as a worthless one. God, on the other hand, has made Him Lord, the Sovereign Who has all the power in heaven and on earth. God has also made Him Christ, the Bearer and Distributor of all His promises.

Also on earth the Lord Jesus was Lord and Christ, but there He was in relation to Israel and all the promises made to Israel. Now He is as Man in heaven and it is with respect to God’s eternal counsel.

### **Acts 2:37-41 | The Effect of the Preaching**

*37 Now when they heard [this], they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” 38 Peter [said] to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.*

The proofs were delivered from the Scriptures and then applied by Peter under the guidance of the Spirit, together with the other apostles, to the hearts and consciences of the hearers. In this way, what the Lord Jesus said with regard to the coming of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled: “He takes of Mine and will disclose [it] to you” (Jn 16:15). Now the Holy Spirit has come and through Peter He shows the things concerning the Lord Jesus.

Often the hearers will have read, or have heard it read, these psalms themselves. They will always have understood that these psalms speak about the Messiah. Now they learn that these psalms have found their fulfillment in the past weeks. They come to recognize their crime. They have killed Him of Whom the book of Psalms testify that He is the Messiah. The Spirit is working in their hearts the consciousness of what a terrible position they are in, now that it appears that He did not remain in death, but that He was raised up again. That is why they call for a possibility to escape judgment.

Their call is to Peter and the eleven other apostles and not to the chief priests and the scribes. They believe that Peter and his men can help them. All prejudice about these "Galileans" has disappeared. They ask their question to all the apostles, but it is answered by Peter as their spokesman.

His answer begins with "repent". First of all, they must come to a complete change in their thinking about the Lord Jesus. They must accept Him as God has accepted Him. This means that they must confess their act of rejection of the Son of God as completely unjustified and as an act through which they are guilty of murder before God.

If this inner contrition about their past is there, they must then allow themselves to be baptized. Thereby, they also outwardly distance themselves from the people to which they belong as a people under the judgment of God because of the death of His Son. Baptism is the public testimony of, on the one hand, a break with the past and the old environment and, on the other hand, the taking of a new path, the path of a follower of the Lord Jesus.

Baptism is the public condemnation of and break with the Jewish people and the joining of the new Christian testimony that has just emerged from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Baptism must therefore take place in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Name that was previously so despised by them, but which they must now openly confess through baptism as the only means of forgiveness of their sins. If they meet these two conditions – repentance and baptism – they will receive the Holy Spirit.

The order we see here is:

1. repentance;

2. baptism;
3. receiving the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 8, where it is about the Samaritans, we have the same order, only there the Holy Spirit is given through the intervention of the apostles.

In Acts 10, where it is about the Gentiles, the order is different. There the order is:

1. repentance;
2. receiving the Holy Spirit;
3. baptism.

This order has been valid ever since, as long as the church is on earth.

Peter emphasizes that the promise of the Holy Spirit is special for them and their children. He has already proven this in verse 16 by quoting from Joel 2. He now also tells that this promise is even for those who are outside the Jewish people. They could also know something about this from their Scriptures (Isa 57:19).

God's promise to give the Holy Spirit cannot be limited to Israel, because that promise is related to the accomplished work of Christ that has also been accomplished for or on behalf of the whole world. That is why God's calling voice goes out to all nations and calls them everywhere to believe in His Son.

Peter has said more than Luke has written down. He has preached the gospel in all possible terms and called them to repentance. He has called to be saved from "this perverse generation". In doing so, he portrayed the people as a murderous people, as a people from whom one must be saved, because otherwise he will perish because of the judgment that will come on this people. He does his utmost to get the people to repent. He preaches his message with conviction.

In the same way, we must persuade people to let themselves be saved by the work of Christ from a world under judgment (2Cor 5:11). We will only be credible if we ourselves are convinced of the truth and the seriousness of judgment and have also distanced ourselves from the world on which we preach the judgment.

The preaching of Peter has an enormous result. Many receive his word. We know that Peter has spoken the Word of God. Yet it is said that “his” word is received. He is as it were one with God’s message. Those who receive his word, i.e. confess their guilt before God for their rejection of the Lord Jesus, are baptized. Through baptism they publicly distance themselves from the guilty Jewish people. The approximately three thousand souls who are baptized are proof of what the Lord Jesus said about the “greater” works that would be done by His apostles when He was back with the Father (Jn 14:12).

### Acts 2:42-47 | The First Church Life

*42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they [began] selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

With the addition of about three thousand believers, the church expanded considerably. In spite of all the differences that exist between all those many members of the church, there is unity. That unity has not been created by human activity and that unity is not maintained by human organization. The hearts of these believers are simply focused on the Lord Jesus and therefore the Holy Spirit is given the opportunity to ensure that the church remains a unity.

This is done through the four aspects mentioned here, which fully permeate the church life and in which they persevere. These aspects also relate to the meetings of the believers who are, as it were, the highlights of the Christian community. However, this can only be the case if these things dominate every aspect of life.

“The apostles’ teaching” comes first. Education in God’s thoughts is the first thing the newly converted need. Only in this way a healthy spiritual life can grow. Continually devoting themselves in this means not only a continually devoting themselves to listen to what the apostles say, but above all a continually devoting themselves to practice the teaching the apostles give. Continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles therefore applies to the entire life of the believers. On the basis of this teaching there is fellowship. The teaching of the apostles is the Scriptural basis for all forms of fellowship known to the church.

So the first thing that characterizes the church after its formation is submission to the teaching of the Holy Spirit by the apostles, which is now the teaching of the whole New Testament. This leads to the second aspect of being a church, and that is, having “fellowship” with one another. The church is a company of people who did not know each other before and did totally different things. What characterized them, characterized the world. Through faith in the Lord Jesus those people have now become a community in which He is their common ‘interest’ (1Cor 1:9), about Whom they want to speak to and think of.

This common interest is expressed in a special way in the third aspect, “the breaking of bread”, which is the celebration of the Supper of the Lord. In the expression of the fellowship, the breaking of bread, the Lord remains constantly before their attention and brings out the deepest feelings for Him.

Finally, there is the awareness that they themselves have no power and that they are dependent on God in everything. That is why they also continually devote themselves “to prayer”.

What Christians do and how they live, frightens all those who are not part of it. The unbelievers perceive things they cannot explain and cannot control. The power of the Spirit is manifested in an impressive way, which can also be seen by unbelievers. The wonders and signs are not described here. In the following chapters Luke will mention some of them. The words “wonders and signs” are the same that are used for the Lord Jesus in verse 22.

While there is fear outside the fellowship of the believers, there is great togetherness among the believers. They are together to share spiritual blessings with each other and they also share all their possessions with each other. This a big difference with our time in which believers are separated from each other for all kinds of reasons and do not even know each other. Many who do know each other live separated from each other because each lives for himself and shares nothing of his wealth with others.

A true Christian cannot bear to have much, while others have too little. Perhaps it was because of the expectation of the Lord's soon return, but the first Christians sold everything they had and shared it with each other. Incidentally, they did so entirely voluntarily, no one forced them to do so.

As said, their togetherness is great. They stay together, even when the feast of Pentecost is over. Their life no longer consists of holding their high times, but of an inner connection with each other that is constantly present. To experience their connection with each other, they gather in the temple and in the houses.

They do not build money devouring churches, but are characterized by simplicity and trust in God. A jeweled Christ child in the Cathedral in Rome and hungry street children just outside cannot be reconciled. The first church has none of the things we have today, such as buildings, money, political influence, social status, and yet many souls are won.

On the one hand, these Christians still cling to Jewish religious customs by going to the temple. On the other hand, they live the true Christian fellowship in their homes. Every day they break bread in remembrance of their Lord and enjoy fellowship with each other during love meals.

In all this they praise God. Their joy and praise are not the result of their redemption, as was the case with Israel in Exodus 15 (Exo 15:1). It is the joy of believers who now share in the love of God. They have partaken of His nature and have been connected with God as their Father and the Holy Spirit has taken His dwelling in them.

Their whole way of life commands respect from the people. If Christians live as the Lord means, it is a blessing for the environment. The Lord shows His commitment to such a way of life. Every day He adds to the community. As a result, the number of those who are saved increases. Salvation

is for eternity. It may also be that the salvation that is meant here has to do with the destruction to which Jerusalem will be given up in the year 70 as God's judgment of the old system. Whoever repented escaped this and was saved from it.

NOTE What happened "day by day" or "daily" in the early church: meet one another (Acts 2:46); adding souls who were being saved (Acts 2:47); increase in number (Acts 16:5); examine the Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

## Acts 3

### **Acts 3:1 | To the Temple to Pray**

*1 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth [hour], the hour of prayer.*

Two of the apostles, Peter and John, go to the temple together. Although they are Christians through baptism with the Holy Spirit, they still cling to certain Jewish statutes. One of those statutes is going up to the temple at the hour of prayer.

The first period of Christendom is a time of transition. Through the service of Paul, who is called further on in Acts, the truth about Christendom will be fully unfolded. This will detach the hearts from Judaism and connect them with understanding to the glorified Lord in heaven. For all those who still find it difficult to let go of Judaism, in the year 70 the final breakthrough will be worked by God by abandoning Jerusalem to destruction by the Romans. This will put an end to the possibility to visit the temple.

They go to the temple as a house of prayer (Isa 56:7b; Lk 19:46). The hour of prayer, the ninth – that is three o'clock in the afternoon our time – is the hour of the evening burnt offering. It is the hour at which Elijah received an answer to his prayer (1Kgs 18:36-38) and the hour at which Daniel also received an answer to his prayer centuries later (Dan 9:21). It is also the hour when the Lord Jesus did not receive an answer when He called (Mt 27:46). At that hour Peter and John go to the temple to unfold the power of the Name of the Lord Jesus in front of the crowd. It is nice to see that the first work of power that is described takes place in the context of prayer.

### **Acts 3:2-7 | Healing of a Lame**

*2 And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he [began] asking to receive alms. 4 But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said,*

*"Look at us!" 5 And he [began] to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" 7 And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.*

While the church is gathered together daily in the temple, a lame man is set down every day at the gate of the temple, called Beautiful. The name of the gate, which symbolically expresses the magnificent religion of the Jews, contrasts sharply with the appearance of this lame man who is a symbol of the true condition of the Jews. He can do nothing and depends on the goodness of people who bring him to the temple. And when he is placed there, he is dependent on the goodness of the temple visitors. When people are in a religious mood, they are often more generous. The place he has at the door of the temple is therefore not badly chosen. He will have sat there for many years, because he is more than forty years old (Acts 4:22).

This man is reminiscent of the sick man who had been lying at a pool called Bethesda for thirty-eight years (Jn 5:5). Like that man, this man is a picture of Israel under the law. The people have wandered through the wilderness under the law for almost forty years; under the law they would never have reached the promised land with the promised blessing. Only God's grace has brought them into the land. Thus also the sick man at Bethesda has been healed by the Lord and thus also this lame one will be healed in the Name of the Lord.

This man is so close to the holy place and yet so far away from it. And hasn't the Lord Jesus been there often? Would he never have seen Him entering the temple buildings? In any case, he never appealed to Him.

Without the man realizing it, the end of his misery is near when Peter and John appear among the temple visitors. When he sees them, while they are about to go into the temple, he also asks them to receive alms. Could Peter and John, who have been there often together with the Lord Jesus, never have been addressed by him before? We do not know. We do know that asking for alms this time will bring him a lot more than gold and silver can ever give. Only God knows why people ignore the gospel for many years and are saved one day.

To Peter and John, the request for alms is the reason to make known the mighty Name of Jesus Christ. Peter fixes his gaze on him. He pays attention to nothing but the lame one. He sees not so much his need but rather the opportunity to glorify the Lord Jesus. John does the same. He too is only concerned with the glorification of Christ. Although Peter is the speaking and acting one, John is one of spirit with him. Their undivided attention is focused on the man.

Then Peter asks him to look at them. The man must renounce everything around him and only look at these two apostles who are standing there in the Name of the Lord Jesus. By looking at them he looks at Him in an indirect sense. He doesn't realize that, but Peter and John do realize that they are standing there with the power of the Lord. That is why Peter can say: "Look at us." It is not about them, but about Him Whom they represent.

The man does what is asked of him and looks at them. All he expects is a gift. His thoughts don't go much further. Our thoughts often don't go much further either. We are more focused on earthly treasures than heavenly treasures.

Then Peter speaks words that bear witness to what he does not have and what he does have. He has no silver or gold, but he does have the power of the Lord Jesus to heal. In the Old Testament, silver and gold are means of reconciliation, but Peter reminds us in his first letter that true salvation does not come through silver or gold, but through the precious blood of Christ (1Pet 1:18-19). The Name of Christ is the true means of restoration and also gives strength to enter the sanctuary, as we see here.

Instead of earthly fortune, Peter possesses a source of happiness and strength in heaven, in Jesus Christ. He draws from that source to give this man a blessing far beyond earthly prosperity. In the Name of Jesus Christ he gives him the command to walk. Peter calls the Lord Jesus "the Nazarene", which speaks of His descent from the despised Nazareth. That Name blares echoes over the temple square as the Name that gives strength to heal. The religious leaders thought to be rid of Him, but He reveals from heaven even a greater power than during His life on earth.

Such an expression of power in spoken words is rare today. Many sincere Christians today are gathering silver and gold for the work of the Lord,

while the power of the Name of the Lord remains largely unused. Many contemporary healers do speak the Name of Jesus with great power to heal, but cannot repeat Peter's first words, "I do not possess silver and gold".

Peter not only speaks words of authority in the Name of the Lord Jesus, but he also seizes the man by the right hand and helps him up. Here we see again that wonderful combination of Divine and human action. God does what we cannot do – strengthen his feet and his ankles – and we must do what we can – seize by the hand and raise up.

### **Acts 3:8-11 | Effect of Healing**

*8 With a leap he stood upright and [began] to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God; 10 and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to [beg] alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. 11 While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.*

The result is there immediately. The recovery is complete and verifiable. There is no need to present doctor's certificates. The man leaps up, stands upright and walks. His first steps are to the temple which he enters together with Peter and John. He has always sat at its door, now he goes in. He does that together with others. At the same time he personally expresses his gratitude. He walks and leaps and praises God. God gets the honor.

What he does is a testimony for the whole people who see him walking and hear him praising God. The people know him. He was part of the daily sight of the temple because he sat there begging every day. Some people may have given him something out of pity, but no one could help him get rid of his lameness. Of course, everyone had reconciled themselves to the idea that he could not be helped. But it is precisely this hopeless case for people that becomes a great testimony of the Name of the Lord Jesus.

The healed man clings to Peter and John, so that it is clear to everyone who has been used for his healing. It also shows the understandable desire of someone who has just been converted to stay with the one who has been

the means of his conversion. It is also a proof of new life when fellowship is sought with others who support him spiritually and help him to grow as a Christian. The man wants to belong to and stay with Peter and John.

His healing causes a popular uproar. All the people come to the temple, to the so-called portico of Solomon. In the portico of Solomon the Lord walked when He was asked whether He was the Christ (Jn 10:23-24) and there the apostles met (Acts 5:12). It is a place of encounter. The people are full of amazement about the healing. It is also an enormous wonder to see him, whom they have had as a lame man in their midst for more than forty years.

### Acts 3:12-16 | Peter Preaches Christ

*12 But when Peter saw [this], he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, [the one] whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. 14 But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 but put to death the Prince of life, [the one] whom God raised from the dead, [a fact] to which we are witnesses. 16 And on the basis of faith in His name, [it is] the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which [comes] through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.*

Peter uses the attention for this work of power to focus on the Worker of it, the Lord Jesus. With this in mind, this miracle has also happened. Unlike Simon the sorcerer who said of himself that he was a great man (Acts 8:9), Peter rejects all honor (cf. Acts 10:26; cf. Acts 14:13-16) and gives all honor to the Lord Jesus (cf. Rev 19:9-10). People are immediately inclined to honor a visible person, a creature, and not the unseen God, the Creator. This is the essence of idolatry. Only God and the Son of God are entitled to be honored. As God honors the Son, we must honor Him.

Peter therefore begins his third speech by removing a wrong impression. In Acts 2 he also starts his second speech with this. There it concerns the wrong impression that speaking in languages would be drunk talk. Here

the wrong impression that needs to be taken away, is that they have made the man healthy. Peter points out that it is not by their power that the man can now walk.

He adds that their piety is not the cause of the healing either. Their reverence for God does not give them any advantage with Him, as if He would give them a little honor that belongs to Him alone. He says that nothing in them has made any contribution to the healing. It is exclusively the work of Jesus Christ, about Whom he is going to speak next.

He does this by pointing out the appreciation God has for Him. He calls God by the Name that reminds us of the promises He made to each of the patriarchs individually. Those promises have as a central theme that He would send His Son, the Christ, to fulfill all promises. Well, God has sent Him. Peter calls the Lord Jesus "His servant Jesus" (cf. Isa 42:1). This indicates that the Lord Jesus served God on earth.

But what contrast there is between the appreciation that God has for His Son and the appreciation that the people have for Him. The people have not acknowledged Him as the Christ of God and have handed Him over to the authority of the government as a criminal. Pilate, the representative of that authority, testified several times that he found no guilt in Him and therefore judged that He had to be released. But the people were not open to reason. In blind hatred they denied their Messiah, the Christ of God, in front of the nations in the person of Pilate. They wanted nothing to have to do with Him and rejected Him.

Was everything now lost? No, for God has raised up and glorified His Servant Jesus, Who served Him so perfectly (Isa 52:13). As such, He is presented to the people by Peter again.

It is remarkable how Peter accuses the people twice of their denial of the Lord Jesus, even though only a few weeks ago he himself denied Him three times. But he confessed his denial with shame and under tears and received forgiveness from the Lord for it. Thus, he is free for God to now confront the people with this sin. He does this so that the people will come to repentance and confession of their sin and be reconciled to God just as he was.

He speaks of the Lord Jesus as “the Holy and Righteous One”. As “the Holy One” He lived on earth completely separated from the world and for God. He lived only for God. Therefore He was also “the Righteous One”. He always did everything completely in accordance with what is righteous for God and people.

In spite of His life completely dedicated to God and people, from which only goodness and grace came to mankind, they preferred a murderer, someone who takes the life of others. They asked Pilate to ‘give’ them that man, while rejecting God’s Son, the great gift of God. They would rather live with a murderer than with the Prince of life. They killed the Origin and Giver of life and thus cut off every path to life for themselves.

With even more emphasis than in Acts 2, Peter sets before their hearts and consciences the people’s dealings with the Son of God. He also shows that God has His own plan and that He triumphs over man’s hatred and evil deeds. Not man, but God has the last word and that in a way that makes man silent.

God has raised up His Son from the dead and presents Him to them again. Not only has God acted with Him in a very different way than they did, but He has also undone their deed and even attached special consequences to it. That is a great grace and a proof of God’s perfect goodness. Peter declares that he and John are witnesses of Him. He openly and unconditionally joins God in his assessment of the Lord Jesus.

After Peter has thus presented to the people their sin and told them what God has done to His Son, he points to the man who has been healed. They see him, they know him. They know how he was and see how he is now. The change in his situation is the result of faith in the Name of the Lord Jesus. What they see and to which Peter draws attention, is brought into direct connection with heaven and Him Who is glorified there. They can look directly upward from the healed man, for there is He Who has worked out what they see.

Faith is the mighty principle by which the glorified Christ makes Himself known on earth. Through faith in the Lord Jesus the man has received “perfect health”. Christ does not do a half job. They all stand there and

they all see that the man is completely healed through the Name of Jesus Christ Whom they have denied and murdered.

### **Acts 3:17-21 | Call to Repentance and Return**

*17 "And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. 18 But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; 20 and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, 21 whom heaven must receive until [the] period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.*

The accusations are fixed. The judgment of God is deserved. Then Peter points to a way out. Led by the Holy Spirit, he can tell the people that they have done their terrible deed "in ignorance" (cf. 1Cor 2:8) and therefore he can call them to repentance and return. Peter can say this based on the intercession of the Lord Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). On this basis mercy was also shown to Paul (1Tim 1:13).

Their sin is seen as manslayer, not murder. Someone guilty of manslayer under the law could be killed by the avenger of blood. If the manslayer managed to reach a city of refuge in time, he was safe there (Num 35:9-34). In this way, the people could still take refuge in the Lord Jesus and thus escape judgment. Instead of judgment, they will receive the promised blessing, as Peter will say in a moment. First he speaks about God's counsel. What they have done with Christ in their wickedness has been used by God to fulfill what He has spoken about through all the prophets. All the prophets have spoken about His Christ suffering.

Here again we see both sides that we also saw in the previous chapter (Acts 2:22-23). On the one hand, we see how man reveals his utter depravity by rejecting God's goodness revealed in Christ. On the other hand, we discover that God has known this in advance and included it in His plans and even used it to fulfill His plans. We, creatures, cannot bring those two sides together, but that is what God is God for, while we are and remain

creatures with the limitations that come with it, as in our comprehension. Through their sinful act, God has fulfilled His purpose regarding the suffering of Christ.

That they are fully guilty of their sins is also shown by Peter's call to the people to repent and return. He has made it clear to them of what they are guilty. This should lead them to repentance, to the acknowledgment that they have sinned. Return or conversion is inextricably linked to this acknowledgment and confession. Conversion is a change of thinking about God and the Lord Jesus. Repentance is an inner conviction of one's own guilt, insight and recognition that I have sinned.

Conversion is a turning around in my judgment of what God has said. First there was rejection of what He said in His Word and of what He gave in Christ. Those who have come to repentance, to acknowledgment and confession of their sins, will believe God on His Word and accept His gift in Christ. He who repents and returns can know that his sins have been erased. Everything that stood between him and God has been wiped away. The barrier has been removed. This has cleared the way for a life of refreshment that comes "from the presence of the Lord".

What can be applied to the individual applies here first and foremost to the whole people, for it is to them that Peter speaks. By "times of refreshing" he therefore means the time of the millennial realm of peace where all the blessings of God on earth will be enjoyed by His people. Then the face of the Lord will no longer be turned against them in wrath (Psa 34:16), but His face will shine like the sun (Mt 17:2). His people will be able to bask in the warmth of His rays and enjoy the full blessing of life according to His promise in the realm of peace (Pro 16:15).

The return of Christ Jesus to fulfill this depends – and still depends – on the conversion of the Jews. Peter makes it clear that God desires to send His Christ, of Whom he says He is "the Christ appointed" for them. Here we are made aware of God's great love for His people.

The first sending of Christ to His people has not been a mistake. God is once again offering this Christ appointed for them, Who is none other than the "Jesus" rejected by them. What a persistent grace of God, Who does so

in spite of their rejection of His Christ! He can do so, once again, based on the intercession of the Lord Jesus on the cross.

We see how God does everything possible to bring the nation to repentance in order to be able to give them the promised blessings. Only when they also reject a glorified Lord, just as they rejected Him in His humiliation, does God's judgment come on the people. In order to prevent this, God is still looking, as it were, also still at this moment for a possibility to send His Son to bring about the period of the restoration of all things.

Christ has been taken up into heaven. Rejected by the earth, heaven had to receive Him. Heaven did not do so reluctantly, but – seen from the purpose for which He had come to earth, namely, to establish the kingdom of God there – did so prematurely.

The original goal, however, will be reached. The moment of the restoration of all things points to the millennial realm of peace. During the kingdom of peace, everything in creation will be restored to the situation God had in mind when He created heaven and earth. God has always spoken about that situation through the mouth of His prophets. He has been pointing forward to that.

When His Son came, that time could have come if Israel would have accepted Him. But He was rejected. That does not mean, however, that God's plan is cancelled now. Through the mouth of Peter, God offers to fulfill His plan. That will happen when the people as a nation repent. We know that the people did not do this. Yet even that does not mean that God can no longer fulfill His plan. It has been postponed once more and will be fulfilled in the end time.

### **Acts 3:22-26 | The Prophet Raised Up by God**

*22 Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you. 23 And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' 24 And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and [his] successors onward, also announced these days. 25 It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to*

*Abraham, 'AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.' 26 For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one [of you] from your wicked ways."*

That God will let the times of the restoration of all things come, has everything to do with Him to Whom Peter refers again by a quotation from one of those "holy prophets from ancient time", that is Moses (Deu 18:15-19). Like for David, whom Peter quoted in Acts 2, the Jews also had great admiration for Moses. Moses spoke of a Prophet Who would be raised up by God in the same way like God had raised him up.

Moses was raised up by God as a prophet for His people at a time when the people were in bondage and in great need. This also happened to the Lord Jesus. Just as Moses was raised up in the midst of his brethren, so the Lord Jesus also came in the midst of his brethren, that is to say, by being born an Israelite, He became an Israelite. In the quote Moses calls upon to give heed to everything He says. That is what Peter holds out to his audience.

Besides the similarities between Moses and the Lord Jesus as a prophet, there is also a big difference. Moses was an instrument that passed on the words of God. But not everything Moses said were words of God. However, what the Lord Jesus would say and did say, were all exclusively words of God. That is why Moses says that the people should hear "to everything He says to you". "Everything" means every word, not a word excepted. Moses also adds the serious warning that whoever does not hear to that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people. As a result, such a person is forever cut off from the blessing that is the part of that people when He will reign.

And not only Moses spoke about the coming of that Prophet, the Lord Jesus. From Samuel, the first prophet appointed by God in His people, God has pointed out the coming of His Son. All the prophets who came after Samuel did. Peter points out to the people their privileged position as sons of the prophets. By this he also means to say that they must walk in the way the prophets have shown the people because only through that way the blessing of God can be received. That way is always the way of repentance and conversion.

Furthermore, they are not only sons of the prophets, but also of the covenant that God made with their fathers and in which He promised them His blessing. In that covenant God has pointed out blessing for the bodily offspring of Abraham, that is the people to whom Peter speaks here. God also promised blessing to all families of the earth through the offspring of Abraham (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:3-4; Gal 3:8). God's blessing in the realm of peace goes through Israel to the whole earth. That is why God has first of all sent them the Lord Jesus, Who by Peter again is called God's "Servant" (verse 26; verse 13).

The "raising up" does not refer to the resurrection, but to the begetting of the Lord Jesus as Man on earth. When it comes to the resurrection out of death, we do not read that God resurrected Him, but that He Himself has risen. When it is about God's work in the resurrection, we read that God raised Him up. The 'raising up' refers to the first coming of the Lord Jesus to earth, His birth and His life, as we find it described in the Gospels.

The blessing God wants to give by sending the glorified Christ is to turn every one of them from their wicked ways. Wickedness is the hindrance to receive the blessing. If they confess their wickedness, that hindrance is taken away. This is already a great blessing that also opens the door to the even greater blessings of the realm of peace.

## Acts 4

### **Acts 4:1-4 | Peter and John Arrested**

*1 As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple [guard] and the Sadducees came up to them, 2 being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.*

The story of the previous chapter continues in this chapter. We are now faced with the first persecution of the Christians. The Lord has foretold several times that His own will be persecuted (Mt 10:16-18; Mk 13:9; Jn 15:20). This persecution comes from the side of the religious leaders who come to the apostles in three forms.

In the first place “the priests”. They have a great influence on the people because of their exclusive right to offer sacrifices. Then there is also “the captain of the temple [guard]”. He is the head of the temple police and as such charged with ensuring order in and around the temple. Finally, the presence of “the Sadducees” is mentioned.

It is possible that the priests are the spiritual branch of the sect of the Sadducees and the separately mentioned Sadducees are the political branch. The Sadducees dominate the Sanhedrin, the Council (Acts 5:17). The followers of this Jewish sect do not believe in a resurrection or angels or spirits (Mt 22:23; Acts 23:8). The preaching of the apostles about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is therefore particularly to them an eyesore. It strikes their self-willed religion in the heart.

These Sadducees come together with the priests, the special class that has the privilege to sacrifice, on which they also boast, and the head of the temple police threatening the two apostles. During the life of the Lord Jesus, the Pharisees were mainly His opponents. These people with their own righteousness were opposed to the Righteous. The Sadducees then stood more in the background. Now they come forward.

They are “greatly disturbed” that the apostles “were teaching” the people. They think that only they, that is the priests, have the right and the ability to do so. They are also “greatly disturbed” that the apostles “proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from [the] dead”. Wonders are already bad enough in the eyes of these freethinkers because they bring the power of God too close to them. But the resurrection from the dead and that still in the Person of Jesus is intolerable to them.

It is about the resurrection “from” the dead, not the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of the dead is general. The resurrection from the dead is something else. It is about the resurrection of someone, or a number of dead, while the rest of the dead remain in death, in the tomb. The resurrection “from the dead” shows that there is no such thing as a general, collective resurrection of believers and unbelievers at the same time (1Cor 15:23; Rev 20:5).

This company of opponents of the truth seizes the apostles and imprisons them. It is already evening, so they will interrogate them the next day. The fact that it is already evening is more than the description of a part of the day. It also says something about the time in which Israel has come. This is a last chance for the people to receive the promised blessing before night comes over them.

Amid all the raging of the enemy, the Spirit mentions God’s work. The apostles can be imprisoned, but the Word is not bound and does its work. Many hear the Word and therefore come to faith. Faith is out of hearing and hearing through the Word of God (Rom 10:17). Because of the powerful effect of the Word, the number of men alone grows to about five thousand.

### **Acts 4:5-7 | Interrogation by the Council**

*5 On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; 6 and Annas the high priest [was there], and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. 7 When they had placed them in the center, they [began to] inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”*

The religious leaders gather together in Jerusalem the next day. The entire administrative apparatus to which the people have been delivered – they are “their rulers and elders and scribes” – is preparing to interrogate the two rebel leaders. The religious leaders see their authority over the people threatened. This is also the reason they killed the Lord Jesus.

At the head of this group is a small group of high priests and their families. Luke mentions a few names. Of them we know Annas and Caiaphas. Caiaphas is the son-in-law of Annas. He was high priest during the trial against the Lord Jesus (Jn 18:13-14). John and Alexander are unknown to us. It has been assumed that they were sons of Annas, but nothing can be said with certainty. And there are still some of the high priestly family present of whom Luke does not mention the names. They let the apostles come and place them in the center.

There Peter and John are, standing in front of a group with whom surely the memory of the day when the Lord Jesus stood before them will have come to mind. They thought they had wiped out the whole movement with Him, but here they are again confronted with Him in His followers.

Their interrogation is not extensive, but it is quite specific. They are not concerned with the fact of the miracle or work of power. They are not fundamentally opposed to a work of power having happened. Works of power can be a social improvement. Their great objection is that this work of power is connected to the Name of Jesus, and that causes great annoyance.

They cannot deny the work of power, but how have these simple people been able to perform this amazing work of power? Where did they get the power and what Name is behind it? Although they know very well what made the apostles do “this” – that is the healing of the lame – they still ask for it. They may want to hear something that will allow them to condemn them.

### **Acts 4:8-12 | Accountability by Peter**

*8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people*

*of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this [name] this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, [but] WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER [stone]. 12 And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."*

Here Peter begins his fourth speech in this book. Again he takes the opportunity to preach the Name of the Lord Jesus and the gospel. In this he is led by the Spirit (Lk 21:12-15). He is even "filled" with the Holy Spirit.

His audience is now a company of religious dignitaries. Peter does not disregard their dignity, nor does he despise their position, but he makes it unequivocally clear that Jesus Christ is far above them. There is no hesitation or fear whatsoever. Fearless, he confronts this company with the same Lord Whom they condemned and put to death only a few weeks ago.

Peter points out to them the nonsense of their interrogation. Surely it is too absurd for them to be questioned about a benefaction to a sick person! It should be a cause of great joy and gratitude and not an interrogation. Instead, the interrogators feel threatened in their position. And he knows the background to that. He knows that their resistance stems from the means used. He then elaborates on that means.

In the clearest and firmest terms, Peter tells his listeners – and over their heads the whole people – Who is responsible for this man's health. That is none other than "Jesus Christ the Nazarene". There must be no misunderstanding about this, it must be known to everyone. This Name must have cut them through the soul.

And Peter does not leave it at that. Without fear of this highest religious court, he places this Name before their conscience by accusing them of having crucified Him, immediately following it with what God did to Him. God has raised Him from the dead. Also in this speech the resurrection of the Lord Jesus occupies an important place. It is through the Name of the resurrected Jesus Christ that the man is healed.

This presentation turns their entire world of feeling upside down and shakes their existence to its foundations. That despised Name, that Person

Who is so hated and executed by them, would be alive and still working on earth?

Peter continues his defense calmly and vigorously. He supports his argument again with a quotation from God's Word that they know so well. Also in his previous speeches he quoted verses from the Old Testament to apply them to Christ. On the day of Pentecost he mentioned some of David's prophecies about the death, resurrection and glorification of the Lord Jesus and the consequence that God made Him Lord and Christ. At the door of the temple, called 'Beautiful', he spoke of a Prophet like Moses.

Guided by the Holy Spirit he always knows how to quote the right verse at the right moment. This time he quotes a verse from Psalm 118 (Psa 118:22). He quotes the same verse he heard the Lord use in front of a group of religious leaders (Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17). This verse is the correct quote here to tell this group what they have done.

From the context of the psalm we see that it is about the temple, God's house. We read about the gate of Yahweh through which the righteous enter (Psa 118:20). It is about the house of Yahweh (Psa 118:26) and about the altar (Psa 118:27). The "builders" are the leaders to whom Peter speaks. They have despised and rejected the cornerstone, that is Christ.

The cornerstone is the stone that is laid on the foundation and on which the house is built. Starting from that stone, the whole building is erected. Christ is the cornerstone of the new temple with which they, the leaders, want nothing to do (Isa 28:16). He is also the cornerstone of the building that God is building now, His church, the house of God today (1Pet 2:4-7; 1Tim 3:15). On Him rests the whole new building, the church.

Peter connects to the quotation, and thus concludes his defense, pointing to the exclusivity of the Name of the Lord Jesus. Only through His Name salvation is possible. The difference with his previous speeches is that in it he offered forgiveness to the people when they repented. He does not do that to the leaders here. The only thing he does is to speak about the Name that alone can save. He is irreplaceable. Without Him salvation is unthinkable. Again and again it is about the 'Name'.

To state that there is no salvation outside of Him means that the Lord Jesus claims to be God, because God demands in the Old Testament the

exclusive right to be the only Savior (Isa 43:11; 45:21). For the unbelieving Jew, the Messiah is merely a man and not God. With the fact that there is no salvation outside of Him Peter states that the Lord Jesus is God. This is reprehensible to the Jew.

If he would read his own Old Testament well, he would discover that it says that the Messiah is both God and Man (Isa 9:6; Mic 5:2; Zec 12:10). Certainly, the religious leaders do not want to acknowledge that, blinded as they are by the seeking of their own honor. The Sanhedrin rejects Him instead of leading the people to that stone.

There is no salvation in anyone but Him. That salvation is also not limited to Israel. "Under heaven", that means on all the earth, there is no other Name given among men, by which they are to be saved than the Name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. That leaves no choice and no excuse. It is He and no one else; it is He for everyone; He is absolutely necessary.

#### **Acts 4:13-17 | Deliberation of the Council**

*13 Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and [began] to recognize them as having been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. 15 But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they [began] to confer with one another, 16 saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name."*

The high company amazes at the confidence or boldness of Peter and John. The members of the Council notice that they are "uneducated ... men", that is, that they have not received theological training from rabbis recognized by them. They also notice that these two men are "untrained men" or "simple men". They do not come from high circles, yet they are not in any way impressed by the distinguished members of the Council.

In their eyes, they are lay people, ignorant, because that is the meaning of "untrained". Something similar has been said of the Lord Jesus during

His life on earth (Jn 7:15; cf. Mt 7:28-29). But the power of the Spirit can manifest itself clearly in those who cannot boast of any worldly advantage. The members of the Council are amazed that they know God's Word so well, even though they do not come from their circles or are otherwise known as taught in the Scriptures. Then the true source of their knowledge emerges. It cannot remain hidden. They recognize that they have been "with Jesus". Do our neighbors also know us by that, that we live a life with the Lord Jesus?

The learned gentlemen would love to lecture these uneducated people, but they are gagged by a visible proof of the right of these lay people. How serious is the position of people who on the one hand cannot deny the truth and on the other hand deliberately do not want to bow to it! They love darkness more than light because their works are evil (Jn 3:19).

They are clearly embarrassed with the situation. This needs to be discussed. That must take place without the presence of either of the apostles. So they are sent away. They consult because they have no grip on the matter. The power of God is manifested outside them and that means that they no longer have authority on their side. Under no circumstances do they want to admit this, but they do not dare to say it openly because they have public opinion against them.

The deliberation takes place behind closed doors, but the Holy Spirit mentions what they have discussed. God makes the hidden deliberations public wherever and whenever He wants. He sees in the darkness, for the light dwells with Him (Dan 2:22). He exposes the work of a hardened conscience.

They acknowledge that an undeniable miracle has happened, which they even call a "sign", as this word also can be translated. A sign indicates more than a miracle that God has something to say with it. The miracle means something. A sign points to a higher reality. For example, a sign points to an escape route. The sign itself is not that escape route. In the case of the healed man it means that God acts for the glory of His Son, the Messiah rejected by them. That Name becomes visible in this miracle which is therefore a sign. The Name of the Lord Jesus should also become more visible in our actions. To witness to Him is our great task.

They could not find any argument against the message of Peter and John. If authorities have no arguments to assert their authority, but they still want to be right, they have nothing left but to become authoritarian. All that remains for them is to threaten to stop speaking in the Name of Jesus. In this way, they want this case to fade from memory. If the apostles would keep their mouth shut, after a while no one would talk about it anymore. Too often Christians have succumbed to a lesser threat and have remained silent where they should have spoken.

### **Acts 4:18-22 | Command and Threat of the Council**

*18 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20 for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; 22 for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

The apostles were allowed to come back in and hear the verdict. They are forbidden to speak or teach at all in the Name of Jesus. They are simply not allowed to say anything at all about the Lord Jesus, while God honors Him so openly and rightly. By what Peter answers, it becomes clear that the leaders of Israel have lost the place of interpreters of God's will. God does not speak through them. Peter makes that clear through his contrast.

The apostles do not expel the religious leaders and do not attack them. They leave the judgment to God. They do, however, ignore the authority of the rulers in connection with the work that God has entrusted to them. The testimony of God can now be found with the apostles and no longer with the rulers of the temple. God dwells in the church and, already for some time, no longer in the temple.

What we also see in the reaction of Peter and John is that personal conscience is placed above authority when that authority makes decisions that go against God's Word. Conscience is bound to the Word and therefore it is placed above formal authority. In their response, Peter and John also

place the conscience of the leaders before God by telling them to account to God for their judgment. As for themselves, at least they cannot disobey God, whatever the consequences.

We also see this attitude with Daniel's friends who decided to refuse to do something that God has forbidden (Dan 3:18) and with Daniel himself who decided to refuse to abandon what God has commanded (Dan 6:11). They experienced the consequences of that, but also God's salvation.

Peter and John declare that they have no choice but to speak about what they have seen and heard. These things are too important. It is about the Christ of God and the salvation of the people. How can you remain silent about that? In the same way, Paul cannot possibly remain silent about the gospel that the Lord has commanded him to proclaim (1Cor 9:16; cf. Jer 20:9).

The Council feels powerless in the face of the convinced apostles. All they can do is with gnashing of teeth sharpen their threats. None of this makes any impression. The apostles remain calm. They say and do nothing to give the Council an opportunity to punish them. The threats of the Council are expressions of weakness. This is how people express themselves who are more afraid of the people than of God.

The apostles are allowed to go. The Council cannot do otherwise. This is not because they are convinced of the innocence of the apostles, but because they are afraid of getting the people against them. Loss of popular favor is the last thing they want. How God thinks about the matter is of no significance to them. The fact that the people glorify God for what has happened does not affect them. They only see that it happens through the influence of the apostles and that they in turn act under the influence of the Name of Jesus. They hate that Name and that is why they resist.

Luke mentions that the sign of healing has happened to someone who has been ill for more than forty years from his birth (Acts 3:2). That rules out any natural healing. The healing is also not the result of a slow recovery that started once and is now complete. After all, the man was carried every day and placed at the gate of the temple. His healing was as spontaneous as it was unexpected.

### **Acts 4:23 | Their Own**

*23 When they had been released, they went to their own [companions] and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.*

When Peter and John are released, they go directly to “their own [companions]”, their own people, the people with whom they are connected, their own spiritual family. They form the company brought together by the Holy Spirit, of which the Lord Jesus is the center. Their connections no longer are with the Jewish people who have turned in enmity “against the Lord and against His Christ” (verse 26). They are separated from them and from the world.

They did not have to wonder where their brothers and sisters were to be found. The believers often came together. It is possible that Peter and John went to the upper room, the familiar place where we have seen the believers together before (Acts 1:13). Later we see that Peter knows where to find the believers when he has been in prison again and has been delivered from it (Acts 12:12). What a blessing to belong to such a company where you can go and where they receive you and where you can share your experiences because they have a warm interest in them.

Peter and John give a detailed account of everything the chief priests and elders have said to them. We do not hear about their own clear and fearless testimony. There are no great stories of a courageous performance. The apostles are concerned with the threat of not being allowed to testify anymore. That is their need and what they want to share.

### **Acts 4:24-28 | The Need Presented to the Lord**

*24 And when they heard [this], they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, 25 who by the Holy Spirit, [through] the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? 26 ‘THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.’*

*27 For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.*

The reaction of the disciples to the message of Peter and John shows the great connectedness with each other. When they have reported on the events, the whole company turns to God in a spontaneous prayer. It has now become a common need. This prayer comes from the testimony and service for the Lord. If we testified more and shared our experiences with each other, our prayers would become more like the prayer described here. There is unity in praying. God hears as it were one voice.

When they address Him, they address Him with “Lord”, which literally means “despot”, that is absolute ruler, sovereign owner and possessor of everything. In connection with their need that is the right form of address. Earthly authorities have threatened that they are no longer allowed to speak about the Lord Jesus. Now they turn to the supreme authority and appeal to it as the highest and absolute authority.

In their prayers they are led to the Scriptures, to also appeal to the authority of the Word. God and His Word are inextricably linked. The situation in which they find themselves reminds them of Psalm 2 (Psa 2:1-2). In the direct sense, the psalm describes the situation in the last days, the end time, but they quote the psalm in their prayers for its application to their days. In the same way, we may also cite Scripture in our prayers. There is no better way to come to God than in connection with His Word. He wants us to come to Him that way. This means that we stand before Him on the same ground as He.

Here we learn that Psalm 2 is of David, because that is not apparent from the psalm itself. We also hear again that David is the mouth of the Holy Spirit in this psalm (cf. Acts 1:16). Quoting God’s Word only has an effect if it happens in full faith in the inspiration of that Word. They speak to God about David as “Your servant”, making an even closer connection with their current situation in which opposition to God’s “holy servant Jesus” manifests itself.

David wonders why the nations are in an uproar and the peoples are devising a vain thing. Surely it is foolishness to rebel against the Most High, isn't it? Yet the kings and rulers, the authorities of the world, are in rebellion against the Lord of heaven and earth and against His Christ. For although in practice only the two apostles Peter and John have been threatened by the religious leaders of Israel, it truly is as stated in the psalm, that the whole power of the enemy has gathered against the Lord Jesus. The apostles have to suffer, but the real reason is the hatred of God's "holy servant Jesus".

Christ is also God's holy Servant in heaven Who from heaven through the Holy Spirit continues His work on earth for the glory of God. God anointed Him when He was on earth. That anointing still rests on Him. To the world, however, He is the rejected and despised Jesus. He was that on earth and He still is.

The disciples mention the names of Herod and Pontius Pilate as the persons who are model for the enmity of both the apostate religious world and the rebellious political world. They mocked, abused and condemned the Lord Jesus when He stood before them on earth. They did this together with the "Gentiles and peoples of Israel". The disciples speak of Israel as belonging to the world of the Gentiles because together with the Gentiles they killed the true Servant of God, indeed, they were the instigators to that end.

In their prayer, the disciples present the acts of the hostile people to God. At the same time they also know that God is not out of control. The enemies have believed that they have been able to carry out their own plans and intentions, but the reality is that they have only done what God wanted. They have carried out His work.

#### **Acts 4:29-31 | Question to the Lord and His Answer**

*29 And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, 30 while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." 31 And when they had prayed, the place where they had*

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*gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and [began] to speak the word of God with boldness.*

It is wonderful to note the conclusion the prayers come to. They poured out their heart before the Lord (Psa 62:8) and placed their needs with Him. It is enough for their heart that they have asked His attention for the threats. They do not ask if He wants to intervene in power and destroy the enemies or take away the threats. They entrust it all to Him with the peace of mind that He knows what is needed.

All they ask is boldness to speak, despite all opposition. After all, they have been threatened by the religious authority to no longer speak or teach in the Name of the Lord Jesus. Now they ask the Supreme Authority to be bold enough to resist the authority of these people and not to take any notice of the threats. All this with the aim to “speak Your word”. The disciples are full of the Word of God. Against this, the enemy tries to raise a dam; but it must be spoken with the view to salvation of people.

The disciples also ask the Lord for proof of His consent to their prayer. They would like Him to further manifest Himself with irrefutable proof of His power through the Name of the Lord Jesus. They ask if He wants to make the Name of His “holy servant Jesus” even greater by healing and doing signs and wonders.

As they pray, God answers. The answer is slightly different than what they have been praying for. There is a manifestation of His power, but it is only noticeable to the praying believers. It is not a manifestation of power against their opponents, but for themselves. That manifestation consists of shaking the place where they are. They feel how the place is being shaken.

The part of the prayer asking for boldness is fulfilled. Therefore they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means that there is no more room for the flesh to assert itself. Through being filled with the Holy Spirit they do not speak in languages, but they speak the Word of God. Two apostles have spoken the Word and that is forbidden to them. After they have prayed, the whole company speaks God’s Word!

## Acts 4:32-35 | Church Unity

*32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one [of them] claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. 34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.*

Here we find more characteristics of this new company. Everything breathes the presence of Him Who deigned to come to earth to dwell in the believers. Without Him, all those believers would have remained just as many individuals, but now there is unity. That unity concerns not only the new life in the spiritual sphere, but also the whole of life in the community and social sphere. Their faith connects the crowd of heart and soul.

If there is such unity, it cannot but be experienced also in practice. From within there is a desire to share everything with each other. This is very different from the law, which prescribes that certain things must be shared with each other. Sharing is then an obligation. The law also states that every Israelite has a piece of land that has been given to him as a blessing from God. The fact that the believers give up this piece of land shows what a big change in the thinking of these Jews of origin has taken place anyway.

Here, grace is the origin of all facets of life. Love for Christ goes hand in hand with love for His own. That love proves itself in giving. They know that their true riches are elsewhere. There is no 'Christian communism' here because the sale takes place entirely voluntarily. Communism is: 'All yours is mine'; Christendom is: 'All mine is yours' and that on a voluntary basis. The right to private property has not been taken away. The community did not have the money until it had been voluntarily placed at the feet of the apostles.

The sharing of earthly goods gives extra strength to the apostles' testimony concerning the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It is only possible to consider earthly possessions as meaningless if there is a great impression of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Through His resurrection a territory has

opened up that is outside of this world. Whoever is connected to it, knows that all his blessings are there.

This truth irresistibly breaks through all opposition in the early days of Christendom. The great resistance this truth evokes is proof of its great significance. The result is only that the apostles bear witness to this truth with great power.

That the enmity against the preaching of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is great should not surprise us. The resurrection of Christ confirms the total corruption of man. What remains for a man today is either the acknowledgment of this, which at the same time brings him the full deliverance that God has worked in Christ, or resisting and dying. That is why the resurrection is fundamental in the preaching. Whoever acknowledges the resurrection of Christ will acknowledge it as a proof of "great grace".

It is remarkable what is called "great" in the early days. There is "great power" and "great grace" (verse 33); there is "great fear" (Acts 5:5,11); "great persecution" (Acts 8:1); "great joy" (Acts 8:8; 15:3); "a great number" who believed (Acts 11:21).

The "great grace" refers not only to the eternal salvation of the soul, but also to the earthly life of the church. God takes care of eternity, the believers take care of each other for the time on earth. This does not mean that the church is a select group of people who do good works. What they do for each other is an effect of the great grace that is over them. It may have been the case that something was sold only when there was a need. In such a case, the Spirit could make clear to someone what he had to sell in order to be able to provide for the needs of others. No wish lists were submitted and no wishes were fulfilled, but they were distributed according to everyone's needs.

In general we are not asked to sell our possessions. The rich in the present day are not called upon to get rid of their wealth, but to deal with it in the right way and not to fix their hope on it (1Tim 6:17-18). Nor do we read anywhere that we should put our gifts at someone's feet. However, it is important that we use our possessions for the Lord's work and the needs of fellow believers.

It is still important to see our possessions as entrusted to us by the Lord to manage for Him. The way we deal with them shows whether we are focused on the Lord and His own, or whether we live for ourselves. He who closes his heart to a brother or sister who is in need does not have the love of God in him (1Jn 3:17).

### **Acts 4:36-37 | Barnabas**

*36 Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37 and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Among all those who sell their possessions and bring the money to the apostles' feet, there is also Joseph, who was nicknamed "Barnabas" by the apostles. His name is mentioned at least twenty-five times in Acts and five more times in Paul's letters.

Luke gives the meaning of his name. Literally in Aramaic his name means 'son (bar) of prophecy (naba)'. So Luke does not give a literal translation, but he immediately gives the fully permitted specific meaning to 'prophecy' of 'encouragement' (cf. 1Cor 14:3). This will be because from his performance mentioned below it appears that encouraging is his specific gift (Acts 11:23).

Barnabas is a Cyprian by birth, i.e. he was born in the dispersion and later came to Israel. He was born outside the land, but is a descendant of Levi. The fact that he owned land is remarkable because a Levite was not allowed to have land of his own (Num 18:20; Deu 10:9). How Barnabas got it is not clear. Possibly he had a piece of land on Cyprus, to which the Jewish law did not apply. Like the others who sell their land, he shows that the blessing is no longer earthly, but that he participates in heavenly, spiritual blessings.

## Acts 5

### **Acts 5:1-2 | The Deceit of Ananias and Sapphira**

*1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,  
2 and kept back [some] of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge,  
and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.*

The two verses at the end of the previous chapter on Barnabas are an introduction to the history of Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias means 'God is merciful', but we learn here that God is also holy; Sapphira means 'beautiful', but we learn here that her heart is filthy because of sin.

In the previous chapter the Spirit shows His power and authority outside the church, here He does it in the church, against evil. God cannot endure evil in the place where He dwells. Satan has always set out to exert his evil influence where God is at work and blesses. He always finds people who are willing to let themselves be used by him.

What Ananias and Sapphira do is in great contrast with Barnabas' way of acting. It seems that Ananias and Sapphira are jealous of Barnabas. Instigated by the generosity of Barnabas and others, Ananias doesn't want to be remain behind. He consults with his wife to also sell a property and does so.

Just as satan used man's greed for money with Judas Iscariot, so he does with Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias talked to his wife about not bringing the whole amount of the sale, but only a part. Giving them the whole amount goes too far, but they want to give the impression that they are giving the whole amount. A person who may be a true Christian, but who gives the sinful flesh a chance to work in him, can come to this kind of behavior.

They want to have the honor of the devotion that the Holy Spirit works, without denying themselves. Their greed is both for money and for honor. The sacrifice they want to make is beyond their spiritual state. They want to imitate the good deeds of others, without their heart being completely subject to the Lord. While man and wife should correct each other, Ana-

nias and Sapphira affirm each other in evil. The wife here is not the help for her husband that God purposed her to be.

### Acts 5:3-6 | The Deceit of Ananias Judged

*3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back [some] of the price of the land? 4 While it remained [unsold], did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.*

When Ananias comes to Peter with the money, he immediately denounces the deceit of Ananias without us hearing that Ananias is saying a word. The Holy Spirit can make it perfectly clear to Peter that here comes a man who is not sincere and lies to Him. Through the Holy Spirit, Peter can discern the spirit that is at work in Ananias (1Cor 12:10). Ananias does not act under the instigation of the Holy Spirit, but under the instigation of satan whom he has admitted into his heart and who has filled his whole heart. When satan fills the heart, man is capable of the most audacious hypocrisy, without realizing that God is much greater.

Peter unmasks the work of satan. Lying is the work of satan. Satan is the arch liar, the father of lies (Jn 8:44; Gen 3:4,13). Ananias withheld something from the proceeds, nobody obliged him to give everything. But then he should not have pretended to give everything. That is to live in the lie and to deceive others with that lie. Peter makes it clear that Ananias had no obligation to sell the property (cf. 2Cor 9:7). If someone had become a Christian, he would not lose his property. Peter therefore says that after the sale the money remained his. There was no obligation to give it.

Peter asks it all in questioning form. He doesn't do this because Ananias may be unfamiliar with the state of affairs in the church, but because he knows it well and because he consciously dealt with it in another way. Then he asks Ananias the question why he has planned this act in his heart. That can only be to create the appearance of complete loyalty to God and

of complete trust in God, while in reality one relies on earthly possessions. This behavior is not lying to people, but lying to God.

It is lying to the Holy Spirit Who is emphatically called “God” by Peter. The Holy Spirit is God. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to bring lies into a place where God is present. They had forgotten His presence and that nothing is hidden from Him. God dwells in the midst of His people both in grace and in holiness. This is a fact of great importance!

We see the effect of this in the judgment that strikes Ananias and Sapphira. Without an opportunity for Ananias to speak a word in his defense or even of acknowledgment of sin, when he hears the words of Peter, he falls down and dies. We see here that sin in the church is a new occasion for the revelation of the power of God.

Immediately after Ananias’ death, “the young men” get up. They treat the body carefully and cover him up, after which they carry Ananias out and bury him. That they are young men indicates the fresh and powerful beginning of the church.

Although we know nothing more about Ananias and Sapphira than what we read about them here, much has been said and written about whether they are saved or lost. There is something to be said for the idea that we will see them back in heaven. They belonged to the company of the church. It does not seem that there were nominal Christians at this stage. The Lord Himself added to the church daily (Acts 2:47) and only true believers dared to join the church (Acts 5:13). The sin committed by Ananias and Sapphira was a sin to death (1Jn 5:16-17; cf. 1Cor 11:29-30). To the church is not only added, but there is also removed from it what does not belong to God: sin.

There is also something to be said in favor of the view that we are not dealing with true believers, but with false Christians. Peter speaks to Ananias in terms that give little hope that new life was present. His act was an extraordinarily brutal one. The deliberation he and his wife had, and which brought them to their act, shows nothing of any sense of God’s holiness. Peter says that satan filled his heart, which makes it difficult to assume that the Holy Spirit had room in his heart. Ananias does not get the opportunity to repent of his deed because it is not a sin out of ignorance, but an act of conscious rebellion against God.

We cannot say the last word on the question of whether or not Ananias and Sapphira are saved. God speaks that last word. What is important to us is that Ananias is a warning example that God's holiness cannot be ignored. That is still true. The fact that no longer every such hypocrisy is punished with death shows how little the Holy Spirit can still work in the church. The power of the Holy Spirit is extremely limited by the secularization of the church.

We see several times in Scripture that every time God starts something new, man spoils it, and God's holiness emerges in judgment. It already begins with Adam and Eve who let themselves be deceived by Satan and as a result are driven out of paradise by God (Gen 3:6-7,23). As God has foretold, death came into the world through their deed (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12). Likewise, the priesthood is barely established or two of the first priests bring strange fire. God must bring His judgment on Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2). When Israel had just entered the promised land, Achan is violating what was consecrated by the ban and must die (Jos 7:1,25).

### **Acts 5:7-11 | The Deceit of Sapphira Judged**

*7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter [said] to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out [as well]." 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.*

After about three hours "his wife" came in, the wife who was given to him for help, but who supported him in his evil intent. As time passed and he did not come back, she may have become anxious and finally went to see for herself. All this time, no rumor of what happened has reached her. Sapphira knows nothing. Satan always keeps his slaves in darkness.

Without reading that Sapphira asked Peter a question, we read that Peter responds to her. That seems to indicate that she has asked a question. Possibly she asked where her husband was. She did not see him with the company. Peter's answer consists of a question, which he precedes with a commanding "tell me". He calls her the amount her husband brought in as proceeds of the sale of the land and asks if this is indeed the amount for which the land was sold. This question is a direct appeal to her conscience. But it does not seem that her conscience has begun working. The absence of her husband does not make her think and the direct question of Peter does not make her repent. She gets the chance to confess honestly. However, she does not take advantage of this opportunity, but persists in the sin of hypocrisy. Not only does she say "yes", but she affirms that it was the price that Peter mentioned as the sale price. Then Peter has no choice but to tell her the verdict.

Before she falls dead, he tells her, and us, the reason for the verdict. Together with her husband, she has conceived the plan to test the Spirit of the Lord. To test is to do something out of a spirit of unbelief with the purpose of testing whether God is true in His words (Exo 17:2; Deu 6:16). I must believe what God says because it is He who says it.

Because Sapphira continues to support her husband in his faithlessness, she shares in his fate of faithlessness. There is a difference with her husband's death. Ananias died immediately after the determination of sin, while Sapphira was given the opportunity to confess it. It shows that the husband is primarily responsible.

There is fear both inside and outside the church in everyone who hears about it. God's presence is in fact a serious matter, no matter how great its blessing. Here in this book the word "church" is used for the first time.

### **Acts 5:12-16 | Signs and Wonders**

*12 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. 13 But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. 14 And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to [their number], 15 to such an*

*extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. 16 Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.*

After the evil has been judged in the church, there is a powerful testimony. When sin is not judged, it is always a barrier to God's work. Wherever sin is removed, either by self-judgment or by being removed from the church, the way is cleared for God's work.

In the beginning, the power of the Holy Spirit immediately revealed that barrier. In the days of decay in which we live, there is a lot of secret evil, as a result of which the Spirit cannot work powerfully in the church. Nevertheless, the Spirit still wants to make the evil public. If we read God's Word in prayer, He will certainly show us what we must remove and also give us the strength to do so.

The hands of the apostles are busy in blessing and grace. All the apostles, not only Peter (Acts 3:6-7), perform many signs and wonders. These are all testimonies of the rejected Messiah Who is now exalted at God's right hand. Signs are not always wonders, but wonders are always signs. Signs point to Him Who has power over a sighing creation. Wonders are the powers of the coming age (Heb 6:5) of the reign of the Lord Jesus Who could still come if the people would accept Him now.

They are the signs and wonders of the time of the beginning. Later in Acts it still occurs, but it is getting less and less. Because of the consistent rejection of the Lord Jesus, the use of signs and wonders has disappeared in places where that happens.

The place of action is the portico of Solomon. There the believers come together, with one accord, because the upper room must have become too small. Although it is a public place, the company of Christians is a holy company where the presence of God is noticeable. As a result, none of those who are not part of it dares to associate with them. There remains a distance.

In addition to holiness, there is also a great benevolence emanating from this company. The whole behavior of the first Christians causes esteem

among the people. A true follower of the Lord Jesus evokes hatred and resistance among people who are jealous and who get stuck in their self-willed religion. People who do not do much about religion often admire and respect those who faithfully serve the Lord.

The fear of associating with Christians prevents it from becoming an uncontrolled mass movement. In an interlude Luke notes that this does not mean that the church does not grow. What a superficial observer would see as a severe blow to the church – the judgment of evil and that no one dared to associate with them – on the contrary gives God the space to do a profound work in hearts. To associate with this company, faith in Christ is needed, not the attraction of the company. It is not about adding to people, not even to apostles, but to the Lord.

God's Spirit can work powerfully precisely through the judgment exercised, so that many come to faith and multitudes are added to the Lord. For the first time, Luke also mentions women among those who are saved. Women play an important role in the apostolic church. Luke mentions them regularly in Acts.

After the interlude (verse 14) Luke continues describing the special things that happen through the apostles. Jerusalem becomes a large hospital; the streets are filled with sick people who all seek healing from the apostles. The power of the Spirit is so abundant present that all are healed. In contrast to today's healing meetings, all are healed without exception. There is no failed or partial healing.

There is a special power emanating from Peter. He heals with his hands, but also with his shadow. Someone's shadow is not the person himself, but is inseparable from his person. Shadow is caused by walking in the sun. Peter only passes on what the Lord Jesus – of Whom the sun is a picture of – gives him. Not only the sick inhabitants of Jerusalem are healed, but also all those who are brought from the cities around Jerusalem. Jerusalem is currently still the center of the apostles' actions. All the sick are brought there. Later the apostles are scattered.

I once read on a forum on the internet, a strong piece of the foolishness of today's healers, who think they can imitate everything the apostles did in the early days,. There someone posted the following message: 'In a speech

in the Pentecostal community of Alkmaar (15-02-2004) [a preacher] said: I also went to a bible school and learned there about Peter that when his shadow fell on the sick they were healed (Acts 5:15). I liked that. One day I saw someone in a wheelchair in the street and I walked a little bit on the sunny side of it, so my shadow fell on that man. Unfortunately, he didn't heal. Yes, I could try, for if you don't try something you don't know.' It appealed to the person who placed the message. He noticed the following: 'I personally never had that idea and I never did it after the speech. But the statement struck me. Have you ever tried it? I don't think you have ever tried it either, why not?'

Commenting on so much foolishness seems superfluous to me.

### **Acts 5:17-25 | Arrested and Released**

*17 But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. 18 They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, 20 "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." 21 Upon hearing [this], they entered into the temple about daybreak and [began] to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent [orders] to the prison house for them to be brought. 22 But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, 23 saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." 24 Now when the captain of the temple [guard] and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. 25 But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!"*

The high priest and his companions, the Sadducees, rise up. This not only indicates a change of physical attitude, but indicates a spiritual reaction. They rise up against the work of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit always alternates with the counteractions of satan. Now comes the next opposition. In the world good always works in the presence of the power of evil.

The spiritual authorities fear every threat to their position. They cannot stand by idly as the influence of the apostles undermines their influence. They either have to join or attack. Since they are so jealous, there is no question of joining and so they choose to attack. This time they do not only seize Peter and John, but all the apostles and imprison them.

Again it seems to be toward the end of the day because the apostles are not immediately interrogated. As night descends over Jerusalem, the eye of God is on the prison. He laughs at the rage of the religious leaders (Psa 2:4). To deliver His faithful apostles, He sends an angel. We see the irony of God to send an angel precisely here, where the Sadducees are the opponents who do not believe in angels (Acts 23:8).

The Lord does not give His apostles the power to deliver themselves. The angel does what people cannot do. He opens the doors of the prison and takes them out. It must have been completely dark in prison and impossible for the apostles to find their way out. The light of the angel shows the way.

When they are outside, the angel gives a command to the apostles. This command shows that they have been delivered to continue their ordinary work and not to flee. He points out to them the place where they must preach and tells them what to talk about. They must take their place in the temple again and speak "to the people ... the whole message of this Life".

God's grace for His people continues. He wants the people to hear the message of "this" Life. That are words of God Himself and about the Lord Jesus, through which everyone who hears and accepts them is saved (Acts 13:26). It is also our privilege to speak these words of life to people who do not yet know Christ, that they may be saved. The words of the Lord Jesus are spirit and life (Jn 6:63). Let us speak these words to the people and not lose ourselves in a wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers (2Tim 2:14).

The apostles do what the angel said because they clearly recognize the Lord's command. They will do it with pleasure and conviction now that they are so encouraged by this remarkable deliverance. Instead of going to bed, they will have prayed until they can go to the temple early in the morning. Once there, they don't tell a beautiful story about their spectac-

ular deliverance, but they teach the people. They continue their teaching to the people fearlessly, without fear of the religious leaders whom they of course expect. It will not take long before they come.

Before that, Luke first mentions that those leaders have come together to judge the apostles. It is clear that none of them has the slightest suspicion of what happened that night. Assuming that they have the matter under control, they send officers to take the apostles out of the dungeon. When the officers come to the dungeon, they don't find the apostles there anymore. This must have caused great surprise.

They return to the priests and report their findings. They tell in detail what they found when they got there. At first glance, everything seemed perfectly in order. The doors of the prison house were not open, but were closed with great care. The guards were also at their post. There was nothing to indicate that the prisoners would no longer be there. But when they had gone inside and opened the inner doors to take the prisoners, there was no one there.

This account by the officers of all the care and the guards provides additional proof that God was at work. No matter how well the case was secured, to God it doesn't matter. He just makes the guards blind and deaf for the time He needs.

It reminds us – and certainly should have reminded the chief priests – of the events around the tomb of the Lord Jesus. There they had made sure that the tomb was properly closed with a sealed stone and a guard to secure it (Mt 27:62-66). But all their measures did not prevent the Lord Jesus from rising. On the contrary, their measures provided additional proof of His resurrection. They want to undo that evidence by bribing the soldiers and making them tell a lie (Mt 28:11-15).

Here the captain and the chief priests are embarrassed with the situation. Where are their detainees? Their question will not remain unanswered for long. Someone comes with the message that the prisoners are standing in the temple and teaching the people. The apostles do also what the Lord Jesus did. The teaching of the people means that they have explained the Old Testament to the people to prove that Jesus is the Christ (cf. Acts 28:23).

**Acts 5:26-28 | Arrested the Second Time**

*26 Then the captain went along with the officers and [proceeded] to bring them [back] without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). 27 When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us."*

When they know where the prisoners are, the captain goes there with the officers. They are aware that the people esteem the apostles highly. They abandon the usual violence when they arrest them, as that would arouse the anger of the people. They do their utmost to make the apostles go with them with a gentle hand.

The apostles go with them without resisting. They do not call for the help of the people that is clearly on their hand. Nowhere are believers called upon to resist when they are arrested for their faith. To give an account is the command (1Pet 3:15).

The captain with the officers bring the apostles before the Council. The high priest immediately begins the questioning which involves an accusation. He accuses the apostles of disobedience to the highest religious authority that had explicitly commanded them not to teach "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). So they had not listened to this. No, they must conclude that the apostles have filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

It is unacceptable to them that these people, who do not belong to the acknowledged religious authority, explain the Scriptures to the people. They claim the right to do so for themselves, to the exclusion of anyone they do not consider qualified. They note that the apostles have not only filled Jerusalem with their teaching, but also want to bring the blood of "this Man" – they do not want to pronounce the name 'Jesus' – upon them.

They feel that the preaching of the resurrection of Christ means that God judges that they have wrongfully killed Someone. With this they would indeed bring His blood on them. That is exactly what they have done and what they have clearly expressed themselves during the trial against the Lord (Mt 27:25). In reality, God takes them at their word.

### Acts 5:29-32 | Testimony of Peter and the Apostles

*29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31 He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses of these things; and [so is] the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."*

The response of Peter and the other apostles is rather a statement of facts than giving a testimony. The rulers are clearly opposed to God, yet there is no pride or self-will among the apostles. It is about obeying God. They begin their answer with being obedient (verse 29) and they also finish with that verse 32).

The high priest and his people are to them no more than "men". The apostles resolutely reject the charge of disobedience. They no longer leave it to the conscience of the rulers to decide whom they should obey more, but state that "we", that is everyone, must obey God more than people. That is why they have acted as they have done, no more and no less.

Then they become the prosecutor. They still take their place in the midst of Israel when they speak of "the God of our fathers". Aptly and compactly, and because of that also penetratingly, they confront the actions of God toward the Lord Jesus with those of these leaders. God raised Him up, while they killed Him by hanging Him on a cross. Death on the cross is the Roman form of execution, but they attribute this act to this Jewish company. Nor do they speak of 'crucifixion', but of 'hanging Him on a cross'. By doing so, they emphasize that they labeled Christ a cursed by God (Deu 21:23; Gal 3:13).

But Him Whom they labeled and treated as such, has been given all glory due to Him by God. They as false leaders disdain Him as a Prince, but to God He is the Superior Prince (Acts 3:15; Heb 2:10; 12:2). They as cursers of the people (Jn 7:49) reject Him as Savior, but to God He is the Savior. God has exalted Him in heaven through His right hand. He lives in glory, where all the pleasure of God rests on Him.

God has exalted Him to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. So another period of grace is added to the period that has been and in which

Israel has not made use of that grace. Both repentance and forgiveness are seen here as gifts from God and are still being offered to the people. All people who have come to faith in the Lord Jesus have also received this gift. Yet the people as a whole, represented in their leaders, have rejected Him again.

Peter and the apostles do not say things they have heard, but they have experienced and lived it themselves. From witnesses one can expect nothing but that they speak the truth (cf. Jn 15:26-27). The apostles are witnesses and the Holy Spirit is Witness. It is a double witness and not only that the Holy Spirit witnesses through the apostles.

The presence of the Holy Spirit on earth is a witness in itself (Jn 16:7-11). This Holy Spirit has been given by God to all who obey Him. Here the gift of the Holy Spirit is connected to the responsibility of man. Obeying is not the keeping of the law, but the obedience of faith, which is to obey God's command to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus (Acts 17:30; 16:31). He who believes the gospel of his salvation receives the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

### Acts 5:33-39 | The Advice of Gamaliel

*33 But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. 36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away [some] people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."*

When Peter has given the clear testimony of God's appreciation of Christ, the leaders are fed up. They realize what this means. They have been addressed in their conscience and accused of murder. Instead of bowing

before God, they prove how murderous their hearts still are by their absolute refusal to give up their position of prestige among the people. Their outburst of anger is so great that they want to kill the apostles. Murder fills their hearts, inspired by satan who is a murderer from the beginning (Jn 8:44).

However, there is someone in the Council who keeps a cool head. It is Gamaliel. He is a law scholar who is honored by the whole people. He is the next instrument God uses in His providence to give His apostles their freedom back, just as He used an angel before (verse 19). Gamaliel brings the Council to rest. He has authority, for he orders that “the men” should be put outside the Council chamber for a moment.

Then he begins his advice to the Council. His advice does not come from dealings with God, but from human wisdom. God uses this advice to reach His goal. Gamaliel addresses the Council as “men of Israel”, as men who belong to the people chosen by God. He urges them to think carefully before they deal with ‘these men’.

In order to convince them that they should be careful and not hastily condemn these people, he points to two people from their recent history who have also presented themselves as leaders. He first cites the example of the otherwise totally unknown to us Theudas. This man claimed to be someone of significance. Modesty was not his greatest virtue. He acquired a following of about four hundred men. But what became of him and his movement? He was killed. With that, the whole company of followers fell apart. Nothing has come of all the wonderful plans and promises.

Then there is that other popular leader, Judas of Galilee. About thirty years ago this person wanted to profile himself as a leader. The people were ready for that because it was in the days of census. Those days are an emphatic reminder of Roman domination. Then the climate was ripe for a revolt against the Romans. Also behind him were people who saw something in his ideas. But the Romans quelled his rebellion. He died and that was the end of his movement. All those who obeyed him were scattered.

People like Theudas and Judas of Galilee are the thieves and robbers whom the Lord means when He speaks of people who enter the sheepfold

other than through the door (Jn 10:1). By presenting the case in this way, Gamaliel places the Lord Jesus on a par with them.

His sober but darkened mind brings him to a sober conclusion. He simply says that they are always right if they let the matter rest. That 'Man' could also be such a deceiver and then Christendom would die down. Troublemakers come and go; that is how it could be with this new movement. However, if it were a work of God, all human effort would turn out to be in vain and they would turn out to be fighters against God. This advice of Gamaliel is still given to orthodox Jews who enter into conversation with Messianic Jews.

Instead of such advice, Gamaliel would have done better to propose to the Council to investigate the matter on the basis of the Old Testament. Never did the Lord Jesus, like Theudas and many others with him, say that He was Someone of significance. In the course of time about forty false messiahs have risen up, of whom Bar Kochba is the best known. They have all served as liberators to free Israel from the yoke of slavery of the nations, but they have all failed miserably. They have dragged many into their trap.

The only One Who can justifiably claim to be the Messiah has a message that is believed throughout the world and has received millions of followers. Instead of being scattered, they have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit.

### **Acts 5:40-42 | Flogged, Released and Keeping Right on**

*40 They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and [then] released them. 41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for [His] name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus [as] the Christ.*

The Council is convinced. Although the Council follows Gamaliel's advice and thereby indicates that they do not want to be fighters against God, they do appear to be fighters against God. They call the apostles back in, but not to apologize. Their murder plans are not carried out, but their ha-

ted has not diminished. This is shown by the flogging they inflict on the apostles. Furthermore, they order them not to speak “in the name of Jesus” anymore. This is how they let the apostles go.

But they are not broken men who leave the courtroom. We are often afraid to give our testimony when we expect a disapproving look or a mocking smile. This is different with the apostles. The only result of the flogging is that they rejoice that they are worthy “to suffer shame” for the “name” of the Lord Jesus (cf. Mt 5:10-12; 1Pet 4:13).

The threat to no longer speak “in the name of Jesus” only leads them with even more zeal to teach from God’s Word in public in the temple as well as from house to house. They proclaim that Jesus is the promised Christ. The order “not to speak in the name of Jesus” is as foolish as ordering the sun not to shine.

## Acts 6

### **Acts 6:1-2 | Complaints in the Church**

*1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing [in number], a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic [Jews] against the [native] Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving [of food]. 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.*

As the number of disciples increases, so do the dangers of the sinful flesh that every believer has within him. In the previous chapter two of the disciples expressed this in a well-considered and therefore crafty way. The judgment was in accordance with it. Now the sinful flesh reveals itself in a different form than in the previous chapter.

It is not an intentional, deliberate sin, but a spirit of dissatisfaction comes into the church and manifests itself in complaining. It is not a rebellion, but it is deadly if it is not responded to properly (1Cor 10:10). As with Ananias and Sapphira, money is the cause. With them it was about making it available, here it is about distributing it, perhaps mainly in the form of goods.

The complaining stems from the different living conditions of the disciples. The Hellenistic Jews or Greek-speaking Jews believe that their widows are not treated equally with the Hebrews in the distribution of the goods that the church received from its wealthier members. We see here two groups with different backgrounds. The Greek-speaking Jews are Jews who came out of the scattering. They speak the Greek language and are familiar with Greek culture which may have been evident in their behavior. The Hebrews are the Hebrew or Aramaic speaking Jews. They have their origin in Israel and have been formed by the law.

These are two groups both having their dangers and need to learn to bear with each other. The Greek-speaking people are in danger of introducing a worldly way of life into the church; the Hebrews are in danger of introducing legalism into the church.

The Preacher has already observed that danger and warned about it (Ecc 7:15-18). He speaks of the contrast between the righteous who boasts of his righteousness – that is, someone who takes himself as norm, makes laws of that norm and imposes it on others – and the lawless who boasts of his freedom – such a person does not acknowledge any law. The only way to avoid falling into either extremity is to fear God.

The God-fearing one has respect for God’s Word and adds nothing to it and avoids both dangers. The Lord Jesus walked on the narrow path, “in the midst of the paths of justice” (Pro 8:20), not to the right and not to the left. We must always focus on Him again (Isa 30:21). If we don’t, satan will succeed in bringing discord among us through dissatisfaction and jealousy.

Satan exploits the small differences there are in the church to set people up against each other. In this case it concerns earthly goods. If we are content with what we have (Heb 13:5), we will not become jealous of what others have or can do. Contentment is inseparable from Godliness (1Tim 6:6).

The apostles, who are called “the twelve” here, recognize the problem. They even recognize that they have contributed to its arising. They have taken on tasks that are not directly theirs. That is asking for trouble. An additional consequence is that they are no longer able to carry out their actual task to the full.

If more is done than is ordered, nothing will happen properly anymore. On the one hand, the apostles do not get around to their original task of preaching the Word of God; on the other hand, the task they have taken upon themselves, serving the tables, is not carried out properly. Serving the tables is about distributing money and goods to the needy believers.

It is also an important instruction for us to stick to what the Lord has given us as a task. If, however well intentioned, we take on other tasks for which He has not given us an order, it is at the expense of the actual task. Also the extra task which has been taken on is not carried out satisfactorily.

Fortunately, the apostles recognize their mistake in time. They themselves feel that it is unsatisfactory. They hear the signals of dissatisfaction in the complaining, and act before tumult breaks out. This allows them to reduce and eliminate the danger. They want to return to their original task. The

social aspect of the church, which is also there and important, must be transferred.

### Acts 6:3-7 | The Seven Deacons Chosen

*3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

To overcome the difficulties that had arisen, the apostles proposed to the brethren that they select seven men who could take over from them this task of distributing funds and resources. The apostles do not select the men themselves; they only give directions that the church should pay attention to in selecting the men suitable to carry out this task. The qualities described that such brothers must possess indicate the value of this service. The men eligible for this work must have a good testimony in their environment. Also, the Holy Spirit must be able to work freely in them and they must be able to perform their task with wisdom (cf. 1Tim 3:8-13).

Although these are practical matters, the brothers who are going to take care of these matters must meet certain spiritual features. They are not practical brothers who are good at accounting, for example, but spiritually minded brothers who feel the material need of believers and provide for it with wisdom. The church is not an organization, not a system of rules, where one looks at how everything can be arranged in the best way. It is the Spirit of God Who in His wisdom knows all needs and can indicate exactly where and how they should be met, as is necessary for the glory of Christ.

These men are chosen by the church (2Cor 8:19). This is different than with the gifts of grace in the church. These are not chosen by the church,

but are given by the Lord and set in the church (1Cor 12:28). The church must accept them and acknowledge them as given to her by the Lord (Eph 4:7,11). In short: the church is owned by the Lord and therefore He chooses and gives the gifts necessary for the building up of the church; the church as steward manages the money and she chooses who is responsible for its management.

After the apostles have made their proposal, they also say what they will devote themselves to. They have said that the Word of God is neglected by them. Nevertheless, the first thing they want to do when they have their hands free again after handing over the care of the practical things, is not to preach the Word, but to pray. And not just once or on a special occasion, but they want to “devote” themselves to it. Then they say that they will also devote themselves “to the ministry of the Word”.

It is remarkable that the apostles here mention prayer first and then the preaching as their work. Their struggle with the power of evil is firstly a struggle in prayer. In prayer, more than in any other service, we become aware of the power of God that is needed for any other service. It is important to first speak with God about people and only then to speak with people about God.

The proposal of the apostles is widely supported by the crowd of believers. They choose seven men who meet the requirements. This means that the church has also worked spiritually and has been able to recognize these conditions with these men. Luke gives the names of the seven they choose. With Stephen he mentions as an extra characteristic that he is “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”. This means that Stephen trusts in God completely, while the Holy Spirit can work in him without hindrance.

As far as can be deduced from the names, all men chosen are Greeks, for they are all Greek names. This is certainly a loving concession to the group of believers that has complained. From that group there can no longer be any reproach of partiality. When the love of God fills the hearts, it overcomes selfishness and pettiness. Today’s church is governed based on democracy, with each group demanding its representation in every commission that is thought to be established.

According to the well-known Bible interpreter F.W. Grant (1834-1902) the names have the following meaning:

1. Stephen – crown
2. Philip – lover of horses, runner
3. Prochorus – leader of praise
4. Nicanor – victor
5. Timon – honorable
6. Parmenas – permanent
7. Nicolas – conqueror of the people

Two of these names stand out, which we will come across a few more times in this book: Stephen and Philip.

These seven men are put before the apostles by the church. Before the apostles identify themselves with the choice of the church by the laying on of hands (cf. Lev 3:2; Num 27:18; Deu 34:9), they pray. They will certainly have prayed for these men that the Lord will give them grace and wisdom to perform this important task. After all, it is about the welfare of the church.

It seems that the multiplication or increase of the influence of the Word on the life of the believers, about which Luke speaks in verse 7, is a result of the election of the deacons. As a result, the apostles are again free to preach the Word, which is not without consequence. The spiritual life of the believers grows through it. And not only that. We also read that the number of disciples in Jerusalem is greatly increasing. So people also come to faith through the preaching of the Word. Among those people there is a large crowd of priests. They become obedient to the faith. This contrasts with their life up to that moment for it was dominated by obedience to the law.

N.B. Verse 7 can be seen as a verse that connects two parts. We find such a verse also in Acts 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31. This gives a division of the book into six parts.

## Acts 6:8-10 | The Performance of Stephen

*8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, [including] both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

After the mention of Stephen as one of the seven deacons (verse 5) we now hear more about him. As noted above, Stephen, which is derived from *stefanos*, means ‘crown’. This name refers to the crown of a victor. There is another word for crown, *diadema*, which is diadem or royal crown. The *diadema* can be inherited by someone, the *stefanos* must be earned.

We see that Stephen’s work is not limited to “the daily ministry” (verse 1). He does “great wonders and signs among the people”. He does this “full of grace and power”. In him the merciful power of God becomes manifest. He shows the powerful efficacy of grace by performing wonders that are a benefit to the people. The wonders he performs are great signs because they all refer to the Lord Jesus in heaven.

In Stephen we see the free working of the Spirit (1Cor 12:11). None of the apostles commissioned him for his work. There is also no mention of the church appointing him to do this work. He who has a gift must not only be free to use it, but is even obliged to do so for the Lord and for the church.

Stephen is a man “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (verse 3), “full of faith” (verse 5) and “full of grace and power” (verse 8). Being “full of” means, in case this is said of people, “to be controlled by”. The Lord Jesus is the Only One of Whom can be said that He is “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

In doing wonders and signs, Stephen is doing something we have only seen with the apostles so far. However, his wonders are not described, because our attention should not go to his wonders, but all our attention should go to his preaching.

His performance in the fullness of faith, grace and power evokes resistance. This time the resistance comes from the synagogue. Different groups come toward him and argue with him. Stephen is not afraid of them. He stands

there as a lonely witness of the truth against a majority of opponents of the truth.

No matter how they try to beat him, they don't succeed. Stephen is powerfully supported by the Holy Spirit. According to the promise of the Lord Jesus, he demonstrates a wisdom and a spirit that silences his opponents (Lk 21:15; 12:12). For us, we must always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us (1Pet 3:15).

### Acts 6:11-15 | Arresting of Stephen

*11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and [against] God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.*

It is unacceptable to the opponents of Stephen that they cannot overpower him with words. That is why they resort to false accusations. They do not express these accusations themselves yet, but they incite men to claim that they have heard Stephen speak slanderous words against Moses and God.

Remarkably enough they place Moses before God. In their traditionalism and formalism their conception of Moses' law is the filter through which they judge God and thus how people speak about God. When people say things that do not correspond with their view of Moses, they are reprehensible, no matter how much they reflect God's thoughts.

They treat Stephen as they treated the Lord Jesus. The people who first held the apostles in high esteem are stirred up against Stephen here, under the influence of slander. This is how fickle the people's favor is. In the elders and scribes these slanderers find grateful supporters.

The whole group comes up to Stephen. They drag him away and bring him before the Council. The Council will know how to deal with him, they think. They bring forward false, criminal witnesses (Psa 35:11). They

accuse him of slander because he would have spoken against the temple and the law.

Stephen, like the Lord, has spoken the truth to their conscience. Because they do not want to bow to the truth, they bend the truth and turn it into a lie. They want to hold on to their own truth about the temple and the law, which gives them prestige among men. Therefore he must be accused of speaking against the temple and the law.

Their accusation indicates that Stephen has confronted them with the consequences of their unbelief. In his preaching he has referred to the Lord Jesus as the One Who has prophesied that the temple will be destroyed (Lk 21:6,20). He will have pointed out the hollowness of the temple service because of the rejection of Christ. He will also have pointed out that the law is not sufficient as a means to be justified. But they did not want to listen. With undisguised contempt they speak about "this Nazarene, Jesus".

After these accusations, they do not see the face of Stephen as the face of a demon, but as that of an angel. They see in the shine of his face the reflection of the glory of heaven. Perhaps some have thought of the face of Moses that shone (Exo 34:30). It is as if God says: 'This man is not against Moses, but he is like Moses, a faithful servant of Mine.'

In the next chapter we hear the impressive speech of Stephen. There we see that the roles are reversed. There it is not the Council that is the court before which Stephen is summoned, but Stephen is the court before which the Council is summoned.

## Acts 7

### **Acts 7:1 | Introduction to Stephen's Speech**

| 1 *The high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

The High Priest has listened to the accusations and gives Stephen the opportunity to account for himself. Stephen's speech is not a defense, but an accusation. He tells the Jews their own history, which they know well. However, knowing history and applying the lessons from it are two different things. Stephen makes it clear that they are entirely condemned by their own history. They do exactly like their fathers.

Stephen does not try to defend himself here. Here he is the judge who pronounces the verdict. He is the memory of the people through which they are placed in God's presence. In connection with the goodness of God toward Israel, Joseph and Moses are placed in the foreground. Israel has rejected them both. They handed over Joseph to the nations and rejected Moses as a ruler and a judge. This is exactly what they have done with the Lord Jesus, what he then shows to them in the clearest terms.

Stephen gives an overview of two thousand years of history of God's people, from Abraham till now. From his survey it becomes clear that the history of salvation is a continual changing of events and places. History is not static. Everything has not remained as it was. That is how it will be with the temple, which they believe will always exist.

Through his survey of their history, he wants to make it clear to them that with the coming and rejection of Christ, a new change in their history has taken place. But they have no ears for that change. The end is that they cover their ears and stone Stephen.

### **Acts 7:2-8 | God's Way With Abraham**

| 2 *And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'* 4 *Then he*

left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, [God] had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and [yet], even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' 8 And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so [Abraham] became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac [became the father of] Jacob, and Jacob [of] the twelve patriarchs.

With the expression “brethren and fathers”, Stephen speaks to them as one who still belongs to the same people. He begins his speech with “the God of glory” and ends it with seeing “the glory of God” (verse 55). The whole time he gives his speech, his face shines with that same glory (Acts 6:15).

He begins with Abraham, the ancestor on whom they boast so much that they are his offspring. Their pride is completely misplaced, for they must remember that Abraham was originally an idolater in Mesopotamia (Jos 24:2). It was in that country, and not in the land they now live in, that the God of glory appeared to him.

There God also spoke to him and commanded him to leave his country and his family and invited him to come to the land that He would point out to him (Gen 12:1). He had to go out of his *country*, to a new land that God had chosen for him. He had to leave his *family* to form a new family. He even had to leave his *father's house*, of which he was still a part, to become a father to many nations. God's calling is always personal. God's way is always with the individual. God has called Abraham when he was but one (Isa 51:2).

At first Abraham obeyed, but his obedience was not total. The reason was that not he, but his father Terah took the initiative to leave (Gen 11:31).

Because of this, at first he did not get any further than Haran, where he settled. Only after his father died, he moved on to “this country”.

Here it already becomes clear what Stephen will focus on in his speech. This part of history shows that every change has always evoked resistance. It already started with Abraham. He didn't go all the way that God had told him to go. He went as far as Haran and stayed there until his father died who shouldn't have been with him at all. The resistance with Abraham was rooted in his family connections. They outweighed God's command. Only when God has put an end to that connection by the death of his father, he is free to move on.

But that too seems to be more a matter of God than of Abraham. Stephen says that *God* had Abraham move to this country in which they now live. So it is pure grace that they live there and everything is God's work. God had Abraham move into that country, but He didn't give him an inheritance in it, not even the smallest piece of which he could say was his property. Instead, he was promised that one day, in the future, he would own it as well as his offspring after him. God gave him that promise even when he did not even have a child.

However, that did not change anything about his faith. It did change his stay in the country. It made the land of promise for him a foreign land and it made him a stranger in that land (Heb 11:9). So he did not claim for himself what God had determined for the future. His descendants possessed it now, but he himself is still waiting for the fulfillment of the promise. Stephen wants to make it clear that they have nothing to claim.

And it was not only Abraham who did not immediately get hold of the promise. Also his offspring would have to wait and even experience the necessary things before they could enter the promised land. God announced to Abraham that his offspring would be enslaved instead of being blessed. They would live in a foreign land and be enslaved and mistreated. This would continue for four hundred years (Gen 15:13-14). At the same time God also speaks words of hope. He promises that He will judge the people who hold them in bondage. Then they will be able to go out to serve God “in this place” (verse 7; Exo 3:12), by which Stephen means the land of Canaan.

Everything Stephen said about Abraham is meant to highlight the low and even humiliating origins of the people because his audience so boasts about their origins (cf. Deu 7:7). Incidentally, he mentions the circumcision of Abraham as a sign of the covenant God made with him and with his offspring (Gen 17:10-14). This too is a matter on which the Israelites are very proud. They, and they alone, are the people of the covenant (Rom 9:4). They boast of that status.

He also mentions that Abraham was circumcised when he became the father of Isaac who he also circumcised on the eighth day. From Isaac Jacob was born and from Jacob the twelve patriarchs, from whom the covenant people would be further built. But how did that covenant people behave at the beginning of their existence?

### **Acts 7:9-16 | Rejection and Reign of Joseph**

9 *“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. [Yet] God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 “Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction [with it], and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers [there] the first time. 13 On the second [visit] Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent [word] and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons [in all]. 15 And Jacob went down to Egypt and [there] he and our fathers died. 16 [From there] they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.*

The patriarchs soon showed their true nature. Driven by jealousy, they rejected Joseph. Their jealousy came from the revelation that Joseph had received in dreams and that he had told them. Those dreams were about his future glorification, in which they would bow down before him (Gen 37:5-11). But they would never do that! Therefore, they made sure that nothing of his dreams could come to pass and sold him to Egypt. The parallels between Joseph and the Lord Jesus are obvious.

Everything Stephen brings up about Joseph in his history had to remind his hearers of what they did to Christ. Did they perhaps remember their thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15-16)? However much the brothers despised Joseph and rejected him, God was with him. After he was rejected, God delivered him from all his afflictions and made sure he came into favor with Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Joseph revealed God's wisdom by making proposals to Pharaoh that would save the country. As a result, Joseph was made the most powerful man in Egypt by Pharaoh and was even assigned the rule of the house of Pharaoh (Gen 41:40-44; Psa 105:21).

The brothers had no knowledge of God's dealings with Joseph. But God made sure that they came face to face with Joseph as the mighty ruler of Egypt. For this He used a famine that He caused over all Egypt and Canaan (Gen 41:54; 42:5). Stephen calls it a "great affliction", which is reminiscent of the period of time of which the Lord Jesus speaks and for which He uses the name "great tribulation" (Mt 24:21; cf. Jer 30:7). The Lord thus points forward to the time when the people will be severely chastened and from which a remnant will be saved after this remnant has acknowledged Him as Messiah. God's goal with the famine was the same. He wanted to bring the brothers to Joseph and to the acknowledgment that he is their savior. For this a long way had to be gone.

Stephen speaks about "our fathers" who could not find food. He still connects with his audience. He takes them further into the history of the brothers and tells them how they are led to Joseph. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent "our fathers [there] the first time" (Gen 42:1-2). Stephen ignores what happened that first time, but proceeds immediately with the second time they go. At this second time, Joseph makes himself known to his brothers (Gen 45:3-4).

Here in Stephen's speech we find a glimpse of hope for Israel. The Lord Jesus will also come a second time to His people and then make Himself known to them. Then they will see Him Whom they have pierced (Zec 12:10) and He will bless the repentant remnant. Joseph did the same with his brothers after he revealed himself to them. Then, as it were, He will also make known to God His descent as a true Man through which He was able to connect people with Himself and say: "Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me" (Heb 2:13).

After making himself known, Joseph sends his brothers away to pick up his father Jacob and all his relatives. They are allowed to live with him in Egypt. In this way God has turned for good everything the brothers had meant evil (Gen 50:20).

But that situation came to an end. Jacob and “our fathers” died. Their bodies were brought back to the land of Canaan and buried in the tomb that Abraham had bought. They had not yet received the promised land, but they were buried in the tomb where Abraham was also buried in view of the fulfillment of the promise (Gen 49:29-30; 50:13; Jos 24:32).

### **Acts 7:17-22 | Moses’ Birth and Nurturing**

*17 “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. 19 It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. 20 It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home. 21 And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.*

Stephen comes to the third and longest part of his speech. Moses as picture of the Lord Jesus is central in this. Stephen was accused of speaking slanderous words against Moses (Acts 6:11). From what he says of Moses it is clear how false this accusation is.

In mentioning the history of God’s people, Stephen is now going to speak about the fulfillment of God’s promises. Based on that history, he presents to his audience that a new change was occurring. The situation in which the people found themselves in Egypt did not remain the same. The time of the promise was approaching, that is, the time to fulfill the promise that God would bring them to Canaan. For this He had to lead His people out of Egypt. The circumstances He used for this are again humbling for his audience.

In the early days of their stay in Egypt it seemed that the people were greatly blessed. The people grew and multiplied in Egypt (Exo 1:7). None of this posed a problem, as long as the country was ruled by kings who had known Joseph. They remembered that they owed the existence of their country to him. As a token of appreciation, the people were allowed to stay in Egypt. Then there was a king who had not known Joseph (Exo 1:8). This king had no connection whatsoever with Joseph and there was no gratitude whatsoever toward him.

This king saw in the ever-growing people a threat to his own position. To prevent expansion of "our race", he resorted to cunning (Exo 1:16) and began to mistreat "our fathers" and to afflict them (Exo 1:10-11). When this did not help to inhibit the growth of the people, he ordered that every son who is born should not stay with their parents, but that they would expose their infants, i.e. that they would be thrown into the Nile (Exo 1:22).

While the people sighed under the cruel domination, God went to work to fulfill His promise by letting Moses be born. Stephen says of him that he was "lovely ", that is, lovely "in the sight of God" (Exo 2:2; Heb 11:23). His parents did not take him immediately to the Nile, as Pharaoh had commanded, but nurtured him "in his father's home" for three months. After that he had to share the fate of every little boy. He was taken to the Nile and put there as a foundling. There he was found by the daughter of Pharaoh who nurtured him as her own son. Later, Moses refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter (Heb 11:24).

The nurturing by his God-fearing parents did not miss its goal. God used the criminal order of Pharaoh to bring Moses to his court. By doing so through the daughter of Pharaoh, God mocked with all the power of Pharaoh. That is God's wisdom. God's plan with His people was not only fulfilled despite Pharaoh, but even with the cooperation of Pharaoh, of course without him wanting or even realizing it.

At court Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians. Moses *became* learned or wise, but he *was* powerful in his words and deeds. Learning he acquired through education, power he received from God as a special gift. Both qualities he revealed in Egypt. To God he spoke about the opposite (Exo 4:10) and felt his incompetence.

### Acts 7:23-29 | Moses Visits His Brethren and Flees

*23 But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 And when he saw one [of them] being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? 28 YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' 29 At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.*

The first period of Moses' life at the court of Pharaoh lasted for forty years. But all the splendor of the court of Pharaoh could not prevent that his heart was with his brothers in oppression. One day he visited them. His love for his people burned in all its fierceness. He did not come to tell them what they had done wrong, but to see their "hard labors" (Exo 2:11). The Lord Jesus did not come to judge either, but to save (Jn 3:17).

When Moses saw one of his brethren being treated unjustly, he defended him. He took him in protection, also taking vengeance for him who was mistreated by striking down the Egyptian. He was then still at the court of Pharaoh. By standing up so clearly for the people, he thought that his brethren would see in him their deliverer through whose hand God would give them salvation. But that thought did not occur to them. On the contrary. The next day, when he appeared to his brothers again, it appeared that they were not at all interested in his intervention.

Again Moses observed that injustice was being done. However, this time it was not an Egyptian who wronged an Israelite, but two Israelites who wronged each other. When he tried to reconcile them for peace with the question why they wronged each other, he who wronged his neighbor turned against him. Moses was blamed for the fact that he should not claim to be "a ruler and judge".

Here we see that from his first action in favor of his people, his authority was rejected, as was the case with Joseph. Moses was dealt with in the same way as Joseph was dealt with before, when he investigated the welfare of his brothers: he was rejected by his own (Gen 37:14,18). Like Joseph, Moses is in this respect a type of Christ Who was not accepted by His own either (Jn 1:11). Christ was hated, rejected, denied and even killed by His people. So it was prophetically the reproach of Christ that Moses took upon himself when he looked after his brethren and wanted to share their fate (Heb 11:26).

The rejection of Moses was clearly expressed in the words of the Israelite who wronged his neighbor: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?" (verse 27; Exo 2:14). The man added that he saw in him not a deliverer, but a threat to his life. This shows how much the people would rather remain in slavery than acknowledge a deliverer. The people did not want to accept a ruler and judge. The accusation that Moses put himself up to this is quoted twice by Stephen (verses 27,35), through which he accentuates its seriousness. When it had become so clear that his people did not want him, Moses fled.

What Stephen, following the history in Exodus, presents as a flee is presented in Hebrews 11 as an act of faith (Heb 11:27). Thus, on the one hand, the Lord Jesus was rejected by His people, while on the other He went away, back to heaven, waiting for the time when His people will accept Him as their Savior.

During the time that Moses was in Midian, he had a heathen wife as his bride and got two sons (Exo 2:21-22; 18:3-4). This can be compared to the Lord Jesus Who receives the church as a bride in this time. The names Moses gave his sons show that he had not forgotten his people in the foreign land either, just as the Lord Jesus, now that He is in heaven, does not forget His earthly people.

### **Acts 7:30-35 | God Appears to Moses**

30 *"After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. 31 When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as*

*he approached to look [more] closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. 34 I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' 35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent [to be] both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.*

Moses was forty when he fled. In the wilderness forty years "had passed". Forty is the number of trial. In the power of his life God formed him in the wilderness. Who would choose such an education, in the loneliness of the wilderness, when all the challenges of life lie before you? But God taught him lessons there that he could not have learned in any other way.

Moses is called by the Lord when he is eighty years old. That is at the end of his natural life, as he himself says in Psalm 90 (Psa 90:10). Before the Lord can use someone, a person has to learn to renounce his natural capacities. Moses learned that. Yet it is not enough not to rely on one's own abilities. Now he must learn to trust in God's power.

Moses is now ready for God to appear to him. He does that as an Angel in a flame of a burning thorn bush. Moses' attention is drawn to the fact that the thorn bush burns but does not burn up (Exo 3:3). The thorn bush represents man by nature, sinful man. We also see the whole people of Israel in it, which is in Egypt in the furnace of fire. We also see that God is in the fire. That is why the thorn bush is not consumed.

God uses the fire of trial to purify His people, and us. What is not in agreement with Him is removed by the fire. As a result, we are answering more and more to His purpose with us which is that we are becoming like the Lord Jesus. He is with us in the trial (Dan 3:23-25; Isa 63:9).

God sees that Moses is approaching the bush to see that wondrous phenomenon. He makes Himself known to Moses as the God of the covenant

with the patriarchs, with Abraham (Gen 15:13-14), Isaac (Gen 26:3) and Jacob (Gen 46:1-3). That is the ground on which He is going to act. He appreciates that Moses shows interest in His revelation, but at the same time He maintains His holiness.

Moses is deeply impressed by God's appearance and His words. He begins to shake with fear and does not dare to investigate further. He knows himself in the presence of the holy God. Where God is, there is holiness. God makes it clear to him that he stands on holy ground. That is why he has to take off his shoes (cf. Jos 5:15). The awareness of standing on holy ground was completely missing from the Council that Stephen stood before, while they claimed to live in the holy land.

After Moses has taken the right place before God, God tells him what He has seen and what He has purposed. God tells him that He has seen what is being done to His people and that He has heard their groans. He is familiar with their sorrows. That brings Him to act. He has descended to rescue them and bring them to a land that He has chosen for them. And Moses is the man He wants to use to carry out that purpose.

The Lord Jesus has descended to earth to redeem people who sigh under the yoke of sin. As with Israel, He did not speak from heaven, but came from heaven to earth. It is wonderful to read that God calls this wretched slave people in Egypt "My people"! It is like the father falling around the neck of his prodigal son while this son is still wearing his dirty clothes (Lk 15:20).

When Stephen has impressively presented the appearance of God to Moses and His command to him to go to Egypt to deliver His people, he repeats the rejection of Moses as a ruler and a judge (verse 35; verse 27). By speaking in plural, "they", he thereby turns the sin of one man into a collective sin, that is, the sin of the whole people.

To further underline its seriousness, Stephen speaks of disowning Moses. And that while God had appeared to Moses and Moses had been sent by Him to them to be both a ruler and a deliverer. This is an impressive illustration of the rejection of Christ, the Prince of life, by the Jewish people (cf. Acts 3:14-15; 4:10-12).

### Acts 7:36-43 | Moses Rejected; Idols; Judgment

36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' 38 This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and [who was] with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39 Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40 SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' 41 At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? 43 YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

After Stephen has emphatically presented the special nurturing, education and calling of Moses to his audience, he continues just as emphatically with the delivering service of Moses. Again and again he points out what Moses has done or said. This, and no one else, led them out of Egypt. And how: performing wonders and signs. Did not the Lord Jesus reveal Himself in the midst of His people in the same way? Did not the apostles also operate in this way among the people and did not Stephen operate in this way?

And Moses not only delivered them out of Egypt, but also led them through the Red Sea into the wilderness, where he also showed them the way for forty years. It is this Moses who was among the sons of Israel – those who form the Council boasted of being that too, didn't they? – who said that God would raise up for them a Prophet like him. To the Council it is clear that by this the Messiah is meant, Who, just like Moses, would act as Deliverer and Judge.

Stephen gives even more homage to Moses. He points at Moses and says that he is the one, and no other, who has received the law in the wilderness through the mediation of angels. The law contains the words of God and are therefore living words. They were given by God to Moses on the mountain of God. Moses was the mediator, because he was with the angel in the wilderness and on the mountain and he was with “our fathers”.

He passes on the living oracles or words to “you”, that is Israel then and now. But what did “our fathers” do with all that God gave to them through Moses and with what He said to them through Moses? They deliberately disobeyed him. They refused to obey him. They repelled him. They did not want him to talk about obedience to God.

In their hearts they returned to Egypt. There they could at least do what they wanted. That they lived in slavery and oppression, they didn’t think about that anymore. After all, everything was better than that oppressive obedience to God. And where was Moses anyway? He had been gone for so long that he would never come back.

That’s why they told Aaron to make gods they could see and follow. So in those days, the days of Moses’ absence, they made a calf. To that idol they offered sacrifice, rejoicing in the works of their hands. No more thought was given to God’s honor and work. That is why God turned away. He withdrew from them and as judgment He delivered them up to idolatry (cf. Rom 1:23-26,28).

Stephen tells the Council how throughout history the people have done nothing but serve the idols. Abraham served them before God called him (Jos 24:2), the people served them in Egypt (Jos 24:14) and in the wilderness (Amos 5:25-27).

In his quote from the prophet Amos, Stephen also quotes the judgment on the people that the Babylonians would bring by making the people go into exile. So there is a double judgment: the judgment of God by delivering them to idolatry and the judgment of God by making them go into exile, away from the land.

Again and again in Stephen’s speech it sounds that God approaches His people differently every time, because His people always turn away from

Him and become unfaithful to Him. Everything He gives, they have always rejected and chosen the idols instead.

### **Acts 7:44-50 | The Dwelling Place of God**

*44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed [him] to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. 45 And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. 46 [David] found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. 48 However, the Most High does not dwell in [houses] made by [human] hands; as the prophet says:*

*49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE,  
AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET;  
WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord,  
'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?*

*50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'*

Here Stephen comes to a new section in his speech. After his extensive tribute to Moses in the face of their accusation that he would slander Moses, he speaks about the dwelling place of God. After all, they had also accused him of speaking words against the temple by pointing to its destruction (Acts 6:14). Stephen will show that God's former dwellings were temporary dwellings and not even real ones.

He first mentions the tabernacle which he describes with the extensive name "tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness". It is the tent from which God testifies, from which He speaks to His people. What kind of tent was that? It was a tent made by Moses at God's command and according to the pattern which God had shown to him on the mountain (Exo 25:40). Stephen makes it clear that the tabernacle was a temporary dwelling place of God and that it referred to a higher reality, heaven. The tabernacle would not always remain the dwelling place of God.

When "our fathers" entered the land with Joshua, they brought the tabernacle with them (Jos 3:14-17). Stephen mentions the name Joshua. This is the Hebrew name for the Greek 'Jesus'. He actually says that the people

took possession of the land with 'Jesus'. The land was delivered by God from the original inhabitants (Jos 23:9; 24:18) who were all servants of idols. There the tabernacle was given its place until the days of David.

With David the next change comes. That change has to do with the way God is served, not with the principle that God is served. God always wants people to serve Him, but He sometimes changes the way He wants that to happen. First it was in the tabernacle, under David it became the temple.

God is also free in His choice of the builder of His house. Although David found grace with God and longed to build a dwelling place for God (Psa 132:5), he was not allowed to do so (2Sam 7:2-17). God had reserved the building of the temple for Solomon (1Kgs 6:1,14; 8:19-20). But no matter how beautiful the temple was, it was not the real dwelling place of God.

The audience of Stephen claimed God by pointing to the temple as His dwelling place. To them, the temple was solid proof of the presence of God. Whoever touched the temple touched God. Stephen brings that idea down by pointing out that God does not dwell in houses made by human hands. He reinforces his words by quoting what God Himself said through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 66:1-2; cf. 1Kgs 8:27).

### Acts 7:51-53 | Stephen's Indictment

*51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and [yet] did not keep it."*

Reaching this point in his speech, it seems that Stephen notices that the Council understands that he is talking about them. In his speech he has reversed the arrows that were pointed at him and directed them at them. He has changed every ground for his conviction into a conviction of them. They have become the accused.

Instead of moderating his tone under their threatening gaze, Stephen raises his voice and calls out to them what the status of their situation is.

He calls them “stiff-necked” because they don’t want to bow their necks before God (cf. Exo 33:5).

He further calls them “uncircumcised in heart and ears”. They may belong to the people of God through outward circumcision, but in their inner being they are like the uncircumcised Gentiles whose hearts are not turned toward God and who do not listen to God (Jer 9:26b; Rom 2:25). In their aversion to God, they resist the work of the Holy Spirit. They do not do this just once, but always (Isa 63:10; Psa 106:33).

Until now Stephen has always spoken about our fathers, but at this stage of his speech he distances himself from them and speaks about “your fathers”. Their fathers and they did and do the same in their resistance against the Holy Spirit. They do this even more clearly than their fathers, for the Spirit has come and is clearly active in a man like Stephen (Acts 6:5,10).

He asks them a rhetorical question: “Which of the prophets their fathers did not persecute?” They cannot mention an exception, because every prophet sent by God to remind His people of their sins and to call them to repentance was rejected by them (2Chr 36:16; Jer 2:30; Mt 23:31). All those prophets also pointed out the coming of the Righteous One, that is the Lord Jesus. And what have they, the Council, done with Him? They have betrayed and killed Him.

This accusation was also made by Peter (Acts 3:14-15). While Peter took “ignorance” into account as an extenuating circumstance, Stephen holds this company of religious leaders fully responsible for this greatest crime of all time. Whatever new revelation from God came, they rejected it, right up to and including the Son of God.

The last words Stephen can speak relate to the way they received the law and the fact that they did not keep the law. They had accused him of speaking against the law (Acts 6:11,13), but here he gives the law the highest honor and correct application. He acknowledges the exalted origin of the law (Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2) as well as its full authority in its application to the members of the Council.

**Acts 7:54-60 | Stephen Is Stoned**

*54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they [began] gnashing their teeth at him. 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they [began] stoning [him]; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on [the Lord] and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.*

With his words that they are lawbreakers, the measure is filled up to them. All the accumulated anger comes out. They are in no way able to argue against Stephen. His proof of their guilt is irrefutable. Instead of his words touching them in the heart and asking them what to do (cf. Acts 2:37), his speech to them has become more and more an agony, a torture for their minds. They gnash their teeth against him as an expression of torment characteristic of the hell with which they are connected (Lk 13:28; Psa 35:16).

While during Stephen's speech the anger increases, which can be seen on their faces, an increasing glory of heaven can be seen on Stephen. They are full of anger; he is full of the Holy Spirit. They see through their anger a man they want to kill. He does not see the angry crowd, but he is completely absorbed by the Holy Spirit in what he sees in heaven: "The glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

The glory of God had left the temple (Eze 10:18; 11:23) and had returned to heaven. The glory of God had reappeared in Christ, but had been rejected and had returned to heaven. Now Stephen sees that glory, which means that the glory is visible to Christians who possess God's Spirit.

After his razor-sharp condemnation he now speaks about the heaven he sees opened and in which he sees the Lord Jesus as the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. Like seeing the glory of God, seeing the opened

heavens is also characteristic of Christendom. In Judaism the entrance to God is closed, God is hidden behind the veil.

When the Council hears all this, they go wild. They begin to cry out, so that they will hardly have heard what Stephen may have said. And even if another word from this – in their eyes – terrible criminal should break through their cries and reach their ears, they make it impossible to hear it by covering their ears (Psa 58:4-5).

It is completely unacceptable to them, no matter what Stephen says. He testifies not of the glory of God – which would be normal for heaven – but of the Son of Man in glory. It is perfectly clear to them what he is saying with this. He says nothing more and nothing less than that he sees the Messiah Whom they have rejected and that He is the Son of God (Dan 7:13).

Stephen says another thing. He also says that He sees the Son of Man “standing”. This indicates that the rejection of the Lord Jesus is not yet total and that He is, as it were, ready to return in case His people still come to repentance. However, this is not the case. On the contrary. By stoning Stephen, they send the Lord Jesus, as it were, a delegation after Him, saying: “We do not want this man to reign over us” (cf. Lk 19:11-14).

In Stephen’s death the testimony of the Holy Spirit was also rejected by them. The Lord underwent a sham trial. Stephen was executed and stoned to death without any form of trial. With this he undergoes the fate of a blasphemer (Lev 24:16). The stoning is carried out by the false witnesses (Acts 6:13).

In order not to be hindered by their robes when throwing the stones, they put them at the feet of a young man, Saul. Later on, Saul, then Paul, will cite his involvement and his care for the robes of the stone-throwers as a regrettable affair (Acts 22:20). Here we hear about him for the first time. He wholeheartedly agrees with the stoning of that ‘blasphemer’.

While he is being stoned, Stephen calls on the Lord to receive his spirit. Heaven had to receive not only the Lord Jesus until the period of restoration (Acts 3:20-21), but also the souls of His own, of those who believe in Him. By seeing Christ glorified in heaven, Stephen, as well as every

believer, is changed and becomes like Him. This is apparent from his last words.

His last words are no longer addressed to the people – he has nothing more to say to them – but to his Lord. While the stones strike him, he kneels down quietly and then by a loud voice, so that they all hear it, he prays for forgiveness for his murderers (cf. Lk 23:34a).

Seeing the Lord Jesus gives him that rest in these circumstances. We also see that rest in the way Stephen's death is described: he falls asleep. Falling asleep refers to the body, not to the soul or the spirit. Stephen is taken away from this life in the power of his life that was a testimony.

Jim Elliot, who was killed at the age of twenty-eight by the spears of Auca Indians to whom he wanted to preach the gospel, wrote: 'I am not looking for a long life, but a full life.' And: 'God seeks to populate eternity and I must not limit Him in doing this just with old people.'

## Acts 8

### **Acts 8:1-4 | Persecution – Stephen Buried**

*1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 [Some] devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul [began] ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. 4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.*

When Stephen was stoned, Saul already demonstrated his involvement by acting as a robe keeper (Acts 7:58). Now Luke notes that he was in hearty agreement with the stoning. Immediately after this remark of Saul's consent to Stephen's death, Luke mentions the first major persecution against the church. With Stephen's death the floodgates are opened. The spirit of hatred that the religious leaders possess takes full possession of them and comes to full development.

With Stephen's death also the extra year of grace that Israel was given by God to bring forth fruit for Him comes to an end (Lk 13:6-9). Now that Stephen has been rejected and with that the second offer of grace, the offer of salvation goes to the nations. For this, God will use the man who is still in the process of becoming the greatest persecutor of Christians.

First the gospel will be brought to the regions of Judea and Samaria. The church is scattered to these regions. These are the regions that the Lord Jesus mentioned in His commission to the disciples to proclaim the gospel there (Acts 1:8). So far, this has not been done. The Lord uses persecution to process this (verse 4). Because of this they are as it were sent out into the harvest (Lk 10:2). The apostles stay in Jerusalem. Are they disobeying their commission? It may be that it is courageous to stay in Jerusalem right now and that God wants it that way.

After the Council has assuaged its anger by the stoning of Stephen, this first martyr for the faith is brought to the tomb by devout men. The loud

lamentation over him fits in with this. They are grieved, but not in the way that unbelievers are grieved who have no hope (1Thes 4:13-14).

Luke then turns our attention to Saul again for a moment. He has seen with joy that Stephen was killed. That event has unleashed in him the cherished feelings of hatred, which he expresses by destroying the church (cf. Psa 83:4). In doing so he works meticulously. He enters every house where he suspects Christians live or gather (Acts 2:46; 5:42).

When he finds them, he arrests them and puts them in prison (Acts 22:4), where he tried by using torture to force them to blaspheme (Acts 26:9-11). In doing so, he makes no distinction between men and women. People driven by hatred have no eye for differences in bearing capacity. Especially the weak are a grateful target for them. Maybe it is precisely in a general sense the weak who have been left behind in Jerusalem because they have no possibilities to flee.

All the hatred that erupts only accomplishes the will of God, because through the scattering that results from this, the gospel goes to many places. The persecution is like an unpleasant wind that carries the seed to other places with the happy consequence that it can germinate there. The hatred that drives them away does not frighten them, but on the contrary makes them courageous witnesses.

The proclamation of the Word is done by every scattered believer. The proclamation of the gospel clearly does not depend on a gift, but on a heart full of the Lord. What is meant by the enemy to eradicate, God uses to expand His work.

We find here a beautiful application of Samson's riddle: "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet" (Jdg 14:14). The eater and the strong is the enemy who "prowls around like the roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1Pet 5:8). But instead of devouring the believers, new life is created as a result of faith in the preached gospel. We see a wonderful example of what is happening in the area of Samaria, of which Luke gives us an account in the next section.

### **Acts 8:5-8 | Preaching of Philip in Samaria**

5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and [began] proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said

*by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For [in the case] of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out [of them] shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.*

We have met Philip before as “one of the seven” deacons (Acts 6:5). He has faithfully performed his duty as a deacon and thereby obtained “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1Tim 3:13). As a result, he has now become an evangelist (Acts 21:8). He preaches in Samaria.

The inhabitants of Samaria, the Samaritans, are a mixture of Jews and heathens who have lived in Israel since the transportation of the ten tribes by the Assyrians (2Kgs 17:24-41). At first they were idolaters, but they also began to worship Yahweh, adhering only to the five books of Moses. Because of that mixture they were despised by the true Jews. They had Mount Gerizim as a place of worship in contrast to the Jews who had Jerusalem as a place of worship (Jn 4:20). Through the preaching of Christ, the new worship comes for them as well, apart from Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim (Jn 4:21-24).

Philip does not preach a doctrine, but a Person, Christ. Further on in this chapter we read that he is preaching “Jesus” to the eunuch (verse 35) because he connects to what the eunuch reads. He reads Isaiah 53 and in it the Lord Jesus is presented in His humiliation. By preaching “Christ” in Samaria, Philip connects to the resurrection and glorification of the Lord (Acts 2:36).

The preaching of Philip has great results. One of the reasons for this is that the Lord Himself had already worked in Samaria and that many people already knew Him there, who in turn had become witnesses (Jn 4:39). Sowing was already done, and harvesting is now possible (Jn 4:35-38). The seed of the preaching falls into prepared soil. There is also faith in the coming of the Messiah (Jn 4:25). Philip can preach Him as already come.

Through his preaching there is unity among the crowds. Obedience to God’s Word works unity. Besides hearing the preaching, which is mentioned first, they also see the signs he performs. By the way, in Acts we see that besides the apostles, signs and wonders are only done by Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (Acts 8:6). The signs that Philip performs consist of

delivering people from spiritual and physical captivity in a wonderful way.

They are not called wonders but signs because all these healings refer to the glorified Lord Who thereby underlines and affirms the preached Word (Mk 16:20). The Christ Who is preached by Philip proves His redemptive and restorative power in these wonders. All these wonders mean that the power to deliver and restore lies with Him. They are a foretaste of the powers of the future age (Heb 6:5). The fact that the unclean spirits shout out loudly indicates that they are reluctantly leaving their victims, but that they have to because of the higher power of the Lord Jesus.

The deliverance from the power of sin through the work of Christ, together with a benevolent deliverance from the consequences of sin, brings great joy. The effect of the preaching of Philip to the eunuch also brings joy (verse 39). Joy is inextricably connected with the gospel. The angel who announces the birth of the Lord Jesus speaks of “great joy which will be for all the people” (Lk 2:10). Wherever the Lord Jesus is received, sorrow over sins is followed by joy over the forgiveness thereof (1Thes 1:6). Joy belongs to the kingdom of God (Rom 14:17) and is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

### **Acts 8:9-13 | Simon the Magician**

*9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.*

Before Philip came to Samaria, there was a man active who brought the people into ecstasy. He did this through magic. He was also not modest in his performance, but presented himself as “someone great”, someone

of importance. [While I read this comment again, I get a postcard in the mailbox, which shows that people like Simon are still very much alive. The card says among other things: I am a great African medium and clairvoyant ... I offer you a solution for all your problems ... but also protection against bad influences ... I help you ... I bring success.' This slave of satan certainly does not suffer from an inferiority complex.]

With his magic, Simon turned his attention to himself, and with success. He got everyone's attention. He appealed to everyone, he appealed to small and great, young and old. Everyone was impressed by him and attributed divine power to him. His sorceries were wonders of the lie (2Thes 2:9). Nor was it a hype, a star suddenly appearing and just as suddenly disappearing again. On the contrary, he continued to fascinate the people "for a long time". At the same time, it shows that what the devil has to offer is always only for a certain time. It never satisfies constantly.

The gospel, on the other hand, has a lasting effect. This is what the people who listen attentively to Philip and pay attention to his preaching discover. When they did not know any better, they were captivated by Simon's magic. But when they see the wonders of Philip, they clearly see the difference between fake and real and that real and fake have nothing to do with each other. "What does straw have [in common] with grain?" (Jer 23:28b). Simon preached himself, Philip preaches the kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom of God is the atmosphere in which the reign of the Lord Jesus is acknowledged. Faith in the Name of the Lord Jesus brings someone into that sphere. That is why baptism follows directly as an outward evidence through which someone shows that he wants to belong to Him and follow Him. Men and women are baptized. In the Old Testament only what was male was circumcised. In the New Testament, when it comes to saving and following Christ, there is no difference anymore between men and women before God (Gal 3:27-28).

Receiving the Holy Spirit, as was the case in Acts 2 (Acts 2:38), is not yet mentioned here. They receive the Holy Spirit only after Peter and John have come from Jerusalem and identified themselves with them by the laying on of hands. God does this consciously this way. For there was a

religious rivalry between Jerusalem and Samaria and this does not give them a chance to do a disturbing work.

Simon also believes and is also baptized. He does not see a rival in Philip, but his superior. Simon constantly remains with Philip, as if he had his hopes set on him. With the eunuch this is different (verse 39). Simon's faith is of the kind mentioned in John 2 (Jn 2:23). Philip lets himself be deceived by Simon and baptizes him (or has him baptized).

What really drove Simon were the signs and great powers that Philip did. Likewise, there are many today who are attracted to the Christian faith because of the sensational things they observe on certain occasions, such as healings or so-called prophecies.

### **Acts 8:14-17 | Peter and John in Samaria**

*14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they [began] laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.*

The apostles in Jerusalem hear that Samaria received the word of God. This does not make them jealous, but they send Peter and John to contact Samaria. Once there they do not reproach the believers in Samaria for not having contacted them or the church in Jerusalem, but they acknowledge that God is at work here. That is why Peter will use the keys given to him for the second time to open the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16:19), this time for the Samaritans. The kingdom of heaven is not the realm in heaven, but a realm ruled by a King in heaven Who rules on earth according to heavenly principles. In Acts 2, Peter opened the kingdom to the Jews. Later he will use the keys for the Gentiles as well (Acts 10:48).

By acknowledging this work of God in Samaria, the practical connection between Samaria and Jerusalem is also acknowledged. Local churches are not separate from each other, but belong together, however, without this being officially reported to other churches or being added to a list of 'acknowledged churches'. Here there is no enmity or competition anymore

(Jn 4:9). Peter and John descend from Jerusalem, which is also more than just a geographical indication. The spiritual application seems permissible that the apostles do not give their approval from an elevated position, but join them.

They show their dependence on God by going into prayer to ask Him to give the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans who have come to faith. The Holy Spirit had not yet come to them because it was a company that was in a way connected to Judaism. They first had to be fully accepted by the converted Jews in order to maintain unity. Receiving the Holy Spirit is thus preceded by baptism and the laying on of hands by the apostles.

With the converted Jews there is no laying on of hands. However, they too are baptized first and only then receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). With the conversion of the Gentiles we see that on the basis of faith first the Holy Spirit is received and then baptism takes place (Acts 10:44; Eph 1:13). This has been the order since then.

In Samaria, by the laying on of hands of the apostles Peter and John, the connection between the believers in Jerusalem and Samaria is sealed and the believing Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit. This avoids the idea of two separate churches, one Jewish and one Samaritan. By the laying on of hands there is unity and acceptance. This was even more necessary because there was no connection between Jews and Samaritans, but mutual hatred. There is no mention of outwardly perceptible accompanying phenomena, as was the case with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

### **Acts 8:18-25 | Peter Sees Through and Judges Simon**

*18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. 22 Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall*

*of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.” 24 But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.” 25 So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.*

The only outward display that is noticed by Simon is the laying on of the hands of the apostles. He understands that this is something he cannot do, but what he would like to be able to do because of his spiritual ability. He is willing to pay for it and offers Peter and John money so that they would give him that power.

This is where the word ‘simony’ comes from, an expression that means that someone is looking for financial gain in spiritual things or for buying offices. Such people believe that Godliness is a means of gain (1Tim 6:5). It covers all forms of trade in spiritual matters. It is the third time that evil appears in the church and all three times it has to do with money.

Inwardly, Simon had no part in the new life, as can be seen from the words Peter speaks to him. It seemed wonderful to him to lay hands on people and give them the Holy Spirit in this way. In this way he would regain his power over people. What Philip did not recognize, is sharply denounced by Peter. Simon is a corrupt man.

To think that spiritual gifts or even the Holy Spirit can be obtained from God through money makes Christ’s work worthless. It is greatly to the dishonor of God and Christ and is no other than the work of satan. The sharp judgment of Peter is the only correct response. Simon is an outward follower, while he invents other things in his heart. He is still busy with himself.

Peter concludes from Simon’s question that his heart is not right before God. After pronouncing the judgment, Peter offers Simon the way to salvation. For that he needs to repent of his wickedness. He must radically condemn that evil lust for power and prestige before God and turn his back on it. At the same time he must pray to the Lord for the forgiveness of his heart’s intention. Here we see that not only deeds are judged, but also the intention of the heart. This concerns the devising and pursuit of evil

in his heart, even before it has actually happened. There is still hope for Simon if he repents.

Peter, who through the Holy Spirit can discern which spirit is in Simon (1Cor 12:10), sees in what he is imprisoned. He is in “the gall of bitterness” because of his loss of influence on the Samaritans who believed the gospel. He is also “in the bondage of iniquity” because he is not seeking the right of God, but his own right.

Simon is more appalled by what Peter has said about the consequences of his act, than by his act itself. It does not seem like real repentance, all the more so because he is looking for human mediation. Instead of praying himself, he asks if Peter wants to pray to the Lord for him to save him from the terrible things Peter has announced about him.

It resembles the repentance of Pharaoh who asked Moses to pray for him so that the plagues would cease, but who then hardened his heart again (Exo 8:8,15). Also with him there was no real repentance, but only a desire to be redeemed from the plagues. We do not read Peter’s answer to Simon’s request.

It seems that Peter and John did not stay long with Philip. They did, however, solemnly testify and speak the word of the Lord before returning to Jerusalem. In the whole area of Samaria they find an open ear for the word of the Lord. When the Lord Jesus wanted to visit a village of the Samaritans, they refused to receive Him (Lk 9:52-53). Peter and John were there at that time and John is one of the disciples who, even because of that refusal, wanted to let fire come down from heaven to consume them (Lk 9:54). Fortunately, the Lord forbade that and John has returned to his wish of that time. Now, on the way back to Jerusalem, together with Peter, he is allowed to preach the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

### **Acts 8:26-29 | A New Order for Philip**

*26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert [road].) 27 So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his*

*chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."*

In the section that follows now, chapter 8:26 till chapter 10:48, Luke describes the conversion histories of three people:

1. An Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8);
2. Saul (Acts 9);
3. Cornelius (Acts 10).

They are the descendants of the three sons of Noah – Shem and Ham and Japheth (Gen 9:18) – through whom the whole world was populated (Gen 9:19; 10:1-32):

1. The eunuch, the Ethiopian, is a descendant of Ham (Ethiopia or Cush (=black), Gen 10:6).
2. Saul, the Jew, is a descendant of Shem.
3. Cornelius, the Roman, is a descendant of Japheth.

The Hamites populate Africa, the Shemites Asia and the Japhethites Europe. These three continents meet at Jerusalem. Jerusalem is therefore strategically the best place to send out from there the gospel into the world. The eunuch, Saul and Cornelius represent the entire human race.

All three are morally sincere people, but they need conversion. They are also socially the most difficult people for the gospel to reach:

1. The eunuch is a politician.
2. Saul is a theologian.
3. Cornelius is a soldier.

Yet in two of them there is already a longing for the gospel. Both the eunuch and Cornelius are seekers. There is already a work of God going on in them. With Saul it is completely different. This man is not looking for peace, but for victims to whom he begrudges this peace.

The Lord has a special messenger for each one of them:

1. For the eunuch this is Philip.
2. For Saul it is Ananias.

3. For Cornelius it is Peter.

Also the way the Lord addresses Himself to them is different:

1. The eunuch is reached with the Word.
2. To Saul the Lord Himself appears.
3. Cornelis sees an angel in a vision.

Different are also the circumstances in which they find themselves when they come to repentance:

1. The eunuch is on his way home.
2. Saul comes from home.
3. Cornelius is at home.

Philip has to leave a busy field of work to serve a single person. Herein he imitates the Lord Who had to go through Samaria to bring the gospel to a single woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4:4,7-8). Philip is used to make the gospel find its way to the nations. God uses an angel to show Philip the way, but Philip has to proclaim the gospel. He is given precise directions where to go, but he is not told what to do there.

There are two roads that descend from Jerusalem to Gaza and he has to take the desert road. An evangelist would never have chosen the desert road, but Philip does not ask questions, he goes. To get Ananias to go to Saul (Acts 9) and Peter to go to Cornelius (Acts 10), the Lord must use more insistence. With Ananias fear is the objection and with Peter his Jewish prejudices prevent direct obedience. The Lord has removed both obstacles and then they have both gone.

In Philip we have an example of immediate, unconditional obedience in simplicity of heart. He does not think of the difference between Samaria where he was surrounded with esteem and love and the road to Gaza which is desolate. He has confidence in his Master Who wants to use him for a eunuch who has been in Jerusalem to worship and is now on his way back to his country.

The word for "eunuch" is literally "castrated". Besides the fact that he is a stranger, the fact that he is emasculated is an additional reason that he could never join the people of God (Deu 23:1). Nevertheless, he undertook

a journey of about two thousand kilometers to Jerusalem. There is also a salvation for the strangers and even for the eunuch, the emasculated (Isa 56:3). His conversion and faith in the Lord Jesus are therefore a foretaste of what we read in Psalm 68 (Psa 68:31b). Since then, many Ethiopians have stretched out their hands to God.

To bring the eunuch on the way of salvation God uses His Word and His servant Philip. What the eunuch sought in Jerusalem in duties and ceremonies of the law, he did not find there. He has been in Jerusalem to worship the true God, but he has only found a cold formalism there. In spite of his seeking heart, the Lord did not let any of the apostles cross his path.

The eunuch has not found peace in Jerusalem, but he has taken something else from Jerusalem and that is a part of God's Word. That is what he is reading in his chariot. With it he has a treasure with him that is larger than all the treasures he has to protect for his queen.

Then the meeting between Philip and the eunuch is prepared by the Spirit. The Spirit tells Philip that he must go up to "this" chariot, the chariot of the eunuch, and join it. Since it is the preaching of the gospel, it is not an angel who comes to Philip (verse 29), but the Spirit Who leads Philip. The Spirit tells us exactly where to go and what to do.

Thus, later, Ananias in connection with Saul, and Peter in connection with Cornelius, also receive precise directions to go to them and bring them God's message (Acts 9:11; 10:19-20). In this way the Lord also wants to make clear to us where He wants us to go and what we should do and say.

### **Acts 8:30-35 | Philip Preaches Jesus to Him**

*30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:*

*"HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;  
AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,  
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.*

*33 "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;  
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?"*

*FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.”*

*34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please [tell me], of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.*

After the directions as to where Philip should go, we do not hear that the Spirit gives directions as to when Philip should make himself known to the eunuch, or as to what he should say to the eunuch. This is not difficult for an evangelist like Philip. He knows himself guided by the Spirit and quickly notices a reason for a conversation. His whole performance contains a lot of teaching for everyone who wants to bring the gospel to people.

After the directions of the Spirit we see that Philip runs up to the chariot. Later, Ananias is reluctant to go to Saul (Acts 9:10-17) and Peter even at first pertinently refuses to go to a gentile (Acts 10:14). But Philip longs to bring the gospel to this man. The love of Christ urges him (2Cor 5:14). He does, however, proceed with deliberation. He notices what the person is doing because he hears him read the prophet Isaiah. The eunuch read aloud, which was common in those days.

Philip knows his Bible, for he recognizes what the eunuch is reading as words from the prophet Isaiah. He opens the conversation with the friendly question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” Through his question he shows his interest in the questions that will have arisen in the eunuch. Do we know the questions people have? Can we empathize with them? The eunuch’s answer shows a longing, humble heart for someone who can and does help him.

He invites Philip to sit with him. Here we also have an important clue for passing on the Word. There is no question of racial difference, but of taking a place on the level of the other. Just as Philip sits with the eunuch, so we must sit with people. The preaching of the gospel cannot be done from on high. If we are aware that we are by nature like those to whom we preach the gospel, we will sit beside them.

The place of Scripture that the eunuch reads is quoted by Luke. It is quite striking that just when the eunuch is at this Scripture, the Spirit tells Philip that he should join the chariot. At the right time, the eunuch meets Philip.

This timing is from the Lord, because this is the Scripture that speaks especially about the Lord Jesus.

The Scripture is this one: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH" (Isa 53:7-8, quoted by Philip from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament). These verses describe the suffering, death and burial of the Lord Jesus and the consequences thereof.

He was as a lamb led to the slaughter, but He did not open His mouth, He bowed under the mistreatment, He suffered willingly. The prophet Jeremiah also compares himself with a lamb, but he does not keep his mouth shut and calls for vengeance (Jer 11:19,20; 12:1-4). For the Lord Jesus the path to slaughter was much worse. He knew perfectly where He was going, but did not open His mouth. It underlines the voluntary surrender of Christ. Shearing means taking away everything that is worthy of a man, but He did not protest against the unworthy treatment that was done to Him.

Everything expresses His voluntary surrender in a way that shows how unique He is. No one can be compared with Him. He was treated in a humiliating way and His judgment was taken away, indicating that He did not even receive a just judgment, because His judgment was predetermined: He had to die.

And who thinks of "His generation", to tell something about it? He is considered so worthless that one cannot imagine anything at all about Him. However, for those who have an eye for it or receive it through teaching, like the eunuch, discover who His generation is. "His generation" can be applied to the consequences of His death, which has produced many spiritual offspring. "His generation" can also be applied to His origin, in which we may think of His existence as the eternal Son and His humble origin as Man from the carpenter's family of Joseph. No one of His contemporaries is concerned with that. To them He has been taken from the earth, His life is over and He no longer exists.

The explanation of these verses is not simple, yet the eunuch has thought about what he has read. He understands that it is about Someone, a Person. His question is a wonderful reason for Philip to preach “Jesus” to him. In Samaria he preached “Christ” (verse 5). The Samaritans had to know that the “Christ” had come. The eunuch must know that “Jesus” is the Messiah.

### **Acts 8:36-39 | Philip Baptizes the Eunuch**

*36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch \*said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” 37 <And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”> 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.*

We do not know what else they discussed on the way, but we do see the result. The eunuch accepted the Lord Jesus in faith as the Messiah and was therefore born of God (1Jn 5:1). When they come to a water, he asks to be baptized. Philip will have spoken about this too, but the desire comes from the eunuch himself.

Baptism is done on the basis of the confession of faith. There is no probation period. Philip does not have to ask permission from the apostles or the church in Jerusalem. He does it instantly. They both go down into the water, which indicates that baptism takes place by immersion.

Baptism is a personal matter, with which the church has nothing to do. The Lord – and not the church – has sent His disciples to baptize. They are just as responsible to Him for this as they are for the preaching of the Word, which is also not done by the church (the church does not teach).

When the baptism has taken place and they have come out of the water again, Philip’s task as far as the eunuch is concerned is over. Philip is snatched away by the Spirit of the Lord and placed somewhere else. Time and space mean nothing to God. This supernatural way of disappearing belongs to this beginning time which is full of wonders and signs.

Without being surprised by the sudden disappearance of his companion, the eunuch travels on his way rejoicing at the redemption he had sought in Jerusalem in vain. What he sought, he found in the Word of God, in Jesus Christ. When someone has truly found Christ, the servant disappears from sight and Christ is everything.

The eunuch and Philip did not see each other again on earth, we may assume. They did not have to. The eunuch could stand on his own two feet as an independent Christian. Servants are not allowed to bind anyone to themselves. The eunuch went back to his country and took up his daily work again. He has remained in the position he was in when he was called by the gospel (1Cor 7:24).

### **Acts 8:40 | Further Service of Philip**

*40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

Philip is not brought back by the Spirit to Samaria to become, for example, 'shepherd of the flock'. He goes where the Spirit leads him and is therefore found in Azotus, a city of the Philistines. There he proclaims the gospel, as well as to the other cities in the whole strip of Gaza, 'the seacoast' (Zep 2:4-5). From there he passes through the country, until he finally comes to Caesarea, where he apparently has settled (Acts 21:8).

## Acts 9

### **Acts 9:1-9 | The Conversion of Saul**

*1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He [said], "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." 7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

Saul was raging against the new sect, as Christendom was seen in the beginning. With this he thought he was offering a service to God (Jn 16:2-3). The Lord allowed this, because He wanted to make him, the greatest enemy of the church, the greatest witness and apostle of His sovereign grace of the church. The history of his conversion is told three times in Acts, once by Luke (here) and twice by the converted Paul himself (Acts 22:1-16; 26:1-18).

Stephen's death had only increased Saul's urge to destroy the church. The fact that he 'breathed' threats and murder indicates that he breathed it out. It came from within. Wherever he went, he breathed death for the Christians and in his anger he spat out his venom against them. In his insatiable thirst for the blood of these enemies of the religion of the fathers he did not limit himself to the persecution of them in Jerusalem and surroundings. He also sought after them in the foreign cities (Acts 26:11). Damascus was also on his list.

Damascus had a large Jewish community with several synagogues. Among them there could be some who had become Christians, but were not yet separated from the Jews. The high priest in Jerusalem still had spiritual authority over these synagogues. The jurisdiction of the Council also applied to synagogues in foreign cities. The governments of those countries allowed a certain authority because they believed that this would benefit the peace in their country.

The new movement, Christendom, is here called "the Way" (verse 2; Acts 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14). It shows the dynamics of Christendom, how it develops. It points especially to the Lord Jesus Who said: "I am the way" (Jn 14:6). Saul's intention with his journey to Damascus was to take away from there men and women belonging to "the Way" and bring them bound to Jerusalem. There they could be brought before the Council to be sentenced.

But on the way to Damascus, what happens to him is completely unforeseen and completely unwanted, even the most hated. Suddenly a light shines around him from heaven, causing him to fall to the ground. Saul must have travelled on foot. A Pharisee on horseback is not very likely. The distance between Jerusalem and Damascus is about two hundred kilometers. The journey would therefore have taken days. It is also understandable that the news of his arrival rushed ahead and the Christians in Damascus were aware of it (verse 14). In the light of the sun shining upon him, the Lord Jesus appears to this son of Abraham (verse 17; cf. Acts 7:2).

From the words the Lord speaks to Saul at His appearance, it appears that He declares Himself one with His own on earth. By persecuting His own on earth, Saul is in the process of persecuting Him. That complete unity between the glorified Lord in heaven and the church on earth will be the content of the service of Saul, later Paul. To him the mystery of Christ has been revealed, that is, the unity of the church as heavenly people with Christ glorified in heaven (Eph 3:3-11).

The authority of the Person Who speaks is undeniable. Saul directly addresses Him as "Lord", even though he did not yet know Who He was. Then he asks Who He is. These are the first words of a Saul who has been stopped and thrown down. The answer given to him by the Lord also brings him spiritually to the ground. "Jesus" spoke to him!

Jesus, thought to be dead, appeared to be alive and to be the Lord of glory. What a shocking discovery! On top of that, "Jesus" is not only the Lord of glory, but He also acknowledges the disciples that Saul wanted to capture as one with Him. The defenseless sheep he persecutes have a Defender, a Guardian in the Lord Jesus. He also discovers that zeal for Judaism means zeal against the Lord.

The conversion of Paul is an example of the conversion of Israel when they also come face to face with Him Whom they have rejected (Zec 12:10). Also, his conversion is a model for every other sinner: if he who calls himself the foremost of all sinners, the greatest of all sinners (1Tim 1:15) is saved, there is hope for every other sinner who must necessarily be a lesser one.

The Lord Jesus has begun a work that will make the greatest opponent of the Christian faith the most fervent advocate of it. In order to continue this, He gives Saul the order to stand up and enter the city. There he will be told what to do. The Lord has personally brought him to a standstill in his rage against Him. He will now call upon others to further form Saul.

Saul did not travel alone. There were men with him, presumably to help him carry out his mission. It is obvious that they were police officers of the Sanhedrin. These men had also fallen to the ground by the sudden light that also was shining around them (Acts 26:13-14). They also heard the voice, but they saw no one. It was an inexplicable phenomenon for them, for which they had no words.

They shared in all the outward characteristics associated with their leader's encounter with the Lord of glory, but they had no part in it whatsoever. The Lord Jesus did not appear to them, nor did they understand His words to Saul. They were blind and deaf to Him and His words.

In Saul's case, the effect of the encounter is all the more impressive. There is no response, his will is broken, his heart overwhelmed, his spirit contrite. He submits himself completely to the voice that speaks to him. In God's presence there is no apology or self-justification. How very differently he had imagined his arrival in Damascus. How his plan is thwarted.

Without having anything to say about it, he is taken by the hand and brought into Damascus to be joined by the company he wanted to exterminate. The hater and destroyer of the church has become like a gentle lamb

that allows itself to be led willy-nilly. He cannot help but surrender to the leadership of others, for he is blind. In this state of blindness, nothing can distract his mind. His blindness also shows him that from now on he should no longer have an eye for the splendor and pomp of the Jewish religion which, after all, is focused on appearance.

In the light of the distress of his soul, the needs of the body also disappear. He does not eat or drink anything. In these days of blindness, the terror of his rage against the Lord will have sunk in to him (1Tim 1:12-17). We read nothing of companions who visit him and want to comfort him. But the Lord is busy with him.

### Acts 9:10-16 | Conversation Between the Lord and Ananias

*10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord [said] to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."*

After His own work, which no man could do, the Lord is now going to use disciples for the further education of Saul. It is not Peter who is sent to Saul, but an ordinary disciple, hitherto unknown to us. Everything the Lord does with Saul is outside of Jerusalem. Ananias means 'Yahweh is merciful'. This is apparent from His whole dealings with Saul.

We would never have heard of Ananias if God had not wanted to use him in connection with Saul. He is an ordinary disciple, inconspicuous to people, but useful to God when He needs him. Thus, many hidden disciples have been used by God. They stand in the background of many prominent servants and have influenced their service and education.

The Lord speaks with Ananias as a man speaks with his friend. As soon as He speaks to him, there is an immediate willingness to listen. With the words "here I am, Lord" he immediately makes himself available to the Lord. He does not seem to be frightened by the voice of the Lord, accustomed as he is to a personal relationship with Him.

The Lord tells Ananias where to go and who to inquire for. He gets an address and the name of the owner of the house. There he must inquire for the man who comes from Tarsus and listens to the name Saul. Because he has to inquire for Saul in that house, the house of Judas is probably an inn with several guests. The name of the street, the Straight, contrasts with the twisted road that Saul has gone down until then. That seemed like a straight road to him, but its end would lead him into death (Pro 14:12; 16:25).

Ananias receives an additional description by which he will be able to recognize Saul and that is what Saul is doing: he is praying. So he doesn't have to be afraid of a threatening attitude with Saul. He is as gentle as a lamb. It is the first expression of the new life we hear of Saul. The dependence expressed in prayer will characterize his whole service. The Lord also tells Ananias that He has prepared Saul for his coming. He informed him in a vision of the person who will come to see him, what he will do with him and that he will regain his sight.

After the order and the extensive information about it, Ananias still has reservations. With remarkable boldness he speaks with the Lord about Saul confidentially and openly. The Lord allows him to express his objections, without interrupting him. With due respect Ananias speaks to Him as "Lord" and then tells Him what he has heard about Saul. He has heard from reliable sources how much evil this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem. He speaks about the believers in the Lord as "Your saints". This is a company which belongs to Christ and which He has separated from the world for Himself (1Cor 6:11).

Ananias also knows that Saul has authority from the chief priests to bind all those who pray to the Lord Jesus as God. It is the great annoyance of the Jews that the Christians acknowledge the Messiah as God. Indeed, it is an annoyance to see in the despised Jesus the Messiah, but it gets much worse

when they also see the Messiah as God. For the orthodox Jew, the Messiah is a man, a special man indeed, but no more than a man.

The Lord does not answer Ananias' objection with stern authority, but gives a patient explanation, although of course Ananias must obey. He speaks to him as someone worthy of His trust and explains to him what He purposes to do with Saul. Saul is a "chosen instrument [or: vessel]" for Him. With the word "vessel," the Lord wants to say that He is going to use Saul as an instrument in His service. He is going to fill this 'vessel' with commands for Him.

The working out of these commands will make Saul a witness of the Name of the Lord Jesus, to bear this Name both before Gentiles, who are ordinary people, and before kings, who are high-ranking people. He will also bear the Name of the Lord Jesus before the sons of Israel. It is remarkable that they are mentioned last.

The execution of his commissions will not go by itself, without effort, but it will cause him much suffering for the same Name's sake. That suffering starts already with his first preachings (verses 23,29).

### **Acts 9:17-19 | Ananias With Saul**

*17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,*

After the Lord's explanation of what will happen to Saul, Ananias goes to the house where Saul is. When he has entered, he lays his hands on him, just as the Lord indirectly told him when He told him about the vision Saul had seen (verse 12). The coming of Ananias confirms Saul's faith, because Ananias can tell him what happened to him, although he has not left the city.

Ananias lives in Damascus and was on Saul's list as a candidate to be killed. Now he lays his hands on him, calls him "brother", and thus repays

evil with good. He does not lay his hands on him to consecrate him for his service, not even to give him the gift of the Spirit. He lays his hands on him to accept him as a brother and to declare himself one with him in faith.

It is also a testimony that being a Christian is not a purely individual matter. Christians visit each other and need fellowship. Here two men meet who have never met before, but they are brought together by the Lord after each of them has been informed about the other by Him.

A simple disciple takes care of him who will become the great apostle and lets him experience the first fellowship so characteristic of Christians. Through the hands of this simple disciple – and not of one of the apostles – Saul also regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. God is sovereign to use whom He wills. In this way, any human presumption in the calling of this special servant is prevented.

Saul spends his first days as a Christian with the disciples in Damascus. By joining them, he also openly testifies that he believes what they believe. He will certainly have been cared for by them and thus have enjoyed the first benefits of the new company to which he has joined. He makes grateful use of the food they give him. In this way he regains strength, which he will use from now on to serve another Lord.

### **Acts 9:20-25 | Preaching of Saul and an Attack**

*20 and immediately he [began] to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and [who] had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this [Jesus] is the Christ. 23 When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through [an opening in] the wall, lowering him in a large basket.*

The effect of true conversion is an immediate confession of the Lord Jesus (Rom 10:9-10). Saul "immediately" preaches Jesus as the Son of God,

which is His personal glory. For confessing this truth, the Lord Jesus was condemned to death (Mt 26:63-66). He had already been preached by Peter as Lord and Christ, the Messiah (Acts 2:36), and Saul now preaches Him as "the Son of God".

There is no real conversion if there is no confession that Jesus is the Son of God (1Jn 4:15; 5:12). Jews do believe in the Messiah, but not that He is also God. To them, the Messiah is no more than a man, although a very privileged man. That is what Saul had believed until that moment, and he had fought with fire and sword the confession that this One is the Son of God.

Saul was called by God to preach the Lord Jesus as the Son of God. God wants to reveal His Son in him (Gal 1:16). It does not say 'to' him, but "in" him. This points to the inner and intimate connection that is made between the believer and the Lord Jesus at conversion and continues thereafter. In the name 'Son' lies the whole riches of the gospel. It is the content of his very first sermon. He proclaims a Person, not a doctrine. This Person is the eternal Son.

He proclaims Him in the synagogues. This shows what we will find in his service, that he first addresses the Jews and only then the Gentiles. Later on we regularly find that he acts in this way by first visiting the synagogue in a city where he comes.

The change that took place with Saul caused a general surprise. Likewise, any sincere conversion will cause amazement about the change it brings about. The change must be noticed, it cannot be hidden. The change with Saul is that he has joined with the Christians whom he first persecuted and that he brings to the Jews the message that he first tried to eradicate.

After an initially hesitant and cautious action, Saul becomes more and more powerful in his performance. It is possible that he has been in Arabia for three years now (Gal 1:17), has been taught by God and has now returned to Damascus. He repeats his preaching, but also adds to his preaching that Jesus is the Christ. Not only does he preach this, but he also proves it.

With his thorough knowledge of the Old Testament and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, he is extremely able to provide these proofs. This confuses the Jews in Damascus. His public confession makes him grow in

strength. Public confession of faith is also one of the conditions to grow in faith today.

When Saul is active for so many days, resistance also increases. The Jews he is trying to convince, join hands and plot to kill him. To them, Saul is an object of their hatred more than any other Christian because he is, in their eyes, an apostate Jew. From his second letter to the Corinthians, we can deduce that the Jews managed to make the ethnarch or governor their ally, probably by presenting Saul as a great danger to society (2Cor 11:32-33).

He soon shares in the fate of the Lord Jesus. It is a quick fulfillment of the words that the Lord spoke to Ananias about the suffering of Saul for the Name of the Lord (verse 16). Their plot, however, became known to Saul. Luke does not tell us how this happened. The plot is reason for him to flee. While the ethnarch or governor has the gates guarded, Saul escapes their attack.

The escape is not spectacular. The Lord could have blinded the guards and opened the gates as He did earlier at the deliverance of Peter and John from prison (Acts 5:19). Saul escapes in a classical way. He now has some disciples. One night they take him to a hole in the city wall through which they lower him in a large basket. In this way he, who will become the great apostle, dangles in a basket along the city wall, depending on his disciples. They let the rope go until he finally lands safely at the bottom of the wall and can make his way, as we may assume, toward Jerusalem.

### **Acts 9:26-30 | Saul in Jerusalem**

*26 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic [Jews]; but they were attempting to put him to death. 30 But when the brethren learned [of it], they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.*

When Saul comes to Jerusalem, he doesn't seek out his old friends, the Pharisees and chief priests, but wants to join his new friends, the disciples. They are very suspicious, however, and it is not easy for him to join them. They know him as a persecutor and are afraid that he is playing a trick to get among them and then arrest them all. They simply do not believe that he has become a disciple. It seems that they have heard nothing of his conversion. And if they have heard anything about it, they have their reservations about it. Saul does not blame them for this attitude.

The Lord gives an outcome through one of His servants, Barnabas, of whom we have heard before (Acts 4:36-37). He is a true son of consolation who brings people together. He is always present when problems arise and brings a solution to them. He has an eye for the work of God and the work of the enemy.

Barnabas takes Saul with him and brings him to the apostles. He reports on Saul's conversion because of his meeting with the Lord and that the Lord spoke to him. The proofs of his conversion are also mentioned by Barnabas when he recounts how Saul boldly spoke in the Name of Jesus in Damascus. Then Saul is taken up in their midst.

We are not told where Barnabas got his information, but he is a reliable and 'good man', so his testimony is believed. We learn from this that no believer can be accepted based on his own testimony, but on the basis of the conclusive testimony of others who can testify of an encounter with the Lord and give the proof of it. This can be done verbally, as here, but also in writing (Acts 18:27; 2Cor 3:1). Later, Paul will even write a whole letter, the letter to Philemon, in which he encourages others to accept a new convert, for whom there were no warm feelings either (Phlm 1:10-17).

The acceptance of Saul in the Jerusalem church means a lot more than just to celebrate the Supper of the Lord with them. He "is with them, moving about freely". This indicates that he not only visited the meetings of the Christians, but also participated in the whole church life. How essential it is not to limit our fellowship as Christians to a few gatherings, but to live it constantly. Saul identifies himself completely with them, while still fulfilling his own specific mission. Unity is not uniformity.

Barnabas' testimony of the frankness with which Saul spoke in Damascus is confirmed by Saul's performance in Jerusalem. Despite the murderous spirit this evoked among the Jews in Damascus, which forced him to flee that city, Saul also speaks boldly in the Name of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Through his earlier experience he knows that in Jerusalem his message will encounter even greater resistance. That is what is happening. He focuses especially on the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews. He speaks with them and argues with them. In every way he wants to try to convince them of the Name of the Lord. But the truth reveals the hatred of the heart. They try to kill him. Before they can execute their plan, the Lord makes their plan clear to him (Acts 22:17-21) and tells him to leave Jerusalem.

Just as in Damascus, there are believers in Jerusalem who help him to flee. Again, ordinary means are used to escape an attack. The fact that they want to kill him in Jerusalem must have been a great disappointment for him. However, the Lord is in the process of carrying out His plan with him and in doing so He makes use of the enemies of the gospel. While Jerusalem wants to get rid of the presence of the preacher of Christ, just as they have got rid of Christ Himself, God uses this to send him to the nations.

Jerusalem thus loses its status as the center of world evangelism. This center is moved to Antioch, as we will see later (Acts 13:1-3). Accompanied by the "brothers" – a beautiful word of fellowship – he comes to Caesarea, from where they send him to Tarsus. God uses the brothers to take him to the next station in his service to his Lord. In this way Saul lets himself be led by the Lord and by the brothers.

### **Acts 9:31 | The Church Has Peace and Increases**

*31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.*

After the persecutions, a time of peace began in the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. The gospel was preached there and as a result several churches were formed. Yet Luke speaks of the church and not of churches. [The fact that Luke does not do this here does not mean that it does not happen at all, see Gal 1:22; 1Thes 2:14.]

In this way he emphasizes the unity of the one church, even though in practice we see that there are several local churches. Each local church is – at least it should be – a reflection of the total church.

According to the word of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:8) the gospel has been brought to those regions, including Galilee, and the church is founded there. Before we leave that area to follow the work of the Spirit to the ends of the earth, Luke tells us some beautiful characteristics of the church in those regions. We can pray that the Lord will cultivate such characteristics in the local or regional church also today. The peace of the churches will have been the result of the conversion of Saul, which stopped the engine of persecution.

This peace will relate not only to the outward circumstances, but also, and above all, to the inward, to the peace in the heart of believers. This time and mind of peace gives the opportunity for spiritual growth, for being built up through the teaching of God's Word.

Times of peace must also in our days be used well by believers to build themselves up in their most holy faith (Jude 1:20). Teaching that is truly ingrained in the heart will, as it were, automatically result in a walk in the fear of the Lord. Walking in the fear of the Lord is not a walk in anxiety for the Lord, but a walk in reverence for the Lord.

The result of this in turn is the increase of the church. A walk in reverence for the Lord attracts people. When people come to conversion and are added to the church, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. That work is presented here as "comfort".

### **Acts 9:32-35 | Healing of Aeneas**

*32 Now as Peter was traveling through all [those regions], he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. 33 There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. 34 Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. 35 And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.*

After Luke, led by the Holy Spirit, described Saul's conversion and his first activities as a Christian, he again turns our eyes to Peter and his service.

The two histories that follow at the end of this chapter stand between the conversion of Saul and that of Cornelius. The conversion of Saul is the beginning of the great harvest of which Cornelius is the beginning. The question could then arise: Has Israel come to an end? We see the answer in Peter's two wonders from which we can learn that God has not rejected His people forever.

Peter travels everywhere to strengthen and encourage the new churches. On his itinerary he also visits the saints who live in Lydda. The church there may have come into being through the work of the evangelist Philip, who has traveled through the country from Asdod to Caesarea, proclaiming the gospel to all the cities (Acts 8:40). Here the believers are called "saints" again, as in verses 13,41. The saints are the special company of people who no longer belong to the world, but to the Lord Jesus. They form a new and separate company in the world that has a new object of love: the glorified Christ.

Among the saints, Peter encounters a man named Aeneas who has been lying paralyzed in bed for eight years. We can see in him a picture of Judaism that has no power of itself to do what God asks in His Word. Peter speaks to the cripple as he did to the lame at the door of the temple (Acts 3:6).

He mentions his name and points to Jesus Christ Who heals him. Peter has no power to heal anyone. Only the Lord Jesus can do that. Peter also does not say 'will heal you', but "heals you". Peter is only the instrument of the Lord's power. The power comes through Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah. The Lord Jesus guarantees immediate and perfect health.

Peter commands him to get up and make his bed. Aeneas responds immediately and gets up. His healing is a clear testimony of the Name of the Lord Jesus. The result of his healing is that all who live in Lydda and Saron and see Aeneas turn to the Lord. The wonder works that hearts are turned to the Lord and not to people.

Saron is a fertile coastal plain that stretches from Lydda to Mount Carmel. The fertility turns out to affect not only the soil, but also the spiritual fruit that can now be found there through the turning to the Lord. Here we find a spiritual pre-fulfillment of the word of Isaiah: "Sharon will be a pasture land for flocks" (Isa 65:10a).

**Acts 9:36-43 | Resurrection of Dorcas**

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated [in Greek] is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. 37 And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." 39 So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. 40 But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. 41 And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42 It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner [named] Simon.

In Joppa, about nineteen kilometers from Lydda, there is also a church. That church had the privilege to have sister Tabitha in their midst. Her Aramean name means 'gazelle', just like the translation of her name in Greek, Dorcas. She was "a disciple", which means that she was a follower of the Lord Jesus. That she was truly worthy of that name was evidenced by the testimony given of her. She was characterized by "labor of love" (1Thes 1:3). They were works of faith, the proof that she had faith. She was the opposite of Aeneas.

While she was engaged in her "labor of love", she became ill and died. Busy with things that are pleasing to the Lord does not mean immunity to sickness and death. What seemed to be a blow for the church and for those she served with her good works and blessings becomes a testimony to the Lord.

In the first place, we see faith in those who took care of her after she died. They wash her and then lay her in an upper room. Normally, after she had been washed, she would have been anointed and buried immediately afterward. Yet they don't do that, but put her in an upper room. Perhaps

they thought of two Old Testament resurrections in which the dead were also laid in an upper room (1Kgs 17:19; 2Kgs 4:21).

In any case, they show faith in the possibility that Tabitha will arise, because the disciples send two men to Lydda to fetch Peter. They are two men to underline the reliability of the question (cf. 2Cor 13:1). They get the message to tell Peter to come immediately.

Luke does not mention that they have to tell Peter the reason of their request. We know that it was not to attend the funeral, but to prevent it. We also don't read that Peter has to speak to the Lord about it first. He sees in the request a clear instruction from the Lord to go along. He lets himself being ordered to come and goes along.

As soon as he has arrived, he is brought into the upper room. There are all the widows that Tabitha has been serving. They have suffered a great loss because of her death. What they show to Peter are the proofs of true religion (Isa 58:7), the opposite of pious talk without providing for need (Jam 2:15-16). Through what the widows show of Tabitha's works, we see that her works follow her (cf. Rev 14:13).

Peter knows what to do. To do so, he must be alone with the Lord, without anyone to distract him. Only with the body and the Lord does Peter kneel down and pray. This gives him the conviction of the will of God that he can speak the word of authority to Tabitha to arise. For this he turns to the body. After his commanding words to arise, Tabitha opens her eyes. She sees Peter and sits up. Tabitha arises by prayer and the word of power.

Only when she sits, Peter gives her his hand and raises her up. Then he calls the saints and the widows and presents her alive. Through being raised, she is able to serve again. It is an indication that our ability to serve God is not limited to this life, but that it continues forever after the resurrection (Rev 22:3-5). This is because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Eternity is full of activity, there will be no boredom.

The result of the resurrection of Tabitha is that "many" in Joppa believe in the Lord. In Lydda, after a smaller wonder, "all" who lived in Lydda and Saron turn to the Lord. The wonder of the revival of Tabitha is bigger, but the number of conversions is smaller, because there are "many", not "all".

After the resurrection of Tabitha, Peter does not return to Lydda, but stays in Joppa for a considerable time. Servants do not always have to be on the road. Especially after a 'successful' service it is necessary to be alone with the Lord, to think and pray and wait for new directions from Him.

For his stay in Joppa, Peter, the great apostle of circumcision, takes up residence with a simple man, a tanner. The profession of tanner was considered impure by the Jews. Such a man was engaged in the processing of skins, especially to make leather water bags from them. Does Peter's stay with this man suggest that God can turn something impure into something pure, such as a leather bag containing pure water?

## Acts 10

### **Acts 10:1-8 | Cornelius Is Visited by an Angel**

*1 Now [there was] a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the [Jewish] people and prayed to God continually. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had [just] come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" 4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 Now dispatch [some] men to Joppa and send for a man [named] Simon, who is also called Peter; 6 he is staying with a tanner [named] Simon, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, 8 and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

In this chapter it becomes clear for the first time that salvation extends to the nations. This has already been preceded by God's work among the Samaritans in Acts 8. Samaritans are not Jews either, but are still connected to them, even though they are a mixed population. The eunuch is also an example of someone who did not belong to the Jews, a true Gentile. Nevertheless, he had a certain connection with Jerusalem. He sympathized with the Jewish religion and because of this sympathy he had visited the city.

In this chapter we see how the history of the church is continued by opening up the church to the nations that have no connection whatsoever with the Jewish people. The most characteristic of this new development is that the nations are incorporated into the church of Jesus Christ without being circumcised.

While Saul, as the apostle of the nations, has already been converted, Peter is still used to open up salvation to the nations as well. After the conversion of the Samaritans and the eunuch, the conversion of Cornelius is proof of the entrance of the nations into salvation in the full sense. Cornelius is

converted apart from Jerusalem. His conversion takes place in Caesarea, where he is visited by Peter and hears the gospel. The name Caesarea reminds us of the Roman emperor. Cornelius is also part of the Roman army.

Here it is fully clear that God's favor is not limited to the Jews and also that it is not necessary to become a Jew to participate in the salvation that is in Christ. The conversion of Cornelius does not yet reveal the truth of the church as a body united with the Head in heaven. It is the preparation for it because someone from the nations is accepted without becoming a Jew.

A beautiful testimony is given of Cornelius. What is said of him is extraordinary for a Gentile. On top of that he is in a social position, where wickedness is practiced in the most brutal way, that is in the army. He is not a proselyte, but he sympathizes very much with the Jewish religion. His whole attitude indicates that he has already been converted, but that he has yet to be saved. So Peter says later in his account in Jerusalem (Acts 11:13-14).

His whole house is under his God-fearing influence. Personally he is pious. Toward God he is full of reverence. He loves the people of God, which is shown by the alms he gives to the people. His life is dominated by dependence on God, which is shown by the statement that he constantly prays to God.

Such an attitude and prayer life do not remain without an answer from God. God shows Himself to people who pray. He uses a vision to address Himself to Cornelius. He does this at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer and of the evening burnt offering (see explanation at Acts 3:1). At that hour, Cornelius sees "clearly", not vaguely, an angel of God coming to him. The angel greets him by mentioning his name. With this he says as it were that God knows him. Very surprised, Cornelius gazes at the angel, while a feeling of great fear overwhelms him. We see this fear more often in people when they see angels (Lk 1:12; 2:9-10).

Then he asks the question about the reason for his coming. The angel reassures him. Not only his name, but also his alms and his prayers are known to God. These are all constantly before God. They are in His thoughts and in His time He goes to work with them. God never forgets anything that

someone sincerely does for Him or says to Him. In His time He will also respond. For Cornelius that time has now come.

God lets Cornelius know through the angel that he must now send men to Joppa to invite Peter. The angel can give directions to do something, but he cannot bring the gospel. The message of grace cannot be brought by an angel, but only by a man who himself has become the object of grace. The angel says where he can find Peter and that is in the house of a certain Simon. He tells him Simon's profession and where the house is.

The housing of a tanner does not immediately evoke the image of a luxury accommodation. It stinks a lot. Something has already been said about the symbolic meaning of the profession of tanner in the explanation at Acts 9:43. Here something is added which also has a symbolic meaning. The house is said to be a house "by the sea". The sea is a symbol of the sea of the nations. It is an indication that the gospel is for the nations and that Peter is the instrument to open the gospel for the nations.

When the angel has left, Cornelius immediately takes action. He does not have to think about it. The task is clear. He calls two servants and a God-fearing soldier. As boss Cornelius must have been a very amiable person who had a confidential relationship with his staff. He informs them about the angel's visit and what the angel said to him. The men leave without asking questions. Cornelius acts obediently to God and his men act obediently to Cornelius.

### **Acts 10:9-16 | Peter's Vision**

*9 On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; 11 and he \*saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, 12 and there were in it all [kinds of] four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. 13 A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." 15 Again a voice [came] to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no*

*[longer] consider unholy.” 16 This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.*

The hearers have been prepared by God; now the preacher has yet to be prepared. There is not only a praying seeker, there is also a praying servant. Peter seeks solitude with God. He devotes himself to prayer in order to serve with God’s Word (Acts 6:4). Peter also sees a vision through which God prepares him for the visit of the men of Cornelius. He gets that vision when he is hungry and desires food. God uses this practical need to make him receptive to the message He has for him.

While the food is being prepared, Peter sees the sky opened up. He sees something descending from it that is reminiscent of a great sheet. He also notices that the sheet is lowered by the four corners to the ground. Furthermore he sees in the sheet “all [kinds of] four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air”. The fish are missing. What he sees are the animals that also went into the ark with Noah, where also the fish were missing (Gen 7:14). All these animals came into the saving ark and were spared from the flood.

Noah had clean and unclean animals in the ark. God saved all those animals. Here God spans a great time arc through which He connects the history of the flood with this time in which the gospel is opened to all people, Jews and Gentiles, as the saving gospel. Just as all the animals that came into the ark were saved through their stay in the ark, so there is salvation for all who are in Christ. This is what Peter sees in the vision.

This vision contains several indications of the gospel by which the church is expanded. We see that it comes from heaven, which points to the origin of the gospel and also to the origin of the church. Attention is also drawn to the fact that the sheet is great, that it is lowered by the four corners and that the earth is the place on which it is lowered.

The fact that it is a great sheet reflects the size of the church: there is room for everyone. The four corners indicate the expanse of the gospel: it extends to everyone, to all corners of the earth. The whole earth is the area where it is preached. The mixing of pure and impure animals and birds shows that the distinction between pure and impure is gone. There is no partiality with God (Rom 10:12-13).

The order to Peter comes from heaven. He is ordered to get up, kill and eat. Peter reacts shocked. No matter how hungry he is, he doesn't dare. As a pious Jew, he still keeps the food laws, which forbid the eating of unclean animals (Lev 11:46-47; Deu 14:3-21). The Jews had to keep these food laws in order to keep themselves clean from the nations. Food is what forms a human being. If Peter eats the food the nations eat, he will look like them.

But now the sheet descends from heaven. All those animals in the sheet together form the church, as it were, which consists of all people who have come to faith, both Jews and Gentiles. The barrier of the dividing wall has been broken down (Eph 2:14), food laws do not apply to the church (Col 2:20-21), because the church is from heaven and for heaven. The food laws are for the earth and an earthly people.

Peter must be led to see the new things as something that comes from the Lord. This will take him a lot of trouble. Old prejudices die only slowly, especially if they are prejudices that have always been part of the right religion. It is a problem of his conscience. We can also have our certainties about what is good and yet still not dare to implement it because our conscience contradicts it. The Lord understands this and makes sure that we do not have to do something with a bad conscience. However, if God says that we can or should eat, we should not say 'no' because of our conscience. Peter is now told that God is making a change in His earlier precepts.

The cross of Christ has changed everything and removed the distinction between Jew and Gentile. To the Christian, the food laws have no meaning at all. God can give the law of pure and unclean animals; He can also undo it for a certain group of people. This group of people includes all those who are in Christ, for whom there is therefore no more condemnation (Rom 8:1) just as there was no judgment for all in the ark.

For Peter to properly understand the meaning of the vision, he is told three times that what God has cleansed, Peter may not consider to be unholy. More things occurred three times in Peter's life: three times he denied the Lord and three times the Lord asked him whether he loved Him.

After it has been said to him three times, the object is taken up into the sky again. Here we see the picture of the church confirmed. The fact that the sheet descends from heaven indicates that the church is of heavenly

origin. The fact that the sheet is taken up into heaven again indicates that the destination of the church is also heavenly.

### Acts 10:17-23 | The Messengers of Cornelius

*17 Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." 21 Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" 22 They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was [divinely] directed by a holy angel to send for you [to come] to his house and hear a message from you." 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.*

The vision he has just seen is not immediately clear to him, but it will soon be so. While he is thinking about it, the men of Cornelius appear at the gate of Simon's house. Here again we see such wonderful timing of the Lord that we also saw in Philip who was also with the eunuch just at the right time (Acts 8:29-30). The Spirit leads Peter further. He does not explain the vision to him either, but prepares him further for its meaning. He tells Peter that three men are looking for him. He orders him to get up, go downstairs and go with them without misgivings. As an extra certainty, the Spirit says that He has sent them.

We can apply the statement that Peter has to go downstairs in such a way that Peter has to get rid of his prejudices and go to the level of the Gentiles. He must not think any further about whether or not to go with them, but must go with them without misgivings. It is really a command of God's Spirit. Then Peter obeys and goes downstairs.

He tells the men that they have found whom they are looking for. He wants to know what the purpose of their coming is. That is still unknown

to him. The Spirit did not tell him that. The men of Cornelius tell Peter the reason for their coming. They give a beautiful testimony of Cornelius (verse 22). It is the same testimony the Holy Spirit gave of him in verse 2. His surroundings know him in the same way. It is beautiful if we can also pass on such testimonies from fellow believers to others.

After the men have told the purpose of their visit, Peter invites them in and gives them lodging. Simon will have given him access to his house. After a good night's rest, the men return with Peter to Cornelius. Also "some of the brethren" – there are six of them (Acts 11:12) – of Joppa go with them. It will have encouraged Peter that the local believers show so much interest in this work that they sent a delegation with him. He acts in fellowship with his brothers. It is a matter of the church.

### **Acts 10:24-27 | Peter Comes to Cornelius**

*24 On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped [him]. 26 But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am [just] a man." 27 As he talked with him, he entered and \*found many people assembled.*

When Peter comes to Cornelius, he appears to be on the lookout. Full of expectation he looked forward to the coming of Peter. He also invited others to come and listen to the words that Peter will speak. It concerns his relatives and close friends with whom he speaks confidentially about the things of God because those things also have their interest. It is an expression of the new life because that is attracted by those who also own it or are interested in it.

They must have heard a lot about Peter and be very impressed by this special servant of God. As soon as Peter enters, Cornelius goes to meet him, falls at his feet and worships him. What Cornelius did was not good, but it showed his mind to fall as a Roman captain at the feet of a simple fisherman from Galilee. Peter, however, does not accept any man's homage (cf. Rev 19:10). Homage is only for God. People are only servants.

What Peter says to Cornelius is a condemnation of papacy. The pope can be worshiped. He boasts of continuing in Peter's footsteps, because he

imagines himself to be the successor of Peter who, according to him, is the first pope. This abominable presumption will be judged by God (Rev 17:15-18; 18:1-9,21-24).

Peter then enters the house with Cornelius. There he finds the whole company invited by Cornelius. In verse 22 there is only mention of Cornelius as the one who needs to hear those words. But he is not the only one who wants to hear those words. He has invited many more. That also means that he has talked about it with others and is not ashamed of the Name of God. It is also an additional proof of his firm trust in what God has said about the coming of Peter.

### Acts 10:28-29 | Peter Tells Why He Has Come

*28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and [yet] God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29 That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."*

Peter begins by saying that they know that he, as a Jew, is not permitted to join a stranger, but to remain separated from the nations. This prohibition is based on the law (Deu 7:1-4,6; cf. Jn 18:28). When we read that part of the law, we read about the prohibition to join the nations, but nowhere does it say that contact with the nations is forbidden. This has to do with the exaggerated explanations of the rabbis.

In order to prevent another catastrophe such as the exile to Babylon, which was the result of the mixing of Israel with the nations, the rabbis put up a fence around the law. They tightened the commandment to avoid breaking the law and thus make the law tighter than God gave it. They really wanted to take God's law seriously, but in their zeal for it, they went too far in its application.

Even Peter was entangled in it and God had to make that clear to him. This is what Peter tells when he says that God has shown him he should "not call any man unholy or unclean". Peter then makes the application of what God has shown him in the great sheet. He has understood what God meant by it and he has also taken the teaching to heart. He has understood

that when God considers people to be clean, he must do the same. That is why he accepted the invitation and has now come to Cornelius without even raising any objection.

By the way, removing the difference between clean and unclean does not mean that there can now be free association with the world. Friendship with the world is still forbidden. Light and darkness cannot coexist and friendship with the world is enmity against God (2Cor 6:14; Jam 4:4). We cannot avoid our contact with the world (1Cor 5:9-10), but we may not make friendship with it.

It is about the inward attitude toward the world that we know has rejected the Lord Jesus and still does. The Lord Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19), but it was those tax collectors and sinners who had a sincere interest in Him. He did not in any way participate in their wrong practices. The Pharisees did not have such contact and condemned the Lord for it. He was a friend to repentant tax collectors and sinners, but an enemy to the world.

Peter still does not know what he had to go to Cornelius for. He therefore asks him. It is important that Cornelius himself tells what he needs. We also have to ask questions first and learn to listen to what occupies people. In the same way Philip approached the eunuch with a question (Acts 8:30).

### **Acts 10:30-33 | Cornelius Explains the Invitation**

*30 Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, 31 and he \*said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon [the] tanner by the sea.' 33 So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."*

In his explanation, Cornelius begins by mentioning that the origin of his request lies in prayer. Cornelius was a man who had persistently gone to the Lord. He did not pray just occasionally for a cause, but constantly.

God wants to be prayed to. He will answer that. The answer for Cornelius came from heaven in the form of a man wearing a shining garment. God's answer radiates beauty. Cornelius repeats what the angel said in verse 4. In verse 2 the order is still: alms and prayers. This is how it must have been for Cornelius, but God puts the prayer of Cornelius first and then speaks about the alms.

Cornelius is a born-again man. Only born-again people seek God in truth. He is also a man who does not yet know the gospel of salvation (Acts 11:14). He has life from God, but not yet the certainty of salvation, because then someone receives the Holy Spirit as a seal of that salvation (Eph 1:13). Peter must speak those words of salvation. For this Cornelius had to have Peter called from Joppa. The angel told Cornelius exactly whom to call, where that person was and also why he had to call him. He also got the certainty that Peter would come.

Cornelius further tells how he immediately did what the angel said and sent Peter a message. He praises Peter for coming. This is a holy moment and a holy place. The presence of Peter and the six brothers of the church in Joppa gives to all the feeling that they are in the presence of God. This is how Cornelius expresses it. It is the right atmosphere to hear the words of the Lord. Peter is allowed to tell what has been commanded to him by the Lord. Cornelius and the others are not waiting for anything else.

### Acts 10:34-43 | The Preaching of Peter

*34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand [now] that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 [You know of] Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and [how] He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen*

*beforehand by God, [that is], to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."*

Peter begins his gospel speech which is the key that opens the door of the gospel to the nations. This is a very different speech than in Acts 2. He knows that this is a different audience and takes this into account in his speech.

In his first words, he acknowledges the sovereignty of God in removing any distinction between people. It is not about whether someone is a member of the right people by birth, but whether someone fears God and shows that by doing what is pleasing to Him. These are strange words from the mouth of a Jewish man, but they are the thoughts of God. Peter begins to learn the lesson. Cornelius is such a man who fears God and works righteousness. Peter acknowledges that he is pleasing to God.

In his preaching Peter speaks about the great facts of salvation in connection with the Lord Jesus. He speaks about His life, His death, His resurrection and His glorification. When God sent the word to the sons of Israel, He did so by proclaiming Jesus Christ as a word of peace. But the coming of Jesus Christ is not only important for Israel. Peter immediately makes that clear by speaking of Him as "Lord of all". He is not only Lord of the Israelites (Acts 2:36), but the Lord of all nations.

Then Peter connects to their knowledge about the actions of John the baptist. From that moment on he takes his hearers to Jesus Christ as John the baptist pointed out to Him. It is important to always bring forward the great truths about the life and work of the Lord Jesus.

Peter speaks about Him as "Jesus of Nazareth". He is so because of His birth and the years He spent in Nazareth, from the moment He went to live there until His performance among the people. It is the Name that evokes contempt in people (Jn 1:46). To God He is the chosen, beloved Son. He has anointed Him. The anointing expresses God's pleasure, His election. God was with Him because He always did what was pleasing to Him.

His anointing also took place in view of His service. The Holy Spirit gave Him the power for His service. It is to be clothed with power that has come upon Him, just as it happened later with the disciples (Lk 24:49). We are also anointed (2Cor 1:21), because we also need this anointing for our service. The service of the Lord Jesus implied that He did good, healed and broke the power of the devil. In everything He did, God was with Him, for everything He did was a joy to God's heart.

Peter, together with the apostles, can call himself a witness to all of this. He has seen what the Lord Jesus did in the land of the Jews, Judea, and in Jerusalem, thus in the heart of the Jewish religion. That is where He was most opposed in His service and that is where they finally killed Him by hanging Him on a cross. That is where the foundation was laid for all doing good, healing and the breaking of the devil and his works. There God gave His Son to nullify sin for all who believe in Him.

But His death was not His end. How could that be! People may reject Him as despicable and think they have got rid of Him, but for God it is different. It is precisely in His rejection that God has found the greatest reason for His pleasure. Precisely in His rejection the Lord Jesus has fulfilled everything that God has asked of Him. That is why God has shown His convincing pleasure in Him and His work by raising Him up on the third day. In this way He gave Him the opportunity to reveal Himself to various persons after His resurrection.

He did not appear to the unbelieving people, but to believers. He appeared to many to give the undeniable testimony of His resurrection (1Cor 15:4-8). In the resurrection there can only be fellowship with those who have Him as their life, who share His resurrection life. We live in the age of faith, without seeing (2Cor 5:7), but the resurrection has been recorded as a fact observed by many. Peter and the other apostles have been commissioned to bear witness to a resurrected Christ on earth (Acts 1:22). Paul will become the witness of the glorified Lord in heaven Whom he saw on his way to Damascus.

Peter has not yet indicated in his speech that salvation is also for the Gentiles. So far it is only a Christ for Israel. The command to preach about Him has been given in view of God's earthly people. That is why Peter,

at the end of his speech, presents Him as Judge of the living and the dead appointed by God. This is the final piece of Christ's coming for His people. Then Peter says that the testimony is not limited to Israel, but that there is forgiveness of sins through His Name for everyone who believes in Christ. All of the above is necessary to come to this point. It is all about faith in Him. This has been pointed out by all prophets. The prophets have also pointed out that there is forgiveness for everyone who believes in Him. At this point the breakthrough takes place.

### **Acts 10:44-48 | Consequences of the Speech**

*44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we [did], can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.*

Even during the speech, the Holy Spirit suddenly falls upon all those who hear the word of salvation. The gift of the Holy Spirit, the seal of Christian blessing among the Jews and the fruit of the work of salvation accomplished by the Lord Jesus, is given to the nations as much as to the Jews. The order we find here is:

1. hearing and believing the Word,
2. then receiving the Holy Spirit
3. and then being baptized (verse 48).

The Spirit is given here after the testimony of the raising up of the Lord Jesus, of which they apparently had not heard. They did know about His life and His death. Without first being baptized – as with the conversion of the Jews in Acts 2 – and without the laying on of hands – as with the conversion of the Samaritans in Acts 8 – the Holy Spirit falls upon all those who hear the words spoken by Peter. Here we see how Gentiles are added

to the church of God through the gospel. This is still God's way of doing things (Eph 1:13).

The believing Jews, here emphatically called "the circumcised believers", are perplexed. They cannot understand what is happening. It is difficult for Jews to accept that the nations will be in the same relationship to God as they, the chosen people, in an even simpler way, because they, Jews, had to be baptized first.

God is tearing down the borders around Israel. He proves that He accepts the nations. He emphasizes that by linking the wonder of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the sign of speaking in languages, just like in Acts 2. Here too this is the sign that God is addressing all nations. This is a sign for believing Jews who are non-believers in a certain respect because they cannot believe that the Gentiles are also accepted by God (cf. 1Cor 14:21-22).

The Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit without first becoming Jews. God does not require them to confess that they are unclean because they belong to the nations, but accepts them without condition. They must not even be led into Judaism. They belong to the new herd outside the fold of Judaism (Jn 10:16). They now belong to the church. For receiving the Holy Spirit, faith alone is sufficient. If God does not attach any further conditions to it, people are not allowed to do so by commanding them to keep the law or something of it.

If God then adds them to the body solely on the basis of faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit, people cannot deny them access to the circle of believers on earth that takes place through baptism with water. Baptism used to mean that someone was baptized to join the Jewish people, the proselyte baptism. Here baptism means entering Christendom. Thus Cornelius and his people are baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ.

After Cornelius and his family are baptized, the service of Peter is over. They want him to stay a few more days, eager as they are for more teaching. This request will no doubt have been met by Peter.

## Acts 11

### **Acts 11:1-3 | Peter Accused**

*1 Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, 3 saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."*

In the first part of this chapter, Peter recounts in detail once more what happened in the house of Cornelius and what preceded it. First, in Acts 10, we have Luke's account of everything that Cornelius and Peter have experienced. Later in that chapter, during the meeting between Petrus and Cornelius, some things from that report are recounted in what Peter tells Cornelius.

We have a detailed report twice, with some details even told three times. That is not without reason. It is clear that the Holy Spirit places special emphasis on this history, just like the history of the conversion of Saul, which we also find three times in this book. These are events that play a key role in this book. They are all about God's great work among the nations. As mentioned before, Peter here uses for the third time the keys that the Lord has given him for the kingdom of heaven.

We see in Cornelius that the Gentiles as a group are accepted into the church of God. By placing this acceptance in the hands of the leader of the believers from the circumcision, God makes sure that the unity between the believers from the circumcision and the believers from the Gentiles is preserved and underlined. Peter gives this report before the apostles and the church in Jerusalem. They have heard that the nations have also accepted the Word of God.

At first this caused a great shock to these believers, just as Peter did not want to know about it at first. There is still no place in their minds for a separate place for Christians, apart from Judaism. To them, Christendom is a new Jewish movement. To them, everything in Christendom is still connected to Judaism. What happened in Caesarea, however, happened

outside of Judaism. But for the time being it is impossible for them to accept that as a matter from God.

To explain this new development, Peter comes up to Jerusalem. There he clashes with “those who were circumcised”, who are Christians from Judaism, but who are still imprisoned in their Jewish way of thinking. For example, they believe that a Gentile must be circumcised in order to receive full blessing. We will get more details about this in Acts 15.

Instead of rejoicing, they criticize what Peter did. They have heard what he has done and attached their conclusions to it. Peter is judged and condemned because of his going to uncircumcised, i.e. Gentiles, and they assume that he also ate with them.

It is a warning for us to beware that we do not just judge someone by appearances. Let us first ask for an explanation. The Lord can send someone and let him act as He sees fit. Still, their reaction is understandable, because we remember how difficult it was for Peter to cross that threshold. He has been just like them.

But their remark about eating with Cornelius goes beyond the observation that he went inside. That’s how it goes with rumors. They have heard of him going in and add that he also ate there. They start from what they judge to be certain. To them, it can’t be otherwise than that he also ate with these Gentiles. And that in turn means that he has eaten things that are forbidden for a Jew, or that he has eaten things that have been prepared in a wrong way.

It could be, for example, that he ate meat cooked in milk, which is a custom among the Gentiles. The law forbids the cooking of meat in milk in certain cases, such as boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk (Deu 14:21b). To prevent this from happening, there is a complete separation between the preparation of milk and the preparation of meat. Here we have another example of the erection of a fence around the law. It is again that exaggeration to not violate the law, but by which the commandment becomes more burdensome than God purposed. As said, it is also just an assumption here.

### **Acts 11:4-18 | Peter Responds**

*4 But Peter began [speaking] and [proceeded] to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, 5 “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a*

*vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, 6 and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' 10 This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. 11 And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were [staying], having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. 13 And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; 14 and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as [He did] upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as [He gave] to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance [that leads] to life."*

Peter responds calmly to the accusations. After all, a gentle answer turns away wrath (Pro 15:1a). The remarks of the brethren from the circumcision gives Peter the opportunity to tell what special things God has done in the house of this Gentile. His orderly explanation shows that he is calm and does not come to an incoherent story under the pressure of reproaches.

Because Luke presents Peter's account again after the account he already gave under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in Acts 10, what happened in the house of Cornelius gets a special characteristic. It is in fact an event that ushers in a new era and for which the spiritual eyes of the heart of the Jews must now be opened, or rather, the blindness of which must be removed.

Peter wants to make it clear through his account that it is a work of God and that he should not have opposed it, nor should they. The result of this account is that the apostles and the believers glorify God (verse 18). Peter

can do his report without being interrupted. He tells in detail what it took to get him to this point. They shouldn't think that he just went in with those Gentiles. It has cost the Lord a lot of trouble to get him to do so.

He starts to tell where he was and what he saw when he was in a trance. Where he was and what he saw is known to us from the previous chapter. Here he adds that the object "came right down to me", which means that he experienced the vision as a vision specially meant for him. He also says "I had fixed my gaze on it". He took in everything well, so that he can now tell it as something engraved in his memory. It has not been a momentary sight.

The words which have been spoken to him from heaven, he can also repeat literally. In the repetition of his answer he goes a bit further than with the event. Then he said that he had never eaten anything unholy or impure; here he says that nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered his mouth. By mentioning that it happened up to three times, he underlines once more the certainty of the event. Any doubt as to its authenticity is unfounded.

Peter then recounts how immediately following the vision the three men sent by Cornelius appeared at him. Without saying anything further about the conversation with the men, he says that the Spirit told him to go with them without misgivings. Three events in a row convinced Peter that God wanted to use him to go to a Gentile: the vision, the three men who came to get him and the Spirit Who told him to go with them. These testimonies must also appeal to his audience.

Then he includes in his account the six brothers who went with him to Cornelius and entered there. He speaks of them as "these six brethren", whereby he can point to them. So they also went with him to Jerusalem to confirm his testimony of the events with Cornelius. The apostles and the brethren in Jerusalem see a total of seven witnesses standing in front of them.

Peter goes on to recount how Cornelius reported on what he had seen, the assignment he had been given to send to Joppa and to invite Peter. From him he would hear words through which he would be saved. We did not find these words in Acts 10. However, they are of great significance. It

means that Cornelius was not yet saved, although he had already been converted.

Salvation comes through faith in the Savior's accomplished work. We also see this with the prodigal son who was converted at the time he stood up and went to his father. But it was only when he felt the father's arms around his neck that he knew he was saved and had the forgiveness of his sins and was accepted (Lk 15:17-20). All that awaited him, but he did not yet possess it when he stood up. God completes His work that He started in a soul.

When Cornelius and his own heard and believed the gospel of their salvation, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter mentions it emphatically: "Just as [He did] upon us at the beginning." He makes it clear to his listeners that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the circumcised believers, but that God gave that gift in the same way to the believers of the nations.

In his account, Peter makes no mention of speaking in languages. He mentions the giving of the Spirit as an event over which he had no control at all, but as something that happened suddenly as an act of God. To underline, he tells that he remembered the word of the Lord (Acts 1:5). In his judgment of what happened, Peter has the word of the Lord as his guide and touchstone.

At this point in his account he asks them a question to which they could only give one answer: If God works, could he repel it? Peter speaks of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as something that only began on the day of Pentecost. They had believed in Him for a long time, but since Pentecost there had been an aspect added to that, that of His glorification. On this basis they received from God the gift of the Spirit. Who could exclude others who are involved by God in that gift?

Peter's account has convinced them. They no longer talk back, on the contrary, they glorify God. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the affirmation by God Himself of what has happened (verse 17). By this they are convinced and glorify God. Their conclusion is clear and beautiful. They also acknowledge and agree that God is no longer limited to them, but that the nations have also been given part in the life that is given to them through

repentance. With this, the imminent danger of a separation of spirits in the young church has been averted.

### **Acts 11:19-21 | Preaching of the Scattered**

*19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and [began] speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.*

With verse 19 we return briefly to the situation described by Luke in Acts 8 (Acts 8:1-4). There he spoke of a great persecution. Luke here picks up the thread again to tell us how it went with those scattered. The scattered ones in Acts 8 were in Judea and Samaria. In the meantime they have moved on. They have crossed the country to Phoenicia in the north, in present-day Lebanon. Then they went to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea and from there to Antioch in Syria.

Antioch now emerges as the great center of the church among the Gentiles. This can happen now that the door has been opened to the Gentiles in the person of Cornelius. From Antioch Paul will start his missionary journeys. There he will also return at the end of the first two journeys.

Those who are scattered, do not “preach” the Word, but “speak” the Word, indicating that proclamation of the Word goes through ordinary contacts. They do, however, limit themselves in this to the Jews who have been scattered much earlier by the deportation of the ten tribes. They address only their compatriots, the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 10:6), possibly out of fear of contact with the unclean nations. They, too, have yet to be delivered from this fear. There are no works of power here. That happened in the land of Israel among the Jews and Samaritans.

Not all Jews have this fear of being defiled through contact with the nations. Among those who are scattered are some men of Cyprus and Cyrene. These are Jews who, however, did not grow up in the land of Israel, but in the Greek-speaking world. They are of Jewish descent, but speak Greek and in that language they speak to the Greek-speakers. These

are not the Greek-speaking Jews of Acts 6, but the Greek-speaking Gentiles with whom they come into contact through the scattering.

These originally foreign Jews do not have this inner aversion to contact with Gentiles. That brings them to a spontaneous proclamation to the Gentiles. At the same time it brings the danger that they easily adapt to customs of the Gentiles. They speak to them about the Lord Jesus, they proclaim Him, present Him as the good news.

It is remarkable how little officialism is connected with this work. There is no appointment to preach. There is no consultation whatsoever with the apostles in Jerusalem. Not a single name is mentioned of these people who participate in the work of the Lord. The Lord Jesus is proclaimed. It is striking how His being “Lord” is emphasized in these verses, which emphasizes that He has received all power. The Lord blesses their preaching with a great number who become believers. Every time there is talk of “the Lord”. He goes along with the preachers and people turn to Him.

### **Acts 11:22-24 | Barnabas and the Church in Antioch**

*22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. 23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and [began] to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain [true] to the Lord; 24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.*

Jerusalem is still the center of the new movement which is also governed from there. Because of the persecution many fled from Jerusalem, but the church in Jerusalem did not cease to exist, as is also shown in verse 1. The church turns out to have ‘ears’, because it “reached the ears of the church” that there is a work of the Lord going on elsewhere. That work is not done by one of them, but by others. This time there is also no Peter connected to it, as in the case of Cornelius, but this work is done by unnamed believers.

Still, no apostle with his authority is going to take a look at it. In their wisdom they send Barnabas, a man with special abilities of consolation. It is not about exercising authority, but about caring for the young church. That is why Barnabas is the person of choice. He is a selfless man who has renounced possessions. The trend in the world and also among Christians

is selfishness, self-love, but Barnabas is focused on others (Acts 4:36; 9:27). He can be used when there are problems.

Barnabas is also not one of the exclusive-thinking native Jews, but he is a foreign Jew – he comes from Cyprus – who knows that God can also work in other ways than an exclusive one. He does not adhere to the idea that he is the best. He who has no contact with others, easily has the idea that he is the best.

Barnabas is the right man, also to judge whether or not what is happening is from the Lord. What he sees when he arrives is exactly what he experiences in his dealings with God: grace. He does not see problems first, but the grace of God. He sees that what God is doing among the nations is a work of His grace.

That gives him joy. There is nothing of jealousy in him, no criticism of God's work, but on the contrary, he rejoices in it. There is no reproach that they should have contacted Jerusalem as a 'mother church' or the apostles as God's special servants.

He recognizes the work of God and joins in with it. He takes his place in this work with the contribution the Lord has given him. This contribution is to encourage them to remain true to the Lord with resolute heart. Barnabas does not hold out to any rules that must begin to meet, but binds their hearts to the Lord. To remain true to the Lord is necessary to be able to grow in faith.

He does this in view of the dangers that exist, of forces that are focused on loosening the believers from the Lord. This can mainly be done by bringing discord between the believers by emphasizing the differences and imposing their own vision on others.

The whole performance of Barnabas and his service to these believers is completely separate from Jerusalem. Also, the believers do not have to answer to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is no longer the center, as it is in the Old Testament and also in the beginning of Acts (cf. Jn 4:20-24).

The characteristics of Barnabas are particularly appropriate for a service among young believers. He is a good man, goodness emanates from him. It is not sugary goodness, but goodness that comes from the Holy Spirit.

He is also full of faith, full of trust in the Lord. His presence will certainly have contributed to adding a considerable crowd to the Lord.

### **Acts 11:25-26 | Barnabas and Saul in Antioch**

*25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*

When Barnabas is in Antioch, he remembers Saul. Possibly because he cannot handle the work alone, Barnabas goes looking for him. It is a church of Gentiles and he knows of the Lord's will concerning Saul (Acts 9:15). He will also have had insight into his special qualities.

He makes an effort to visit Saul in Tarsus, in Turkey, where he grew up. A few years ago, Saul was sent there again by the brothers (Acts 9:30) to testify and to be further taught by the Lord. Earlier, Saul was sent by his parents to Jerusalem for a religious education that made him extraordinarily religious. Saul is therefore both a Hebrew and a Hellenistic person who has been deeply versed in the Scriptures and is therefore the right person for Antioch. What Barnabas does with Saul is an example of how young believers are introduced to the church by older believers and are taught to perform their task.

Barnabas does not care about taking the second place. Without selfishness, but for the good of the church, he looks for Saul, whom he brought to the church in Jerusalem about eight years earlier. A church as young as Antioch does not yet have a teacher in its midst. For the teaching of the church in Antioch, Barnabas does not call upon the apostles in Jerusalem. He does not consider himself capable to do so.

Barnabas knows his limits. He understands that consolation or admonition is not enough and that there must also be teaching. He realizes that the appropriate tool for this is Saul. So there is evangelism (verse 20), admonishment or encouragement (verse 23) and now teaching (verse 26). We see evangelists, shepherds and teachers all working without being appointed by the apostles. The Lord gives the gifts (Eph 4:11). In verse 27 there is also

prophecy. In this way the different gifts work together and complement each other.

Saul's task is the service of teaching in the Word of God, the affirmation of the doctrine of God's Word. This is what this young church needs, while at the same time functioning as a church. She doesn't need education to be able to function as a church at a certain moment after sufficient education. For Saul, this teaching is a preparation for his ministry through which many churches will be founded.

For the first time the whole of the believers in one place is called "the church", whereby it is distinguished from the church in Jerusalem. It is a church that consists mainly of believers from the nations, but to which also believing Jews belong. The name "Christians" is also used here for the first time to refer to the believers. The name "Christian" for the believers appears three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Pet 4:16). This name comes from 'Christ' which means 'anointed one'. A Christian is a follower of the glorified Christ.

The name "Christians" is given to believers by the world around them who name them after the Man they proclaim. This happens when Christians in their lives show their connection with the Lord Jesus as Lord. This name is still used, but unfortunately it no longer only includes true believers. The world no longer knows who is a real and not a real Christian. Unfortunately the world gets a false impression of the Lord Jesus by the wrong behavior of the nominal Christians and even more unfortunately also of true Christians. This is not yet the case here.

### **Acts 11:27-30 | Agabus Predicts a Famine**

*27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and [began] to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the [reign] of Claudius. 29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send [a contribution] for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.*

After Barnabas, some more prophets come to Antioch from Jerusalem. Prophets are gifts to the whole church. So they can be active in Jerusalem, but they can also come to Antioch to perform their ministry there. Jerusalem is not a center, but there is connection. This is where the prophets are mentioned for the first time in the New Testament. We read in 1 Corinthians 14 a whole chapter about their service. They pass on God's Word from God's presence and speak for edification and exhortation and consolation of the church. They do not make predictions about future events, but apply the Word of God to hearts and consciences.

There is one prophet among them who, as an exception, does make a prediction, namely Agabus. We read of him that he stands up and, by the Spirit, indicates that there will be a great famine all over the world. This is not someone who claims to be a prophet. That his prophecy is real is shown by its fulfillment under Claudius, who reigned from the year 41 onward. The famine will come over the entire empire, including them.

Although the prophecy will only be fulfilled later under another emperor, the prophecy has the consequence that the believers in Antioch can express their connectedness with the believers in Jerusalem through support. The believers cannot stop the famine, but they can do what is necessary to alleviate it. The prophecy has an effect on the hearers and that is the purpose of every prophetic service. By taking the prophecy to heart, the believers can at the same time express their gratitude for the spiritual blessing they have received from the circumcision. After the nations have received spiritual goods through Jerusalem, they now want to serve them with their material goods (Gal 6:6; Rom 15:23-28).

What is written here is the model for Christian giving rather than what we found in Acts 2 and 4 where it concerned relationships among the Jews themselves (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37). Giving is done according to capacity (2Cor 8:12-15; 9:7). It is given from the consciousness of being one body. Prophecy encourages immediate action, even before there is evidence that it is good. It is a work of God's Spirit in the hearts. The prophets in the days of Ezra incited to rebuild the temple before the king gave them the opportunity to do so by prohibiting resistance (Ezra 5:1-2). It is blessed to act on the basis of heavenly motives in earthly matters.

The actions of the believers in Antioch must have been a great encouragement to the believers in Jerusalem in the experience of unity. The money goes to the elders, who are mentioned here for the first time in connection with the church; how they are appointed is not mentioned. They are the responsible brothers of the church. It is their task to further distribute the money. In this way the connection is expressed in a practical way, as before in a spiritual way (verse 22).

Barnabas and Saul take the gift with them. They do not feel too good about this, or think that spiritual work is more important. It is their desire to provide for every need. Here again we see that Barnabas is involved, because an assignment with money asks for trustworthy brothers. Barnabas has already shown not to value earthly possessions (Acts 4:36-37).

## Acts 12

### **Acts 12:1-2 | James Put to Death**

*1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.*

Verses 1-24 of this chapter are an intermediate section. From verse 25 onward the thread with Barnabas and Saul is taken up again, about whom we have read in the last verse of the previous chapter (Acts 11:30). In this intermediate section, Luke records the death of James by Herod, the arrest of Peter by and his deliverance from the hand of Herod and the death of Herod.

The deeper meaning of this intermediate section seems to lie in the typological sphere. We have seen in Acts 10-11 the work of God's Spirit He began among the nations. This means that the connection with Judaism is weakening. The emphasis will lie on Christendom among the nations.

Before Luke continues his account of this shift to the nations, we see in this section how, once the dispensation of the nations is over, God takes up the thread with Israel again. That is why we are taken back to Jerusalem for a moment and then leave it forever – except for a single incident. There we find Herod, who is a type or picture of the antichrist who persecutes the faithful remnant in Jerusalem.

We have a type or picture of the faithful remnant in both James and Peter. Just as we see with these two apostles, we also see with the remnant that during the great tribulation a part is killed and a part is spared.

The Herod who plays a leading role in this section is the third Herod mentioned in the New Testament. The first wanted to kill the Lord Jesus, the second had John the baptist beheaded and the third is responsible for the death of James. James was killed in the same way as many Old Testament martyrs (Heb 11:37).

There is another aspect we can mention of Herod that is in connection with the gospel. We see in Herod the political obstacle to the proclamation

of the gospel, which is overcome by prayer. In Peter's case, laws of purity were a hindrance to the gospel, a religious hindrance, but also that hindrance has been overcome by God. Both religious and political authorities have always been instruments in the hand of Satan to stop the course of the gospel, but always in vain.

It seems that Herod has been successful in his campaign against the Christians. He lays hands on some of the church to do them harm. If he gets his hands on James, he has captured one of the leading figures of the new movement. He has put to death James with a sword, which is tantamount to having him beheaded. It is about James who is further referred to as "the brother of John". This happens so as not to confuse him with James the brother of the Lord.

He and John and Peter have been with the Lord in His transfiguration on the mountain and they have been eyewitnesses of the glory of the Lord (Lk 9:28,32). The experience on the mountain was the confirmation of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of Christ in glory. As three witnesses they have seen that. Herod begins to kill these witnesses. He has killed James, he wants to kill Peter and who will say if not also John was on his list. The devil always wants to eliminate witnesses.

James is the first of the apostles to die of martyrdom. He is not replaced as an apostle, as Judas was at the time (Acts 1:20-26).

### **Acts 12:3-6 | Peter Arrested**

*3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. 6 On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison.*

In the following verses, Luke draws attention once more to Peter before he disappears from the stage in Acts except for one more performance in Acts 15. The Jews have not yet lost any of their hatred of Christians. They

welcomed the death of James. When Herod notices this, he wants to take political advantage of it. In order to be even more favorable to the Jews, he continues his campaign of purification. He then arrests Peter, which is the third time he is arrested.

Just like Pilate, Herod also acts with the favor of the people in mind. Common feelings of hatred bring Herod and the Jews together. The hatred of the Jews concerns the worship of the Lord Jesus as God. According to them, this is apostasy from God, because to them He is only a human being and the worship of a human being is punishable by death.

Because of the feast, the execution does not take place immediately. The reference to the days of Unleavened Bread means that the Passover was celebrated. It was a reminder of the time when the people were under foreign domination, but from which God delivered His people. Here the Christian people of God are oppressed by political power, as will be the case in the end times with the faithful remnant. But just as God delivered His people at the time so that they might serve Him, so He is delivering His own now and in the future. In all times political powers have tried to prevent the serving of God.

In this case of Peter, Herod leaves nothing to chance. He will certainly have heard of the previous imprisonments of Peter and how he has been delivered from them twice. That will not happen to him. So he will keep those weak Christians with his security measures from plans to deliver Peter. Only, the question is not what Herod is doing. What matters is what God can do.

Herod's security measures are firm. Peter is guarded by four squads of soldiers. That means that he is guarded by four men every three hours, to the four periods of three hours in which the night is divided. Two soldiers of each squad are chained to Peter and two soldiers are on guard at the door. So the guarding is all right.

But there is a battle going on in another area that nullifies all security measures of any kind. That is the battle of prayer. This is what the church is involved in. The church has come into being in an atmosphere of prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:42) and persists in this attitude. The postponement of the execution of Peter is used by the church to pray for him.

This is indeed what may be called a prayer meeting! The imprisonment of Peter, with the terrifying death of James still fresh in memory, drives the church to fervent prayer. The power of prayer is greater than the power of Herod, yes, than the power of hell. Several days are spent in prayer with only one subject: Peter. It is a fervent communal prayer, it is addressed to God and it is a concrete prayer: for Peter (Heb 13:3; Rev 5:8).

An initial effect of the prayer can be seen in the peace Peter has. While he knows what Herod intends to do with him, he is not restless, but asleep. This sleep is a victory of faith. He sleeps the sleep of the righteous. On the one hand he knows what happened to his good friend James. On the other hand he has the experience that the Lord has delivered him from prison before. He has put everything in the hand of the Lord. What He decides is good and that gives him the rest to sleep. He has slept at times where he had to remain awake, such as at the transfiguration of the Lord on the mountain (Lk 9:32) and at the Lord's prayer in Gethsemane (Mt 26:40), but now he sleeps in peace (Psa 4:8; 3:5-6).

### Acts 12:7-11 | Peter Delivered

*7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he \*said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."*

While Luke, in verse 6, has once again drawn attention to how firm the guarding of Peter is, we now see how the Lord is mocking it. He sends one of His angels to the prison cell in which Peter is sleeping. With the angel He brings heavenly light there. Peter doesn't wake up because of it, so the angel has to strike him (cf. 1Kgs 19:5).

Then he gets the command to get up “quickly”. The fact of the supernatural deliverance doesn’t mean that Peter doesn’t have to do the necessary things himself and also do it quickly. God has set a certain time for deliverance and within that time it must happen. God’s intervention and what man has to do coincide here again.

To enable the quick rise, the chains fall from his hands. The chains are not a problem to God, just like closed doors or tombs. The falling off of the chains will be accompanied by noise. We can assume that the guards have been put into a deep sleep by God. Just as the guards who had to guard the tomb of the Lord Jesus were put aside, so these guard are put aside by God. There, at the appearance of an angel, the guards “became like dead men” (Mt 28:4). Here, they notice nothing about it. God treats them as if they were not there. They do not wake up from the light or the noise.

The angel then gives Peter practical directions for his escape. The angel has unfastened the chains, but he must put on his sandals himself and also wrap his cloak around himself. To put on his sandals he has to bend down and after that he can walk. Wouldn’t Peter, every time he put on his sandals afterward, often be reminded of this extraordinary deliverance? Wouldn’t his trust in the Lord be encouraged by it?

Peter does what the angel says and follows him outside. That is all he has to do at that moment. He experiences it as if he is dreaming. This is a reminder of the experience the faithful remnant will also have when they are delivered by the Lord from the greatest need in the last days (Psa 126:1).

On his way to freedom, following the angel, they pass two guards without them sounding the alarm. The iron gate that forms a final hindrance to freedom opens by itself, that is, God’s mighty arm opens the way to freedom. When they have passed through it, they are in the city. The angel goes on one more street and then his service is over. He disappears without saying anything else and returns to heaven to stand before the Lord, ready to be sent out for the next service.

So now Peter stands there alone. Then he comes to himself. He realizes that he is free and that nothing of Herod’s expectations or those of the people of the Jews will come to pass (cf. Rom 15:30-31). We see that Peter is also aware of the close connection between these enemies of Christendom. As

said, this close connection between Herod and the people of the Jews is a type of the connection between the antichrist and the apostate mass of the Jewish people in the end time. His deliverance does not make him careless. He knows he has to leave that place.

Now that we have before us the death of James and the deliverance of Peter, the question arises: Why is James killed and why is Peter delivered from prison? These questions arise, but cannot be answered by us. These are God's ways of government that we cannot fathom. Here it suits us to fully trust God that He is not mistaken.

### Acts 12:12-17 | Peter Goes to the Church

*12 And when he realized [this], he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13 When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. 15 They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." 16 But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened [the door], they saw him and were amazed. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place.*

Now that he is free, he knows where to go. He knows that the believers come together in the house of Mary, who is further referred to as the mother of John who was also called Mark. Of John Mark we will hear more. Regarding the meeting that was held there, we see that "many were gathered together". No one will have been missing due to lack of interest. The pressure from outside drives the believers toward each other and together they seek the presence of God.

The fact that there are many does not mean that the whole church is there. After all, we read further on that Peter sends the message of his deliverance to James and the brothers (verse 17). Apparently they are not there.

When Peter arrives at the house of Mary, he must as usual knock on the door. That door does not open automatically for him like the door of the

prison. On his knocking a servant-girl comes forward. Luke mentions her name. Her name is Rhoda. He says nothing about her age, but it is clear that this girl has an important task in the church. She is expected to know those who want to enter and to warn if someone presents himself of whom she suspects he comes with impure motives. She is a real servant of the church.

Peter has apparently not only knocked, but also called softly, because she recognizes his voice. This also indicates her great interest in the things of the Lord. She will have heard him speak often. Earlier Peter was also recognized by a maidservant, but on that occasion he did not want to be recognized and denied his Lord (Lk 22:56).

In her enthusiasm for the appearance of Peter, she ran inside to tell that Peter was standing in the front of the gate, forgetting to open it. This forgetfulness gives rise to the manifestation of the unbelief of the church. Although Peter has been rescued by Divine intervention before (Acts 5:19), they do not believe that what Rhoda says is true.

We do not have to blame them, because how many times do we doubt, while the answer is already at the door. At the same time, their reaction makes it clear that wondrous deliverances and works of power at that time are generally not everyday events. The life of the believer is not a sequence of all kinds of wondrous events that deliver him from difficult situations or from annoying diseases.

In their reaction they first say that Rhoda is out of her mind. But Rhoda is not brought into doubt. She assures the believers that it is really Peter who is in front of the gate, but the believers don't want to believe it. Then, they say, it must be his angel. By this they do not mean his guardian angel, but that his spirit has shown itself to her, that is to say that she has heard a supernatural being representing Peter. From the Old Testament they are familiar with the idea that angels can appear to people. Angels have a protective, guarding and serving function (Psa 91:11-12; Heb 1:14).

While all this takes place inside, Peter continues knocking. When they have all come to the gate and opened it, they see him. They can't believe their eyes and are amazed. They have probably been more impressed by

the power of Herod than by the power of God. They will have fired their questions at him.

Peter calms them by motioning to them with his hand to be silent, apparently without raising his voice. His deliverance does not make him careless. He exhorts them to silence. The noise they make carries far in the silence of the night and could betray where he is. He tells them how his deliverance happened. Not an angel gets the honor of his deliverance, but the Lord.

He asks them to report his deliverance to James and the brothers who will surely have prayed as well and will be curious about the outcome. He calls James especially, probably because together with him he is responsible for the church in Jerusalem. This James is the brother of the Lord (Mk 6:3) of whom we read further on that he is a leader in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; 21:18). Paul acknowledges James, together with Peter and John, as one of the three pillars of the church (Gal 2:9).

After his deliverance, Peter does not go back into the city as in Acts 5 (Acts 5:20), but he goes to another place. Luke does not tell which place that is. With that, the history of Peter is almost over. In Acts 15 he comes back in this Bible book for a while. We read nothing more about where and how he worked. The roman-catholic church says that he went to Rome to start a forty-five year reign as pope. Of course that is nothing more than a foolish thought. The departure of Peter takes place around the year 44. He writes his letters in the mid-60s.

### **Acts 12:18-19 | Herod's Reaction**

*18 Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers [as to] what could have become of Peter. 19 When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away [to execution]. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.*

With the disappearance of Peter from the scene, the history of his disappearance is not yet finished. Luke informs us of Herod's reaction to this and then tells us the end of Herod. That seems to indicate, as already mentioned, that it is about the typological meaning of this whole history. After

the deliverance of Peter as a type of the faithful remnant in the end time, we get the judgment on Herod as a type of the antichrist. That judgment comes on him because he lets himself be honored as God, which is also what the antichrist will do.

As for the disappearance of Peter, it is understandable that there is great consternation among the soldiers. They were present at the disappearance, did not participate in it, but they did not notice anything about it and therefore could not stop it. It is the confusion of people who think they have everything under control, while things are taking place that are happening completely outside of their control and in which they are nevertheless closely involved. This is the blindness that is characteristic of people who do not take God into account. This also applies to Herod.

He first searched for Peter for some time, but he did not find him (cf. Jer 36:26). Then he examines the guards. Of course, they cannot give a satisfactory explanation for Peter's escape. Then he orders the guards to be led away, that is to be executed. They must pay for Peter's escape with their own lives, for they are responsible for this escape (cf. 1Kgs 20:39). It is not Peter who dies that day, but a number of soldiers die in his place (Pro 11:8).

### **Acts 12:20-23 | The Death of Herod**

*20 Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. 21 On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and [began] delivering an address to them. 22 The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.*

Luke also describes the death of Herod. The events giving rise to his death are related to his relationship with the Tyrians and Sidonians. For unknown reasons, Herod was outraged by the Tyrians and Sidonians, the inhabitants of two trading towns on the Mediterranean Sea. These cities depend on Israel for their food supply. This food supply has been shut

down by the wrath of Herod. To try and get it going again, they try to flatter Herod.

To re-establish diplomatic relations, they contacted one of Herod's closest servants, his chamberlain Blastus. They managed to get him to mediate for them with Herod, possibly through bribes. By asking for peace, they ask Herod to reconcile himself with them. Herod accepted the request and appointed a day when he would address the embassy and the people of Caesarea. According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, this was the second day of a feast organized by Herod to celebrate a victory of Emperor Claudius.

Josephus also speaks about the royal apparel that Herod put on. He says that it is an apparel woven entirely of silver. Herod thus emphatically acts as king, drawing all attention to himself. In that capacity, and with that display of overwhelming brilliance, he takes his seat on the rostrum to deliver his address. Herod begins by presenting himself as king, a position which he assumes. But that is not all – as he speaks, he grows into a god in that position.

He hears with great pleasure how the people shout at him – no matter how hypocritically because they want to get him back on their side – that his voice is that of a god and not that of a man. They bring him divine honor which he receives gracefully. This adds another aspect to the idea that we find in him a type of the antichrist, because that wicked one too will let himself be worshiped as God (2Thes 2:4).

This tribute that he receives from people brings him the wrath of God that he must receive immediately after this tribute. What is common among the Gentiles and is by no means always immediately judged by God, God judges with Herod without delay. Herod knew better and should not have accepted this.

God shows here that He is the Ruler of the world, however great man's pride may be. Because Herod lets himself be honored, God strikes him by means of an angel (cf. Dan 4:30-31; Job 40:11-12). Here God also gives a testimony that He is the true Ruler and not the man who persecutes Christians.

This concludes the intermediate section in this chapter. We have had the acts of Peter as well as the seven speeches he gave. After this the acts of Paul begin. We will hear seven speeches from him as well.

### **Acts 12:24-25 | Transition to Paul's Service**

*24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. 25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with [them] John, who was also called Mark.*

Rulers may come and go; the Word of God increases and multiplies. The death of James and the departure of Peter do not prevent the increase of the Word and the multiplication of the church. The increase and multiplication of the Word of God is caused by the conversion of every soul to God. In the life of every converted man, the Word of God has gained another piece of ground in the world. The Word multiplies His presence on earth in every believer who submits to the dominion of the Word.

At the beginning of this chapter, Herod threatened to destroy the church. The end of this chapter shows that Herod himself has been destroyed and the church is growing. At the same time, it is the transition to the new section in this book containing the service of Paul. Barnabas and Saul – from Acts 13:9 Luke will use the name of Paul for him – return to Antioch after they have fulfilled their mission in Jerusalem that was dedicated to them in Acts 11:30. Mark is with them. He is mentioned because he is present when Paul begins his first missionary journey.

## Acts 13

### **Acts 13:1-3 | Calling of Barnabas and Saul**

*1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was [there], prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*

After having followed the acts of Peter in the first part of the book of Acts in chapters 1-12, Luke will tell from Acts 13 onward mainly the acts of Paul. From this chapter we see how a small Jewish sect develops more and more into a global movement. We have already seen its preparations in the conversion of Saul (Acts 9), the conversion of the eunuch (Acts 8) and the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10). Through the scattering of the believers, God has already begun this development.

In the previous part, Jerusalem was the center of – at that time mainly Jewish – Christendom. In Paul's service this place will be taken over by Antioch as the center of non-Jewish Christendom. However, the connection with Jerusalem will be maintained. After some time, also Antioch will no longer be the center. Christendom has no geographical center.

In the beginning of Acts 13 Luke focuses our attention on Antioch as a place where there is a church. He also mentions that there are prophets and teachers there. There is no mention of any appointment by people. It is clear that there is also no one-man ministry. The Lord Jesus gave the prophets and teachers this task and placed them in His church (Eph 4:11).

It seems that the five brothers mentioned are both prophets and teachers. The five form a close team. Together they minister to the Lord while fasting. That is the atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit can speak and make His will clear. The Holy Spirit speaks to this whole company. He could have addressed Barnabas and Saul directly, but He does not. Although He

sends out – and not the church – His sending is not apart from the church. After all, the service of those who are sent out is on the territory of the church. In their service they add to the church through the preaching of the gospel, while they build up the church through their teaching in the church.

They are not sent out by the church, but are dedicated to the Lord for their ministry. When they come back to Antioch later with their report, it is not to give an account, but to tell what the Lord has done among the nations through them (Acts 14:27). We do not have a Christ on earth sending His disciples. The sending out of Barnabas and Paul – here still Saul – takes place through the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit.

This also shows that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit will have used the mouth of one of the prophets to make His will clear. The sending out happens from a Greek city and not from Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is working apart from the apostles, independent as He always is. A glorified Christ in heaven is His starting point.

When they are called to their ministry, they have already worked for the Lord for several years. They are not newcomers. Saul's calling took place in Acts 9:15 (cf. Gal 1:15-16), about eight years ago, and now the order follows to fulfill that calling. There is a distinction between calling and sending out. The time in between is the time of preparation.

The Holy Spirit was able to make His will known to them because they focused in their lives on the Lord Jesus and serving Him. This also included fasting. They voluntarily refrained from food in order to be open to the will of the Lord. Isaiah 58 shows that the inward attitude that belongs to fasting counts for God and not fasting itself (Isa 58:1-12).

After the Holy Spirit has revealed His will to them, they fast again and ask in prayer for further guidance from the Lord. It becomes clear to them that they must lay hands on Barnabas and Saul and send them away. It means that they did not put anything in their way, although their departure was a great loss to the church. They are committed to their mission and remain involved.

The laying on of hands has nothing to do with human appointment, but is the sign of the fellowship they could have with them in this matter. In a

real work of the Lord, the Lord calls the servant very personally, without any interference from the church. At the same time, the servant will gladly let himself be laid hands on in order to go into the service of the Lord with the support of the church. Laying hands means identification (Lev 1:4; 3:2,8,13; 4:4,15,24,29,33).

### Acts 13:4-5 | Beginning of the First Missionary Journey

*4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they reached Salamis, they [began] to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.*

This is where the first missionary journey begins, the account of which extends to Acts 14:26. After being called by the Holy Spirit – and so explicitly not by people (Gal 1:1) – He also sends them out – and so explicitly not the church. Without reading that the Holy Spirit tells them where to go, they go on their way.

It seems that Cyprus is not an accidental choice. It is the island where Barnabas comes from (Acts 4:36). Perhaps he would like to start proclaiming the gospel precisely there. When they go ashore in Salamis, they first go to the synagogues of the Jews. There were several synagogues, which indicates that there was a large Jewish community on the island. Although they were sent out to the nations, in the pagan area they first look for Jews. Paul will do this later on all the time. In his love for God's earthly people it remains for him: first the Jew and then the Greek (Rom 1:16).

They proclaimed the Word of God in Salamis. John, that is Mark, is also present at this preaching. John Mark went with them to help them. He wanted to dedicate his time and strength to the gospel, which he probably did by arranging all kinds of practical things for these two preachers.

### Acts 13:6-12 | Elymas and Sergius Paulus

*6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the*

*magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, who was also [known as] Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, 10 and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? 11 Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. 12 Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.*

We do not hear of any reaction to the proclamation of God's Word in Salamis. A possible reason could be the influence of the activities of a demonic man, who is even a Jew. This man was especially active in Paphos. There Barnabas and Saul ran into him, after they went through the whole island. He listened to the name Bar-Jesus, which means 'son of Jesus'. The Holy Spirit shows us in this man someone who in name is closely related to Jesus, but in fact stands at an enormous distance from the Lord Jesus. He does not proclaim the true Word of God, but is a falsifier of God's Word.

Elymas is in the service of the proconsul Sergius Paulus who represents the Roman authority on Cyprus. The proconsul is ignorant of the true God, but he is also a man of intelligence or a wise man. This is evidenced by a sincere longing for something that can fill the emptiness he feels at the inanity of pagan ceremonies and their abominable immorality.

In the false prophet and magician, the Jew Elymas, we see the representative of enmity against Christendom. Again and again we will see how the Jews outside the land of Israel reject the Word and at the same time want to prevent it from being spoken to the nations (verse 45). In Elymas we see that demonic powers and forces are involved. This is also how Paul exposes him.

This is the moment when Luke changes his name and calls Saul Paul from now on. In the midst of Judaism, Luke has always called him by his Hebrew name. Saul means 'the requested' or 'the coveted'. In that name we listen to the great plans his parents seem to have had with him. Maybe they gave him that name out of admiration for King Saul. King Saul literal-

ly stood head and shoulders above everyone else; from their son Saul they must have expected him to stand above everyone else in a religious sense. That is what happened (Gal 1:14). But from now on he will be called Paul. Now that his service among nations has started, Luke will continue to call him by his pagan name.

This happens for the first time in Paul's confrontation with the false prophet, in which he proves where his power lies, namely not in himself, but in the Holy Spirit. Instead of being the greatest of all, he has learned that true power can only be found in being the smallest of all (Lk 22:26-27). Paul means 'the little one'.

Humility is a prerequisite for world evangelization. Then also someone is in the right mind to be able to act strongly against the opposition the gospel experiences. Paul finds this power in the Holy Spirit with Whom he is filled. The fulfillment with the Holy Spirit points to an instantaneous fulfillment for that moment. At the moment of fulfillment, the Holy Spirit gives special power for what needs to be said.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul speaks powerfully to this false prophet who manifests himself so clearly as an opponent of the gospel. With the indignant exclamation "you who" Paul addresses this man directly and then un masks him fully as a man "full of all deceit and fraud". Nothing good is present in this man.

He is rightly a "son of the devil" and an "enemy of all righteousness". He has the devil as his father and expresses himself as one who abhors all righteousness. A person is only called son of the devil if he shows persistent and deliberate opposition (Jn 8:44; 1Jn 3:10). In his depravity, he also presents the right ways of the Lord (Hos 14:9) in a twisted way. However, he is seen through (cf. Pro 10:9b).

With apostolic authority, Paul passes judgment on this son of the devil and makes him blind by letting the hand of the Lord be upon him. For the second time there is talk of "the hand of the Lord", here in judgment. The first time is in Acts 11, there in blessing (Acts 11:21). Paul also sets a limit to blindness, for it will be "for a time".

In this temporary blindness, Elymas is a picture of the unbelieving Jewish people on whom there is a covering in the present time. That veil will also

be removed in time, i.e. from a faithful remnant. It is a temporary covering (Rom 11:25). The unbelieving Jews have been smitten with blindness because they envy the proclamation of the gospel to the nations (1Thes 2:16). As a result, for many centuries Judaism has been looking for people who can take them by the hand to guide them. They depend on the favor of the nations they seek each time.

Another consequence of the blindness of the Jews is that the gospel went to the Gentiles (Rom 11:11,15). We also see this in the history of Elymas. After he had been smitten with blindness, God opens the door of the heart of the pagan Sergius Paulus for faith. The proconsul was not so much impressed by what happened, but by the teaching of the Lord. Not a work of power, but the Word is the basis of conversion.

### **Acts 13:13-15 | From Cyprus to Antioch in Pisidia**

*13 Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem. 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."*

The fact that there is talk of "Paul and his companions" seems to indicate that there is a larger company than Paul and Barnabas. It is possible that people have come to faith together with the proconsul and some of them have joined Paul and Barnabas. The fact that there is 'a company of Paul' also means that from now on Paul takes the lead and Barnabas takes the second place. Paul puts his stamp on the company, the company continues under his leadership and responsibility.

The company leaves the island of Cyprus. They boarded in Paphos and sailed to Pamphylia in southern Galatia. In Perga they go ashore. There John Mark leaves them. He has had enough of going with the two servants. They have to go on without him and his help. John is the picture of the unfaithful servant. It seems that he was not ready for this service. Barnabas and Paul did not notice that either. Without any remark on their part – at

least we don't read anything about that – they let John Mark go. They themselves go from Perga into the country.

On their journey they arrive in the province of Pisidia in a city that is also called Antioch. At that time there were several cities that had this name. Also here Paul goes first to the synagogue. They know the customs in the synagogue and take place there. They know that after reading the law there will be an opportunity to speak to the Jews. We see how the service in the synagogue goes on. There is great freedom in the service, more than in many churches today. After the reading of the law there is a free preaching. The presence of Paul and Barnabas is noticed, and they are asked to speak a word that will serve to encourage the people.

### **Acts 13:16-21 | Period From the Fathers to Saul**

*16 Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. 18 For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. 19 When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—[all of which took] about four hundred and fifty years. 20 After these things He gave [them] judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.*

Paul welcomes the invitation to speak a word to the people. Surely he has a word of encouragement or exhortation, that they cannot be justified by the law, but only by faith in the Lord Jesus. Without preparation, Paul can use the opportunity offered to him to preach God's Word. He does so in the awareness of the audience he has before him. To get some rest he motions with his hand (cf. Acts 12:17). Then he starts his speech.

The Israelites are addressed as "men of Israel" and the proselytes as "you who fear God". Paul begins by showing that Israel was God's chosen people. He reminds his audience of their sojourning – rather than their slavery – in Egypt and how God led them out of it. He presents both the choice of the fathers, who were idolaters, and the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, which they did not ask for, as acts of God's sovereign grace.

Throughout his speech, he always points to those gracious acts of God with His people and not to their unfaithfulness and what they had deserved on the basis of the law. This is evident when he presents to them the care of God which they have enjoyed in the wilderness for forty years. He is concerned with the side of Divine grace and not with the continual failure of the people in the wilderness. According to the law, they would have perished.

He points to that same grace, when he recalls how God destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan to be able to give them that land. They did not get the land because they deserved it (Deu 9:4). God did not just give that land either, but gave it to them as an inheritance, as a land that He purposed especially for them and which they received from Him as their real possession. The period in which God has been involved with His people in this way is about four hundred and fifty years. That is the sum of four hundred years in Egypt, forty years in the wilderness and ten years of conquest of the land.

When they arrived in the land, God gave them judges. These judges were always given by Him in His grace as a result of their calling to Him. That this calling to God was again the result of oppression by enemies that God had brought upon them because of their unfaithfulness, Paul leaves aside. The only judge who Paul mentions is the last one God gave, Samuel. Samuel is a special proof of God's grace. God gave him without being asked for by the people.

When Paul then presents Saul as the king whom the people asked for, he also does so without saying anything about God's thoughts on this request of the people. He leaves it to his listeners to think about the fact that this king persecuted the man after God's heart. Listening to a preaching from the Word requires the listeners to think about it and should not be a mere absorption of words. As we listen, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to me?

Here is another thing we do not read in the Old Testament and that is that Saul was king for forty years.

### Acts 13:22-25 | Period From David to the Lord Jesus

*22 After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not [He]. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'*

By noticing that God “removed” him, Paul points out, veiled, that Saul was not the king after God’s heart. Paul’s focus in his speech is on David. He wants to talk about him because through David he wants to point to the Lord Jesus, the Man after God’s heart. With the election of David, God begins a completely different relationship with His people than before through the judges and the first king, Saul. Paul has told all the above to show how God saved His people again and again on the basis of sovereign grace. At the same time he makes it clear to his audience that he is not a modernist, but someone who brings the ‘old teaching’.

From David the transition to the Lord Jesus is quickly made. This brings Paul to his actual subject. After all, Israel expected the Messiah and that expectation was linked to the house of David. The Messiah is the Son of David, born out of the house of David. Paul holds up to his audience that that promised Son of David was brought by God according to the promise to Israel in the Person of Jesus. The promise was made to David in the first place, but also to the whole people. He was brought by God to His people as a Savior. In that Name we hear the ‘salvation’.

Paul mentions the predecessor of the Messiah, John, because they also knew John here. He also points to John’s preaching of the baptism of repentance for the whole people of Israel. His audience here in the Pisidian Antioch also belongs to that. By quoting the contents of John’s preaching, he already gives his hearers the indication of the need for conversion. Then he lets John speak. After completing his task, i.e. shortly before his imprisonment, John rejected all honor for himself and pointed to Him Who is

worthy of all the honor, from him and everyone, for He surpasses all and everyone.

### **Acts 13:26-31 | What Happened to Christ**

*26 “Brethren, sons of Abraham’s family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. 27 For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled [these] by condemning [Him]. 28 And though they found no ground for [putting Him to] death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. 30 But God raised Him from the dead; 31 and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people.*

After having presented their history to his audience, in which God’s grace has been shown again and again, Paul again calls for the emphatic attention of both groups that comprise his audience. He comes with the highest proof of God’s grace by telling them now that the “message of this salvation” has been sent “to us”. By talking about “us” he includes himself.

The message of this salvation has come to them in a Person, the Lord Jesus. He has come, but those who live in Jerusalem and their religious leaders have not understood Who He really is. They have not recognized Him as Messiah. That has led them to condemn Him. In doing so they have fulfilled what was said by the prophets, whose voices they hear every Sabbath in the synagogue when they hear them read from their writings. The prophets have prophesied about this rejection. The fact that they have fulfilled the prophets through the rejection of Christ does not diminish their guilt.

Paul says nothing about the life of the Lord Jesus but focuses on His sentence and death. Not only Israel is guilty of that death, but the nations are also guilty of it. Paul indicates the latter by mentioning Pilate as the person involved. God allowed them, the Jews, to accomplish anything they wanted about Him. They have accomplished what was written about

Him, ignorant of it, yet fully responsible for it. “They” who took Him from the cross and laid him in a tomb are Joseph and Nicodemus.

After Paul has described the people’s work, he says what *God* has done with Him. God has raised Him up. That resurrection is not a pretense, but reality. The fact of His resurrection has been observed by His disciples. He Who appeared to them is the same with Whom they had crossed the land from Galilee to Jerusalem. They can still consult these witnesses because they are still approachable in Israel. Paul does not mention his own testimony that he also saw the Lord. He had not been a witness of the Lord on earth, but of Him in glory. In his speech it is about the fact that He Who died, is the same One Who was raised up by God.

### Acts 13:32-39 | The Proclamation of the Promise

*32 And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33 that God has fulfilled this [promise] to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.’ 34 [As for the fact] that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY [and] SURE [blessings] OF DAVID.’ 35 Therefore He also says in another [Psalm], ‘YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.’ 36 For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; 37 but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. 38 Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.*

Paul can now proceed to proclaim the fulfillment of the promise with regard to “us”, which are the children of the fathers, i.e. the Israelites. The fulfillment of the promise happened through the raising up of Jesus by God. This raising up of the Lord Jesus is both through the Holy Spirit in Mary (Lk 1:35) and through God’s raising him up from the dead. For both aspects of the raising up Paul quotes Scripture.

First he refers to Psalm 2 (Psa 2:7). From this quote it appears that the Lord Jesus is more than just the Son of David, because here it appears that

through His birth He is also the Son of God. So this is not about raising up in the sense of the resurrection, but really as the origin of His life as Man on earth.

After the quotation which indicates His being begotten, Paul proceeds directly to His resurrection from the dead. He presents it as the resurrection to an imperishable life. The Lord Jesus will never see decay. Paul proves this with a quote from Isaiah 55 (Isa 55:3) in connection with another quote from the book of Psalms (Psa 16:10).

Every Jew who reads Isaiah 55:3 knows that it is about the great Son of David in Whom God proves to His people the sure blessings of David. All the blessings that God has promised to David are fulfilled by the great Son of David. Because of this it is also clear that that Son could not remain in the tomb and therefore God did not let Him undergo decay, as Psalm 16 mentions (Psa 16:10). God gives us His blessings in Him Who is the Blessed or Holy One.

To further underline his application of Psalm 16:10 to the Messiah, Paul points out that this word from this psalm cannot, of course, be applied to David himself. In his generation David fulfilled the will of God and then died and was buried. After that he underwent decay and that is precisely not the case with the Lord Jesus. Once again Paul confirms that He Whom God raised up, did not see decay.

After establishing the great facts regarding all that God has done with the Man after His heart, Paul can proclaim to his hearers, the blessings of David. The way is free to offer them to all who believe. The first of those blessings is the forgiveness of sins. It does not stop there. There is more than forgiveness, there is justification. The question that appears twice in the book of Job, "how can a man be in the right [or righteous] before God?" (Job 9:2; 25:4) is answered here.

The law causes man to be preoccupied with himself; justification makes him see what God has done in Christ. It is impossible to be justified on the basis of the law. Every transgression of the law of Moses is an aggravation of the righteous judgment that is connected with the transgression of the law. Yet justification is not impossible. It is possible, but only by faith in the accomplished work of Christ.

**Acts 13:40-41 | A Warning at the End**

*40 Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon [you]:*

*41 'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'"*

The previous verse would have been a nice ending. But Paul has looked around and expects a reaction to his speech. He therefore ends his speech with a serious exhortation from the Word for anyone who rejects the offer of grace. If they reject it, this word of the prophet Habakkuk will be fulfilled to them (Hab 1:5). This verse announces the situation of the downfall of the state of Israel. This is how it will be with them. Whether this is so depends on whether or not 'you, listeners' accept the message.

The work of God in the days of Habakkuk was that God sent the Chaldeans to discipline His people, a work they did not want to believe. That God punished His people through an evil gentile nation was a wondrous work. Paul applies this word of the work of the judgment of God to the work of the gospel that God was now doing. If they rejected it, it would bring doom upon them in a way similar to the days of Habakkuk.

When Paul makes this serious appeal to the conscience of his listeners, we are in the year 45/46. We know that twenty-five years later the downfall will come, for they have rejected salvation.

**Acts 13:42-44 | Effect of the Preaching**

*42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. 43 Now when [the meeting of] the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. 44 The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord.*

We now get the effect of Paul's speech. The people are very impressed. There is no jealousy yet, there is only a desire to hear more. Many cannot wait until the next Sabbath and follow Paul and Barnabas, not for the sake

of the persons, as often happens, but to hear more. From now on, with a few exceptions (Acts 14:14; 15:12,25), the order is no longer Barnabas and Paul, but Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas gladly fulfill this desire by further teaching them about the “grace of God”. The exhortation is to continue in the grace of God that has been proclaimed to them in the gospel and also to become doers of the Word and to live out and by that grace. They will need it in the resistance they will encounter in their following of a rejected Christ, for as long as He has not yet returned to establish His reign on earth.

When the next Sabbath has come, we see that the Word spoken on the previous Sabbath has made a deep impression. It was not spoken to forgetful hearers. These two men, unknown to any man, had not brought their own word, but God’s Word. They must have used the week well for proclaiming the gospel. When they have another meeting on the next Sabbath, nearly the whole city assembles. They want to hear the Word that comes from the glorified Lord and has Him as its subject. To Him the word of the gospel is related.

### **Acts 13:45-52 | Driven Out by the Jews**

*45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and [began] contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. 46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us,*

*‘I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.’”*

*48 When the Gentiles heard this, they [began] rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.*

*49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50*

*But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet [in protest] against them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

When the Jews see the crowds, they become jealous. As long as the preaching took place in the synagogue for the select company of its visitors, they were still under the assumption that it was a message from God for them as Jews. However, now they see that many who never come to the synagogue also hear about the Lord Jesus. With their nationalistic pride and exclusivism they cannot cope with that.

Where grace is preached, it will always arouse the enmity of people who consider themselves important in their service to God. It is the jealousy of begrudging grace to the nations. That is why they begin to contradict and blaspheme what they first greeted so enthusiastically. Those who do not accept grace for themselves will also begrudge it to others.

Instead of telling the crowds to come to the synagogue, Paul speaks to the Jews. They have been given priority in the preaching of grace, but grace puts everyone on an equal footing before God. If they don't want it, if they don't want eternal life, he and Barnabas will no longer address themselves to them, but to the Gentiles.

For the believing Jew this is already difficult to accept, for the unbelieving Jew it is reprehensible. It evokes all his hatred. However, they have forfeited the right to the blessing based on the law, because they did not meet the conditions. Now that they do not want grace either, they also forfeit grace. They have put themselves offside because of this. In this way, what used to be a small Jewish sect, partly due to the resistance of the Jews, is slowly moving in the direction of a worldwide movement.

The preaching to the Gentiles is not a concoction of Paul. God has already thought of the Gentiles in the Old Testament to make them partakers of salvation (Isa 49:6). Isaiah 49 is about the Lord Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh. The words Paul quotes are meant in Isaiah as an encouragement to the Servant of Yahweh, after He expressed His disappointment that Israel rejected Him. This now also happens with Paul and Barnabas. They too are rejected by the unbelieving Jews. That is why Paul says in his quote "so the Lord has commanded us", by which he means himself and Barnabas. Now that they, as the preachers of grace, have been rejected by the unbelieving Jews, they will go to the Gentiles, as the Servant of Yahweh was told.

When the Gentiles hear this, they rejoice. They glorify the Word of the Lord; they embrace it and fully appreciate it. That Word does its work in them. Many come to faith through it. Those who come to faith are those who are appointed to eternal life by God. Here we find the side of predestination. God knows perfectly who will believe because He Himself has appointed them to it. This also means that only those people will believe who God has appointed to this purpose.

But predestination does not take away our responsibility to preach the gospel. The counterpart is found in the first verse of the following chapter. Paul, who knew like no other the truth of predestination, also preached the gospel. He also did not know who all would believe. God also begs not only the elect to be reconciled with Him, but all people (2Cor 5:20). The Christian therefore believes that so many people come to repentance as God has appointed and that he must preach it in such a way that many come to repentance.

No matter how hard the enemy tries to prevent the spread of the Word, the course of the Word is unstoppable. The Word of the Lord in Antioch has an enormous effect all around. Remarkably often the name 'Lord' appears in this section (verses 44,47-49), of which the 'Word of the Lord' is mentioned three times (verses 44,48,49). It emphasizes that the Word of God for those to whom it is preached and by whom it is accepted is the Word of the Lord, the Commander, to Whom they must submit.

The Jews know how to incite the devout women of prominence and other distinguished people and to assume the role of persecutors. Important and distinguished people feel the gospel as a threat to their honor and prestige. They refuse to acknowledge any authority that puts an end to what distinguishes them. If there is no desire for the gospel, such people can easily be turned into opponents. The Jews, with their insinuations, succeed in this.

The result is that Paul and Barnabas are driven out of that area. As they leave Antioch, they make it clear by shaking the dust off their feet against them that they have no part at all in the people driving them away. They don't even want to have anything to do with the dust of the city (cf. Mt 10:15). Then they are on their way to their next destiny, Iconium.

When Paul and Barnabas leave, they do not leave behind some disciples who panic, but disciples who are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Although the preachers are gone, the joy and the Holy Spirit remain. Joy and the Holy Spirit belong together. They are filled with both. God gives that where the hearts are focused on the Lord Jesus and the opposition is fierce.

## Acts 14

### **Acts 14:1-7 | Preaching in and Fleeing From Iconium**

*1 In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. 2 But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. 3 Therefore they spent a long time [there] speaking boldly [with reliance] upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. 5 And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, 6 they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.*

What happened in the Pisidian Antioch, is repeated in Iconium. Paul and Barnabas again first go to the synagogue. The persecution in Antioch has not diminished their courage and zeal to bring the gospel. They speak in a way that leads a large crowd of people, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles, to come to faith. Speaking must be in a way the Lord can use (cf. Ecc 12:10). It is about an ability that must be of God (2Cor 3:5), which is His gift, but which also must be used. The Word has power and bears fruit.

As in Pisidian Antioch, the unbelieving Jews are the fierce opponents of the gospel. Here, too, they know how to manipulate the minds of the Gentiles and to make them bitter, so that they come in opposition to the brethren. But the brethren do not give way to the rage of the people. They remain for a long time, without worrying about the attempts of the Jews to expel them. They speak boldly of the Lord and bear witness to Him.

In turn, the Lord gives testimony to the Word of His grace by giving to His witnesses that they perform signs and wonders. These signs and wonders serve to confirm the Word. This is as the Lord promised when He commanded them to proclaim the gospel (Mk 16:20; cf. Heb 2:3-4). Yet we do

not read that every preaching in Acts is accompanied by doing signs and wonders. So it is not an automatism.

When the gospel has been so powerfully proclaimed, division arises in the crowd. The preaching of the gospel brings division. The opposition in Iconium grows and takes on a threatening form. The enmity becomes so great that there is mention of a plan to mistreat and stone the apostles. This plan is conceived in a dialogue between the nations and the Jews with their rulers. The plotting shows the deep-rooted hatred against the proclaimers of the gospel. Not only death by stoning, but also a preceding mistreatment is part of their plan.

Though they did not give in at first to the bitter mood among the Gentiles, the moment comes when it seems advisable to flee (Mt 10:23). It is just how the Holy Spirit wants it, because through Him they let themselves be guided. The apostles were not characterized by a kind of heroism, but by something much better: the simplicity of grace. This is how they come to flee into Lystra and Derbe, cities that are in Lycaonia, which thereby get the chance to hear the gospel.

### **Acts 14:8-10 | Healing a Lame in Lystra**

*8 At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. 9 This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, 10 said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and [began] to walk.*

There is no synagogue in Lystra. It seems to be a very pagan city. When they walk through Lystra, they see a man who has not been able to walk since he was born. Luke focuses our attention to this man who, as far as his condition is concerned, is reminiscent of the man we met in the beginning of Acts and who was healed by Peter and John (Acts 3:2-8). There it was a Jewish man, here it is a pagan. As a true evangelist, Paul sees that the man listens with great interest to what he says.

Paul can discern whether it is just curiosity or a deeper need for interest. He sees that this man has faith to be saved, both in his body and in his soul. Therefore he does not need a long consideration to know what to do. He

speaks with a loud voice to the man the words: "Stand upright on your feet." The man obeys immediately. He leaps up and begins to walk. The healing is immediate and complete.

That is the case with all wonders in the New Testament. They all have an immediate and perfect result. There is no question of gradual or half work. The wonder of the healing of a blind person by the Lord Jesus in phases is no exception (Mk 8:24-25). It is a purposeful work of the Lord through which He wants to teach the disciples a lesson [see the explanation of the Gospel according to Mark].

By the way, Paul was not looking for someone he could heal. He didn't make the sick better looking for them everywhere randomly, but he noticed something special with this man.

### **Acts 14:11-18 | Preaching of Paul in Lystra**

*11 When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." 12 And they [began] calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose [temple] was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out 15 and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. 16 In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; 17 and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." 18 [Even] saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.*

In light of their erroneous view of things, the crowds misrepresent what is happening. They live by the faith of descending gods. There is no intellectual idolatry in Lystra, but primitive idolatry. They immediately give Barnabas and Saul the names of their most important idols because it is

clear to them that these idols appeared in human form among them. They call Paul Hermes because Hermes was the messenger of Zeus. Barnabas is the silent one and therefore they worship him as Zeus, the main god. Because Paul speaks, they give him the place of messenger.

The temple of Zeus stands in front of the city as a forward post to protect the city. That temple has a priest who quickly arrives with bulls to sacrifice them to these 'gods'. Because everything happens in the Lycaonian language, Paul and Barnabas at first don't realize what is going on, but as soon as their intention is clear, they come in defense. They immediately and radically reject the tribute that these people want to pay them.

This whole movement is a huge danger to the Christian faith, greater than any opposition. In this way, countless people allow themselves to be honored. Herod has therefore been punished by God with a terrible death (Acts 12:23).

Paul and Barnabas reject all tribute to them. To make themselves heard above the tumult, they have to shout. They cry out to the crowds as to why they are doing these things, for it is utterly reprehensible because they too are only creatures (Acts 10:26; Rev 19:10). The situation is urgent and they need to change their minds quickly.

They take the opportunity to preach the gospel to them. On this occasion, Paul does not quote anything from the Old Testament, which he does when speaking to Jews. Here, however, he speaks to primitive pagans. That is why he starts with the Creator and creation, a theme that interests the pagans very much. To us the lesson is that it is always good to think about who we have in front of us and to connect to that in the preaching. Paul goes on to say that after creation God let the nations go their own ways. That this is the result of the falling into sin, he does not talk about.

Nor does he speak about the election of a people for His Name out of all those nations. He does talk about the fact that God, although He has let the nations go their own ways, has taken care of them. His care for them has been – and still is – expressed by giving rain from heaven and fruitful seasons. "From heaven" means from God's presence. Every harvest is a proof of His goodness. He has also filled their hearts with food, i.e. with

satisfaction about good results of efforts made, which also goes hand in hand with joy.

There are many earthly blessings that also fill the hearts of unbelievers with joy. Even unbelievers know the satisfaction and joy of a good marriage and good family relationships, of health and enjoyable work. The joy that God gives in natural relationships is a testimony of His goodness toward people in general. It is a gift from Him. God is the Savior, that here means Sustainer, of all people (1Tim 4:10; Psa 104:27-28). That same God now comes to announce the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

By saying this, the people of Lystra are restrained from offering sacrifice to the apostles. It seems that the danger of devil worship has been averted. But other dangers arise.

### **Acts 14:19-20 | Paul Stoned**

*19 But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20 But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.*

When the Jews of Antioch and Iconium come to Lystra, they are not displeased with the idolatry of the pagans. Nor are they on the side of Paul and Barnabas against idolatry. On the contrary, they turn against the two servants of God. Their hatred of the gospel is greater than their abhorrence of paganism and its idolatry.

The Jews of Antioch and Iconium are not satisfied that they have driven the bringers of the gospel out of their own cities. They pursue the apostles, and through their malicious imputations they manipulate the crowds here in Lystra as well, resulting in an uprising against Paul and Barnabas. The crowds stone Paul as if he were a false prophet. Then they drag him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

When people start to worship people, they exalt themselves, someone equal to them, a human being. When someone comes to condemn this worship and points to the Lord Jesus as the only One Who may be honored, he gets the hatred of those people on himself. At first they wanted to worship Paul

as a god, but when it turns out that he condemns their religion, they turn against him and kill him. At least that's what they think.

The power of life is greater than the power of the devil and death. Surrounded by the disciples, Paul comes back to life. It is a beautiful picture: The disciples stand around him as a circle of life – presumably they have prayed for him – through which there is an atmosphere to which death gives way and life can manifest itself.

When Paul has got up, he enters the city again, not to be admired as a god who has power over death, but to finalize a few things. It is in itself a wonder of God that from almost dead a moment later he is able to go on healthy and strengthened.

After finishing his work in Lystra, he goes with Barnabas to Derbe the next day. There too they preach the gospel with great results. Many come to faith there and become disciples. That will mean that these believers are baptized and also taught to live as followers of the Lord. Presumably in this environment and during this visit Timothy was brought to the Lord by Paul (Acts 16:1; 1Tim 1:2; 2Tim 1:2).

### **Acts 14:21-25 | Back to Antioch in Syria**

*21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and [saying], "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." 23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.*

In reverse order, they again visited the cities where they had previously brought the gospel, now to strengthen the disciples. It is an after-care visit, a pastoral service. This is a necessary part of the labor of love that newly converted souls need. They come fearlessly to the places where they have previously been driven away by persecution. During the Lord Jesus' walk in Israel, the disciples did not dare to return to a place where they recently tried to stone Him (Jn 11:8). Paul and Barnabas do not have that fear here.

They go through the power of the Spirit, while they also know that God, as with Job, determines the boundary of the work of satan.

That they are well aware of what happened to them during their first visit, we see with Paul. When he writes his farewell letter to Timothy at the end of his life, he refers once more to all the suffering that has befallen him in these three cities (2Tim 3:11). That happened at the very beginning of his service, but he never forgot it. These are the cities where especially the Jews persecuted him bitterly and tried to kill him, but where the Lord rescued him.

The service in the mentioned cities does not consist of openly preaching the gospel this time either, but as said, of strengthening the souls of the disciples in faith. They teach the disciples in the truth of the faith and encourage them to hold on to it. It is about holding on to the whole Word of God. Continuing in the faith is necessary because there is a lot of deception and oppression.

Furthermore, Paul makes it clear that tribulation is part of the gospel. More than anyone else he knows what he is talking about when he says this. He knows from experience the tribulations that accompany entering into the kingdom of God. He who says this, has just been stoned (cf. Col 1:28-29).

These believers have continued to live in cities where there is great opposition to the gospel. Therefore they need reinforcement and encouragement. In faith they have already entered the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5), but not yet actually, because that will only happen when the Lord Jesus comes back to visibly establish that kingdom. Between these two events are the tribulations (2Pet 1:11).

Paul here presents the kingdom of God as it will be in the future because he speaks about entering. Only believers can enter it because unbelievers cannot 'deserve' the kingdom by undergoing tribulation. For believers there is now tribulation and later rest (2Thes 1:6-7).

Apart from their teaching the apostles give to encourage the believers, they do something else that will be of help to these young believers once they have left. They appoint elders in each church. The apostles appoint these elders after they have chosen them themselves. In both these actions,

choosing and appointing, there is no activity of the church. The appointment of elders is further only mentioned in Titus 1 (Tit 1:5).

The appointment of elders happens in churches of the Gentiles. In churches with an exclusively Jewish background this is not an issue, because elders have been present there for many years. In their case we read nothing about a formal appointment. The elders for Gentile churches were not appointed by Paul and Barnabas right at the start of the church, but at a second visit. Some maturation of the believers has taken place and some who possess the necessary qualities can now be appointed.

What the requirements of an elder, or overseer, are, Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy and in his letter to Titus (1Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9). The word for 'elder' means that it is someone who is a more mature believer in the midst of newly converted believers. From the texts where the appointment of elders occurs, it appears that the authority of the apostles is the source. The official appointment of elders is therefore no longer possible since the passing away of the apostles.

Although there are no officially appointed elders anymore, fortunately there are still older believers who function as elders in the local church. They are given by the Holy Spirit and can be recognized by their qualities. They should be acknowledged by the church in their work (Acts 20:28; cf. Heb 13:7,17,24; 1Thes 5:12).

We also observe that after the activities of the apostles as evangelists, they unite the converted in a local church to which a letter or letters will also be written later. In these letters Paul further teaches the believers how things should be done in a local church. It is nice to remember that the local church represents the universal church (1Cor 12:27). The local believers are members of the church. They may know that the Lord Jesus is in the midst according to His promise when they come together as a church (Mt 18:20).

After the appointment of the elders Paul and Barnabas commend the believers to the Lord in prayer with fasting. Luke adds "in whom they had believed". He emphasizes once more that the believers have entrusted their life to the Lord. It is in this trust that the apostles continue on their way back.

On their return journey, they travel through Pisidia and arrive in the south in Pamphylia on the coast. There they visit Perga, where they also have been on their outward journey and where Mark has left them. This time they speak the Word there. Then they travel to the port of Attalia.

### **Acts 14:26-28 | Arrival and Report in Antioch**

*26 From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. 27 When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they [began] to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they spent a long time with the disciples.*

They leave Attalia and sail across the Mediterranean to disembark again in Antioch. This is Antioch in Syria from where, more than a year ago, they left for their first missionary journey. The church did not send them, but commended them to the grace of God for the work to which He had called them. The church has been sympathizing with them. Now the apostles want to share with the believers what the Lord has done through their ministry (cf. Acts 21:19).

There is no question of accountability toward the church. The church is not the source of mission, but a place of fellowship where what the Lord does in blessing for others is shared. God is the One Who works, they are only the instruments. Also today it is heartwarming for believers who are allowed to do a work for the Lord elsewhere to experience interest from the 'home church' in the work that the Lord does.

Paul and Barnabas tell the believers especially that God has opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. This has already been the case in Antioch because Antioch is also a Gentile city. Yet the existence of a church of Gentiles is then only an incident. Now it has become clear that God is working through Paul and Barnabas everywhere outside Israel and that the Gentiles are coming to faith in crowds, together with some Jews who also live in those places.

God's work of grace among the Gentiles through His Word and the power of the Holy Spirit outside of the church in Jerusalem and the law raises the question with the converted Jews whether this can happen just like that. In

the next chapter this question will be answered. We will see there that the grace of God also has an answer to this question.

After the report Paul and Barnabas do not leave immediately for the further proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. They stay with the disciples for a longer period of time. Their 'home church' is a kind of haven of peace after all the unrest they have experienced in their work. There they can share and have fellowship.

It must have been a refreshment for them to stay with these believers, called "disciples" by Luke. The fact that the believers are called "disciples" is because of their consistent imitation of the Lord Jesus. To be allowed to stay with such believers is a blessing for anyone who also wants to consistently imitate the Lord Jesus, as we know from Paul and Barnabas.

## Acts 15

### **Acts 15:1-2 | Salvation and Circumcision?**

*1 Some men came down from Judea and [began] teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, [the brethren] determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.*

After opposition from outside from the unbelieving Jews together with the Gentiles, there is now opposition from the midst of the believers. Believing Jews from Judaea, still living in connection with the demands of the law, want to impose these demands on the believers from the nations. They have come to this new center of work in Antioch to impose their teachings on the believers. Their teaching is to make salvation dependent on circumcision.

This is a frontal attack on the gospel of the grace of God even in the center of the church. These people want to prevent Christendom from becoming independent of Judaism. If this would have succeeded, Christendom would only have become a Jewish sect. What these Judaists say is the same as saying: If you do not join our group, you cannot be saved, because there is no salvation outside of us. For those who bring this up, it is not a question of whether they are right. There is not the slightest trace of doubt about this in their legalistic teaching.

Now, their teaching would not have to cause much commotion if the believers themselves were confirmed in the truth and held fast to it. People who bring legal teaching have neither Scripture nor the apostles on their side. However, the people are docile, and these people speak with force of voice and persuasion. That is why strong action must be taken against them.

It is not a small difference of opinion, but it touches the very essence of the gospel. The introduction of the law is the denial of a risen and glorified Christ. It denies that through Christ everything is accomplished that is

necessary to be saved. These people look back to the time before the cross, to things and persons on earth. They do not look through a torn veil at Christ above. They want to hold on to the ancient glory of the Jews from which they derive honor for themselves. They learn that there can only be salvation by becoming entirely Jewish.

In this chapter it is about establishing that salvation is in nothing but faith in the Lord Jesus without any further conditions. Apart from the fact that the crisis situation is about a teaching of the highest importance, it is also about preventing a division in the church between believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

The Jewish Christians remain zealous for the law. That in itself is not the problem. The problem is that they want to oblige believers from the Gentiles to also obey the commandments of the law. To the Jewish Christians, Christendom is a continuation of Judaism, but now with faith in the Messiah Jesus. To them, the churches among the nations are churches of proselytes. They consider these believers as people who have passed over to Judaism. To them, there is still nothing besides Judaism. But they are wrong, because Christendom is something completely new and has nothing in common with Judaism.

If the believers would continue to cling to Judaism or would be forced to cling to it, Christendom would be reduced to Judaism. Later, Paul will expose the new dispensation in all its facets through the various letters he writes to various churches. Especially in the letter to the Ephesians he shows that Jew and Gentile together have become something new in the church.

The wrong teaching causes great discussion, dissension, unrest and confusion. Paul and Barnabas, who see their work threatened, vigorously protest against this false teaching. Fortunately, the brothers in Antioch have so much faith in Paul and Barnabas that they decide that they should go to Jerusalem together with a few others to present this question of discord to the apostles and elders.

The problem is not only a problem of Antioch. Jerusalem is also directly involved. According to the counsel of God, this issue should not be solved by apostolic authority or by the working of His Spirit in Antioch. This might

have divided the church. In order to maintain unity, this matter must be resolved during a conference in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish system. In Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians, the apostles, the elders and the whole church, must declare that the believers from the Gentiles are free from the law. The things at stake touch the heart of Christendom. The importance of a standpoint according to God's thoughts is great.

### **Acts 15:3-6 | To and at Jerusalem**

*3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.*

The journey to Jerusalem is also spent for the honor of God and the blessing of the church. On the way, the embassy recounts in the regions through which they pass the conversion of the Gentiles. They do this in Phoenicia – today's Lebanon – and Samaria. Their stories cause great joy. When they heard and accepted the gospel themselves some time ago, it had made them joyful (Acts 8:8). Now there is great joy when they hear that others from the Gentiles have accepted it.

The brothers have not heard of this work before. It is new to them, but they accept with great joy what they hear. It is important to remember that the special thing about the conversion of the Gentiles is that it happens separately from Judaism and also without them having to become Jews after their conversion.

When the company arrives at Jerusalem, it is received by the church, which has undoubtedly been called together. The apostles and the elders are mentioned separately. Paul and Barnabas and the others do not suddenly start discussing the question that causes controversy. First they tell, just as they did along the way, about all that God has done to them. They tell how God has caused Gentile churches to arise everywhere.

This is the reason for some of the Pharisees to stand up and express their views on circumcision and the law. They are not prevented from expressing their teachings, but are given every opportunity to say what they want. For a good solution it is necessary that everyone is given the opportunity to express their thoughts. These things are not regulated by a single word.

The defenders of the law therefore first get every opportunity to express their views. They have much to criticize because they are strongly against the apostles not having preached circumcision and not having said anything about keeping the law of Moses. The spokesmen, as Pharisees, are very familiar with the whole law, to which they also keep themselves scrupulously.

Luke talks about “the sect of the Pharisees”. A sect is a group that distinguishes itself from other groups. The word ‘sect’ means ‘to choose’. It does not have to be about false teachings, but it is about the overemphasis of a doctrine or a person.

The word ‘sect’ appears nine times in the New Testament, six times in Acts and three times in the letters (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5,14; 26:5; 28:22; 1Cor 11:19; Gal 5:20; 2Pet 2:1). In the church in Corinth, these are groups of believers who separate from each other by following persons who are their favorite (1Cor 1:12). In the letter to the Galatians sects are called a manifestation of the flesh. Peter writes about pernicious cults as the work of false teachers.

A sect is not something of the Spirit, but of man, the flesh, the devil. The Pharisees who raise their voices here have come to faith in the Messiah Jesus, but remain bound with heart and soul to the law and its customs. These are the statutes of God that must therefore also be observed by the believers of the Gentiles, they think.

After the Pharisees have made their remarks and thus have laid down the core of the problem, the apostles and the elders meet together to deal with this problem. It seems that only the apostles and the elders have spoken about this matter, without the whole church being present. In any case, brothers in charge of the church have discussed it with each other. It has not been dealt with by some apostles who have imposed their decision on the others. In making decisions, it is good to involve as many brothers as possible who have responsibility.

### Acts 15:7-11 | Reaction of Peter

*7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."*

Even in the smaller circle of responsible brothers, unanimity is initially hard to find. There is much debate. There is freedom to say what is in one's heart, although the flesh can abuse it. Yet it is not said: 'There is no discussion here.' Nor are structures created to prevent these discussions. This would restrict the freedom to express oneself. In all argumentation it should be about learning to understand the will of the Holy Spirit, so that finally it can be said that "the Holy Spirit and we" have come to a certain decision (verse 28).

During the debate, Peter stands up. After his deliverance from prison, he travelled to another place (Acts 12:17), but here he is back in Jerusalem. What he is about to say shows that he has thoroughly learned the lesson of the event at Cornelius (Acts 10:34). He listened carefully to what the others said. Guided by the Spirit, he stands up at the right moment (Pro 18:13). After the thoughts of the people the thoughts of God are given and they come to a unanimous conclusion.

Peter begins by reminding how God used him as a special instrument with the purpose that through his mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel and believe it. It was not God's purpose that they would only hear it, no, the purpose was that they also would come to faith.

God proved that they indeed came to faith by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to "us", who are the believing Jews. By giving His Spirit also to converted Gentiles, God Himself gave testimony that He saved them (Rom 8:9; Eph 1:13). God has sealed their faith with the Holy Spirit, without any prerequisites, but only by faith. God knew the hearts

of Cornelius and his people and saw faith in those hearts. He would never have given His Spirit in their hearts if their hearts had not been cleansed by faith.

How, then, could people set additional conditions, conditions that were also not fulfilled by those who set them? God does not demand external action such as circumcision or proselyte baptism, but cleanses their hearts by faith. The function of the law is to condemn man. Through law knowledge of sin comes, but the law does not bring salvation from sin.

Peter tells about the function and the effect of the law. He forcefully states that the unbearable yoke of the law with its inseparable impossibility of being saved by it must certainly not be imposed on others. How could they do that and why would they do that? It is such a great sin that Peter equates it with testing God. It is to challenge God, to test Him to see how far one can go.

It is an insult to God to say that something still must be done in addition to the work done by the Lord Jesus in order to be saved. No, the foundation on which the Gentiles stand is that of grace and faith. On that basis they have been saved. Peter sets the way in which God saves Gentiles as an example of how Jews too can be saved and not the other way around. The origin lies in the grace of the Lord Jesus and grace places everyone on the same basis before God.

### **Acts 15:12 | Report of Barnabas and Paul**

*12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

The silence of the crowd indicates that they have no response to what Peter said. A reply would mean that they would contradict God. While they remain silent, Barnabas and Paul take the floor. After Peter has looked back to the past, Barnabas and Paul speak about the deeds of God in the present. After them, James will look to the future.

The whole crowd hears Barnabas and Paul recount the signs and wonders that God has done through them among the Gentiles. What God has done among the Gentiles proves that His grace also reaches out to them. Already

in verse 4 Barnabas and Paul have talked about God's work among the Gentiles. Now they want to make clear that what took place in Caesarea as a one-time event is happening everywhere among the Gentiles. Thereby it is notable that God has not given any indication that there is anything lacking in His work, such as keeping the law.

With their account Barnabas and Paul substantiate and underline the account of Peter. The signs and wonders they mention in their account are an underlining of God's message of salvation also for the Gentiles. God has thus confirmed that their proclamation to the Gentiles is according to His will.

As already mentioned in the comments on Acts 8, we see that where there are signs and wonders, they are done by the apostles and next to them only by Stephen and Philip. Thus, the practice of signs and wonders is not something generally done by all believers, but only by a select group that God has given the ability to do so.

#### **Acts 15:13-18 | Reaction of James**

*13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,*  
*16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,*  
*AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,*  
*AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,*  
*AND I WILL RESTORE IT,*  
*17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,*  
*AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'*  
*18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.*

When Barnabas and Paul have spoken, James takes the floor. He is the leader of the church in Jerusalem and therefore has a special place in it. Although he does not belong to the twelve apostles, he is also called an apostle (Gal 1:19). He is the brother of the Lord Jesus (1Cor 15:7) and the

writer of the letter of James. It is of great importance that James will speak. His words will be decisive in this discussion about the meaning of the law for the Gentiles. His great zeal for the law is clear to everyone. If he says that the Gentiles do not have to keep the law, all zealots for the law will be silent.

He starts his speech by drawing attention to what he has to say. First he points out what Peter has said. James uses the Hebrew name of Peter and speaks about Simeon. He connects to his report. From what he says, it appears that he has understood that the work Peter has spoken about does not consist of making proselytes. He understood that God is in the process of taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself, a people from among the Gentiles, and that “for His name”.

For the zealots of the law, “for His name” can in fact only mean that it is about the people of Israel, because they are the people that God has chosen for His name. Therefore, all who come to faith from the Gentiles should join Israel. But James shows that even in the Old Testament there is already talk about Gentiles who are called by the Name of the Lord apart from the people of Israel. So this is not an unknown phenomenon, a new doctrine, but something the prophets have spoken about in the writings of the Old Testament.

James quotes an example of this from the prophet Amos. It is not a fulfillment of what Amos said – that fulfillment only comes in the realm of peace – but it corresponds to it. This quote shows that in the realm of peace the nations will be blessed, not by joining Israel, but by seeking Yahweh. The expression “as it is written” is the end of all contradiction. It confirms what has already been said by the other apostles.

James quotes the verse according to its tenor. God promises in Amos that “the tabernacle of David” will be rebuilt. The ‘tabernacle of David’ means the royal family. It has decayed since the Babylonian exile. Then the kingship of the house of David came to an end, while God promised that the house of David will exist forever (Psa 89:3-4,35-37).

The prophecy of Amos is fulfilled with the coming of the Lord Jesus. Although He has been rejected and His dominion is not visible on earth, all power has been given to Him in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18). This can

only be seen in faith. Soon it will be visible to everyone, when He will sit on the throne of His father David in Israel. Then the Gentiles will seek Him and He will call out His Name over them.

This is how it is now. Over all those who seek the Lord in faith, who turn to God and accept the Lord Jesus in faith, He will call out His Name. This is completely independent of Judaism and entering Judaism as a proselyte. It has been of eternity in God's heart, when there was no mention of Judaism yet. Everyone who knows God knows that He is like that and acts like that.

### **Acts 15:19-21 | The Judgment of James**

*19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."*

Because God wants to make a great people from among the Gentiles to be His people without having to become a Jew, James judges that the Gentiles should not be brought into trouble. The difficulties consist of imposing the yoke of the law. The nations have their own place in the ways of God.

The fact that the law should not be imposed on them does not mean that they have nothing to do with general statutes of the Lord. James mentions four things to which the nations must adhere. The things he mentions are not imposed by him as the four commandments of the law in order to impose commandments on the Gentiles by means of a detour. These things are not Jewish in themselves, but have to do with the rights of God as Creator.

The first, the idols, attacks the true authority of God. "Things contaminated by idols" is everything connected with idolatry. That they had to keep far away from idolatry did not have to be emphasized again. They had just converted from idolatry as such. The danger, however, is in its contamination. Eating meat in an idolatry temple is such contamination (1Cor 8:10), for it could give others the impression that whoever does so is still an idolater.

What applies to the idols also applies to the second, “fornication”. Everyone who is converted knows that fornication is sin. Fornication goes against the will of God with respect to marriage, where the woman is only bound to the man in the sacred bond of marriage. Therefore, what is meant by abstinence from fornication is mainly meant for forms of fornication that are condoned.

These are all kinds of associations that God calls fornication, while in society they are generally accepted and equated with marriage. We can think of marrying someone who is divorced (Mt 5:31-32; 19:9; Mk 10:11-12; Lk 16:18), premarital sexual intercourse (Mt 19:5) or homosexual intercourse (Rom 1:24-27). They are all violations of the only marriage bond God has established.

The third and fourth, to abstain “from what is strangled and from blood”, has to do with the fact that the blood, the life, belongs to God. He is the only One entitled to life. After the deluge, man was given the flesh for food (Gen 9:3-4), but man must always remember that the blood was not given to him as food. The blood is the life that belongs to the Creator. Therefore, the blood of an animal that serves as food must run away into the earth, as it were, to give it back to God.

James does not hold up a new law to his audience. Nor does he meet the prejudices of the Jews, as if he treats the Gentiles on the level of the Jews after all. Nevertheless, the things he mentions are not foreign to Judaism. According to their character they may not be Jewish, but they are in accordance with the law. The Jews, too, must at least abide by these things. They can all know about this, because every Sabbath in the synagogues is read from the law. In reading the law, everyone present in the synagogue listens to the preaching of Moses.

### **Acts 15:22-29 | The Letter for the Gentiles**

*22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas— Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, “The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles,*

greetings. 24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with [their] words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word [of mouth]. 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

Those gathered are convinced

- a. by Peter who recounted what God had done in connection with Cornelius,
- b. through the account of Barnabas and Paul on the deeds of God during their missionary journey, and
- c. through the voice of God from the Scriptures quoted by James.

They decide to send a letter to the Gentiles. Agreement was reached because all bowed to the judgment of James that there can be no question of imposing the law on the Gentiles.

The church is not a democratic body where decisions are taken by the majority of votes. There is no voting. The apostles and the elders with the whole church, which is here again present, decide that Paul and Barnabas will go to Antioch again to share the outcome of the consultation in Jerusalem.

In order to avoid any possibility of a wrong impression, some brothers from Jerusalem will also go with Paul and Barnabas. For this purpose they choose Judas and Silas. These men are leaders among the brethren (cf. Heb 13:7,17,24). They are men who are known to the believers in Jerusalem and who teach and show by their lives to them what God expects of His own.

The outcome of the consultation is laid down in a letter which they give to the company. The result of the exchange of words is that a letter is sent to the brothers from the Gentiles. The letter is addressed to "the brothers

from the Gentiles” in the areas where this confusion has been caused. Apparently this is not only in Antioch, but also in Syria and even up to Cilicia. They begin their letter by apologizing for the fact that “some of our number” caused confusion among the brothers from the Gentiles by their words. The words they have spoken have unsettled the souls of the believers. Here we see how devastating the introduction of the law is for the assurance of faith. Introducing the law or legal principles undermines the assurance of faith and turns steadfast believers into unstable souls.

The senders of the letter clearly distance themselves from the words of their fellow believers. These believers acted on their own initiative and not by order of the Jerusalem church. People who preach the law always do so on their own initiative and not on the recommendation of the church. The brethren they now send do come with a recommendation from the church. Some things did precede, as can be concluded from the words “having become of one mind”, before these men have been selected to go to them on behalf of the church in Jerusalem.

Judas and Silas come along with Barnabas and Paul whom the church calls “our beloved”. The use of this expression clearly tells how much these two apostles have been accepted and appreciated by the church in Jerusalem. It also means that the work of these servants among the Gentiles is fully acknowledged by them. They also mention that they are people “who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. A more impressive recommendation can hardly be given. By speaking of “our” Lord Jesus Christ, using the full Name of the Lord, they express the fellowship the believers have in that Name.

Besides Barnabas and Paul, also Judas and Silas will be present at the handing over of the letter. They will explain the letter verbally. The letter is not a law, but a report, in which a further explanation helps to understand its purpose. Their message goes beyond just the businesslike, formal handing over of a letter.

They have been witnesses to the establishment of its contents. They have experienced how the Holy Spirit has brought the believers to the unanimous decision which they are now announcing to the Gentiles, so that they have been able to write: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” This

means that the Holy Spirit has been able to work in the discussion. The unity to which they have come is His work.

If it had been stated in the letter that the believers in Jerusalem had become united and now communicated their decision in the letter, no one would have doubted that this had been worked out by the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Holy Spirit is explicitly mentioned is done in view of the entire work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. The brethren, the elders and the apostles agree with this work. In this way they have come to the conclusion that not the law, but only the generally binding commandments are to be observed.

The generally binding commandments are imposed on them, they cannot ignore them. These things are called “these essentials”. These are ‘essentials’ because they have to do with

1. the relationship of faithfulness to God to Whom alone may be offered sacrifices,
2. the acknowledgment of His exclusive right to life and
3. the absolute faithfulness in the relationship to one’s neighbor in the most intimate form, that of marriage.

Those who keep themselves free from these essentials do well. Taking these things into account is a benefit to the spiritual life. They conclude the letter with the wish that they will fare well.

### **Acts 15:30-35 | Delivering the Letter in Antioch**

*30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. 33 After they had spent time [there], they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. 34 <But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.> 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.*

The church lets the envoy go, which indicates that they support their mission. When the four of them arrive in Antioch, the congregation is

gathered. Then the brothers who have come from Jerusalem hand over the letter. The letter brings joy because they are acquitted of the yoke of the law. The prescription to abstain from some necessary things is also part of that joy. Jerusalem guarantees freedom for the Gentiles, although they themselves stick to the law. This is the right mind to deal with each other as churches when it comes to regulations and statutes that some people think they have to keep.

In addition to the encouragement that the letter has brought to the believers, there is also an opportunity for Judas and Silas to verbally encourage and strengthen the believers. As prophets they are able to speak totally different words than their predecessors who have been here without a commission and have spoken words that have unsettled souls (verse 24). The lengthy message or many words spoken by Judas and Silas serve to strengthen the faith. It is beautiful to speak to one another in this way and also to be built up in faith by those who have received the gift of the Lord to do so.

When Judas and Silas have performed their comforting and strengthening service in this way for some time, they return to those who sent them, i.e. the church in Jerusalem. The brethren let them go in peace. There is peace and harmony in the church. When Judas and Silas leave, they leave behind a church with whom they are in unity. The report that they will have made later in Jerusalem of their stay and service in Antioch, will certainly have caused joy there as well.

Paul and Barnabas stay in Antioch. Together with many others they teach and proclaim the Word of the Lord. This indicates that there is a large church in Antioch and that there is a large number of gifts. The goal is the same for all. It is about the building up of the believers and that is only possible through the Word of the Lord. Here again it is not the 'Word of God', but the 'Word of the Lord'. The purpose of the service is that the life of the believer in all its aspects comes under the authority of the Lord.

### **Acts 15:36-39 | Separation Between Paul and Barnabas**

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, [and see] how they

*are." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.*

When there are so many others who preach the Word of the Lord in Antioch, we can imagine that Paul, after a few days, is thinking of serving somewhere else. He thinks of the brethren in the cities where he and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey. His heart goes out to them and he would like to see how they are. He tells Barnabas what concerns him. This consideration of Paul is the introduction to the second missionary journey.

However, it is also the introduction to a sad separation between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas agrees with Paul and wants to go with him to visit the cities of which Paul spoke, but he wants John Mark to go with him. Mark has also been with them the first time, but has returned halfway (Acts 13:13). How nice it would be if he would get a second chance and be able to participate now for the whole journey.

Barnabas, a real 'son of comfort' (Acts 4:36), wants to give him a second chance. Paul does not agree with him. He doesn't think Mark is a suitable companion. It does not mean that he has written off Mark for good. Later he will write to Timothy that he should take Mark with him because Mark is useful to him for service (2Tim 4:11). But at the moment Paul apparently does not consider him mature enough.

It has been suggested that Barnabas has been too much guided by his affection for his cousin Mark. Affection is good, but it is not a basis for dedication. No honey was allowed in the grain offering (Lev 2:11), where honey represents natural affections and the grain offering represents full dedication to God.

Natural love is good. Woe to us if we do not have natural love. The absence of natural love is a characteristic of the last days (2Tim 3:3). But natural love should not affect our full devotion in our service to the Lord. Has Barnabas been too soft and Paul too hard? The Lord has hidden it from us. We can draw general lessons, but we cannot point out causes.

Here two dedicated servants of the Lord, who have known each other long and well and have done much for the Lord together, have a disagreement which is not resolved. This chapter has started with a dispute about a question of teaching. That dispute concerned the teaching of salvation and had to be solved. There is no compromise in such a dispute. That dispute has therefore been solved.

The disagreement between the two men of God is of a different nature. It concerns a question of judgment and that dispute remains unsolved. The dispute even leads to sharp disagreement or bitterness. They are both to blame for it. From the fact that Paul and Silas leave with the blessing of the brethren, we should not too quickly draw the conclusion that Barnabas and Mark have gone the wrong way. It is possible that Barnabas left quickly to prevent the division between him and Paul from spreading among the brothers as well. It is in accordance with his character that he does everything to prevent divisions.

Sharp disagreement or bitterness is not good, but now that they are separated, two teams go out for the Lord. Sometimes our imperfections are opportunities for God to do His work. Barnabas will undoubtedly also be used by the Lord for His service. We won't hear any more about it. He leaves for Cyprus, his homeland, which he had previously chosen as his first destination with Paul during the first missionary journey (Acts 13:4).

When Paul talks about Barnabas again later, there is no trace of bitterness. He speaks with appreciation of Barnabas as a fellow servant and places him in the same position as himself in his service to the Lord (1Cor 9:6).

### **Acts 15:40-41 | Beginning of the Second Missionary Journey**

*40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

Paul needs a companion who can occupy the vacant place of Barnabas. His choice falls on Silas. He spent some time with Silas in his service in Antioch and thus learned to know his qualities. Silas had travelled to Jerusalem again (verses 32-33). Luke does not mention how Paul came into contact

with him again. Together they are, before they leave, committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

Not a geographical place of departure, but the spiritual place of departure is decisive for a service. The grace of the Lord is the point of departure of Paul and Silas for the second missionary journey. The brethren who committed them to the grace of the Lord know that the success of this missionary journey depends on that.

For Paul and Silas a home base that sees the importance of this is a great encouragement. With this support Paul travels through Syria and Cilicia, where the souls were first brought to waver and later strengthened. With this last work he continues. He strengthens the churches everywhere where they have been formed.

## Acts 16

### **Acts 16:1-4 | Timothy, Paul's New Travel Companion**

*1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, 2 and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.*

After passing through Syria and Cilicia, Paul comes to Derbe and to Lystra in Lycaonia (Acts 14:6). In Lystra he meets a disciple named Timothy. Timothy is mentioned here for the first time. In the sequel of Acts and also in Paul's letters we will hear a lot about him.

It seems he came to faith through Paul's preaching during his first missionary journey. We can conclude this from the letters Paul wrote later to Timothy. In them he calls him "[my] true child in [the] faith" (1Tim 1:2) and addresses him as "my beloved son" (2Tim 1:2; cf. 1Cor 4:17). He will become Paul's most valued co-worker.

The marriage from which Timothy was born is forbidden by law (Deu 7:3; Neh 13:25). But grace overcomes and makes him, born of an unlawful marriage, an instrument of God's honor – his name means 'honoring God'. His mother and also his grandmother were believing women (2Tim 1:5), who taught him in the Scriptures. He has known the Scriptures from an early age (2Tim 3:15).

Since his conversion, Timothy has grown in the faith. Because of his knowledge of the holy Scriptures, he is soon able to serve with the Word. His spiritual development has been noticed by the brethren in Lystra, where he lives, but also by the brethren in Iconium, where he apparently sometimes comes to serve with the Word there as well.

When Paul comes back to Lystra and his attention undoubtedly is focused on this promising young man, he wants Timothy to travel with him. From the letters that Paul will later write to Timothy, we know that he is equipped for the service in a special way. We can discover four aspects that have played a role in this:

1. previous prophecies (1Tim 1:18),
2. the spiritual gift of God (1Tim 4:14; 2Tim 1:6a),
3. laying on of hands by Paul (2Tim 1:6b) and
4. laying on of hands by the joint elders (1Tim 4:14).

As mentioned before, the laying on of hands does not mean ordination or calling, but identification (Acts 6:6; 13:3).

Then Paul is doing something that at first glance seems odd because it is something he recently opposed so much. He circumcises Timothy with his own hands. The reason follows immediately. His goal with the circumcision of Timothy is to overcome Jewish prejudices (1Cor 9:20). Timothy will not be acceptable to Jews if he is not completely Jewish.

Paul stands in the freedom of the Spirit, therefore he can circumcise Timothy. He also does it without any constraint being exerted on him. When he was forced to circumcise Titus, he did not do so (Gal 2:3). Christian freedom fully acknowledges the law in its place, although the law has no place in that Christian freedom itself. With Titus it is about Christian doctrine, as if you cannot be saved without circumcision. That is why Titus is not circumcised.

With Timothy it is about what is useful for the work and then it is useful to circumcise him in order to have a better entrance with the Jews and to win the Jews. Thus, the circumcision of Timothy has nothing to do with his salvation, but only with his functioning among Jewish believers.

Because of his birth from a Jewish mother Timothy is Jewish. This has been stated – so it is said – from a practical point of view that it is easier to prove that a mother is a Jew than that a father is a Jew. Also, a child is influenced by the mother in a much stronger way by her religion than the father could by his religion.

Nowhere did Paul call on the Jews to no longer abide by the law. Where it was useful, he submitted himself to it with a view to the gospel among the Jews. Only later is written in the letter to the Hebrews about the disappearance of the age of the law and with that its importance to the Jews and called on them to leave the camp (Heb 13:13).

With Silas and Timothy, Paul travels through the cities to pass on everywhere in the churches what has been decided in Jerusalem concerning the necessary things to be observed by the believers from the Gentiles. There is no question of keeping the commandments of the law.

### **Acts 16:5 | Strengthening and Increase of Churches**

*5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.*

Here Luke again gives an “in-between” stand of the development of the church. The verse marks the transition between two parts of the book. The section beginning in verse 6 continues to Acts 19:20 where Luke again gives such an “in-between” stand.

Now that the matter with the law has been settled, there is room for further growth. Being free from the law creates an atmosphere in which the churches can be strengthened in the faith. It is still the early days with the powerful work of the Spirit and dedicated servants. That there are daily additions to the churches also speaks of the powerful work of the Spirit. Conversions are not incidents. They do not take place every now and then, but every day people come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

### **Acts 16:6-10 | Come Over ... and Help Us**

*6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; 8 and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

Because the field of gospel service covers all creation, guidance is needed to know which way to go. For his first missionary journey, Paul can point to a clear commission from the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2). His second missionary journey he undertakes without such a commission, but with clear instructions.

The reason for this second missionary journey is the desire to provide aftercare in the areas where he went on his first missionary journey (Acts 15:36). There is no need for a special commission from the Spirit because this work is in accordance with the general command in Scripture that there must be care for the newly converted, the lambs of the flock. Paul is concerned for the welfare of the believers. That brings him to take action. Such action bears witness to spiritual maturity. It is the normal way of being led by the Holy Spirit, because among other things, He dwells in the believer to always lead him (Rom 8:14).

On the second missionary journey, Paul travels through the Phrygian and Galatian region, where he also speaks the Word and through which churches come into being. They continue to the west, to Asia. Asia is a part of Asia Minor with Ephesus as its capital. There they are forbidden “by the Holy Spirit” from speaking the Word. Later on he will work there for several years and proclaim the gospel extensively, with Ephesus as the headquarters of his work, but it is not God’s time yet (Acts 20:31).

By speaking about the *Holy* Spirit, Luke seems to emphasize that Paul and his people are surrounded by *unholy* spirits who want to bring them to unholy acts. Those unholy acts can be the result of all kinds of good intentions, but they are not the result of the Holy Spirit. It is a warning that we should not let ourselves be led by ‘wishful thinking’. The Lord can lead our lives in different ways. He can lead by Scripture, circumstances, fellow believers, the Holy Spirit, sober thinking.

After having been prevented from speaking the Word in Asia, they move north and try to go via Mysia to Bithynia. That road is blocked by “the Spirit of Jesus”. The Spirit of Jesus is of course none other than the Holy Spirit. The fact that He is now called “the Spirit of Jesus” makes us think of the life of the Lord Jesus in humiliation on earth, because that is what His Name reminds us of. The Lord Jesus has been guided on earth in every-

thing and always by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit and the Lord Jesus are so closely connected that can be spoken of the "Spirit of Jesus". As dependent as the Lord Jesus was on the Father, so dependent must Paul also learn to be on God. Nobody can teach him this better than the Spirit of Jesus.

We do not know how the Spirit blocked the road to Bithynia. Now that the road to Bithynia is closed, they are heading west. We see that Paul wants to travel for the Lord, but that he does not get a whole itinerary from the Lord. He has to learn to be dependent from step to step. That is how they end up in Troas.

In Troas Paul receives new marching orders in the silence of the night. For this God uses a dream (cf. Job 33:14-15). The man visible to Paul in a vision can be seen as a symbolic appearance. In this man the whole of Europe looms up in the spirit of Paul. The man does not call out to come to proclaim the gospel, but calls for help. There is a continent in need. An evangelist is a helper in need. He is a helper of people who are burdened by their sins to take that burden off their shoulders and offer the relief of faith.

The vision gives no further details about the journey and the destiny. It is a global indication of God's guidance. They still have to get clarity about the details. That clarity comes by talking about what has to be made up from the vision. They come to the conclusion that God has called them, and not only Paul, to preach the gospel to the Macedonians.

The writer of Acts, Luke, participates in this discussion. He joined the group unobtrusively. Until now, Luke has always written about 'they'. From verse 10 onward he speaks about 'us'. He becomes a participant of the company and an eyewitness to the events. The company now consists of four persons.

### **Acts 16:11-15 | Conversion of Lydia**

*11 So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a [Roman] colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of*

*prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. 14 A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.*

From Troas in Asia the company sailed to Samothrace, a little higher up in Asia. From there they made the crossing to Macedonia in Europe, where they landed in Neapolis. From Neapolis they go on foot to Philippi, the most important city of that part of Macedonia, twenty kilometers away.

Before there is any activity in connection with the gospel, Paul and his companions spend some days in the city. In this way they can get to know the people of the city. It is important to show interest in the people first in order to be able to bring them the gospel afterward.

Philippi is a Roman colony, i.e. an area where the citizens have the same rights as in the cities in Italy. In Philippi you can imagine yourself as if you were in Rome. It is just like in Rome. The people in Philippi live as Romans under the authority of Rome. Paul will point out in the letter he later writes to the believers in this city that believers in the world also live in such a way. Just as the inhabitants of Philippi live as Romans in a strange environment, so believers live as citizens of heaven on earth by the standards of heaven surrounded by a world of which they are not a part (Phil 3:20).

When they get to know the city, they will also have come to the conclusion that there was no synagogue, but there is a place of prayer. It seems that a place of prayer was common when there was no synagogue. In this really Roman city it is not obvious that there would be a synagogue. According to tradition at least ten Jews are needed for a synagogue, based on the prayer of Abraham for Sodom in which he goes down to ten righteous people (Gen 18:32).

Paul searches for the place of prayer in order to preach the gospel to the Jews here as well. When the Sabbath has come, they go to the place of which they have come to the assumption that people come together there to pray. When they get there, they see that women have come together.

Paul and his companions sit with them. In that attitude of rest they speak to the women.

In the reaction of the women and especially Lydia we see that God is already working in Philippi. In His time He brings Paul there to complete His work in the hearts. That a church is also coming into being that is characterized by love and care as is shown in the letter that Paul writes to them later, Luke does not speak about that here.

Lydia is probably a Greek converted to Judaism. She no longer worships the multitude of idols of the Roman Empire, but the one God of the Jews. She comes originally from Thyatira, which was known for its dyeing of fabrics. Lydia trades in these in Philippi. While Paul speaks – so there is more a kind of conversation than a formal preaching – Lydia listens. Then the Lord opens her heart, through which she gives heed to what Paul has spoken. She takes God's Word to heart, she accepts in faith what God says.

Here we see the two sides of the truth that we find throughout the Bible. On the one hand we see Lydia who listens, and on the other hand the Lord opens her heart so that she accepts what has been said. This is also how it works in our lives as believers. We go to a meeting to listen to the Word and at the same time we pray that the Word will do its work in us.

After her conversion, she is baptized immediately, which indicates that Paul will also have spoken about this. Not only she is being baptized, but also her household, i.e. all those who belong to it. Salvation is an individual matter. No one is saved because someone else is a believer. Children are not saved because the parents are believers. Every person must personally turn to God and believe in the Lord Jesus.

At the same time it is God's purpose to save not only persons, but households or families. We also find this in Scripture. God already told Noah that he had to prepare an ark to save his household (Heb 11:7). God gives parents a great responsibility to bring their children up in the discipline and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4). On the other hand, God's grace is that when parents do so, He connects His promise to save the children. For this the children themselves will have to come to repentance and faith. Where people are head of a family, they bring the whole family into the sphere of the Word of God.

When Lydia is baptized and her household, she urges Paul to stay with her for some time. In doing so, she appeals to her faithfulness to the Lord. Everything shows that she worships God. Her baptism proves that she wants to be obedient. Her hospitality proves that she has new life and wants to experience the new relationships that now exist as children of God. She will gladly have heard more about the Lord Jesus and His work.

### **Acts 16:16-18 | A Spirit of Divination Cast Out**

*16 It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. 17 Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." 18 She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.*

On the way to the place of prayer, Paul and his companions meet a slave-girl who possesses a spirit of divination, through whom she practices fortune-telling. The girl is really demon-possessed, really in the power of an evil spirit, through which her identity has been lost. She is an instrument of satan who ruthlessly exploits her. The masters of the girl earn well from her. There are plenty of people who come to consult her for payment.

When she crosses Paul's path, the spirit of divination in her reveals itself noisily. It praises "these men" as "bond-servants of the Most High God" who proclaim (not: 'the', but) a way of salvation. Here we see the deceptive tactics of satan. He does not openly attack the gospel here in Europe, but tries to connect with the work of the gospel through deceptive support in order to mix gospel and error and thus destroy the gospel.

It is important to see that there is no article here before the word "way". The girl does not speak about 'the' way, but about 'a' way. She is also talking about proclaiming "to you" a way and not about proclaiming "to us" the way. She does not advertise the gospel, but is out to present the gospel as one of the many ways of salvation. It is typically demonic to

deny the exclusivity of the gospel. In world religions such as buddhism and islam there is room for Jesus, but only in addition to other idols.

In the Greek context, talking about them as bond-servants of the most high god also means that she says that Paul and his companions are bond-servants of Zeus. She speaks of a way of salvation, not as salvation from sins, but the salvation from certain unpleasant circumstances of life which she also proclaims as a fortune-teller. She proposes a path which should lead to the well-being of man, but which in reality ends in eternal destruction.

Paul does not act directly against the girl. He endures her crying out for many days. Then comes the moment when he can no longer bear it. It does not mean that he becomes irritated, but that tolerating it even longer would make the gospel powerless. The girl's crying focused people's attention on them and not on the gospel. At a certain point, Paul turns and commands the spirit in the Name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. Paul does not expel the spirit in his own strength, but with the authority of the Name of the Lord Jesus. That Name is exalted above all power and strength (Acts 3:6,16; 4:10). The spirit obeys immediately.

Unfortunately, much of the gospel preaching today is a preaching that has the approval of the world because the evangelist allows the world to unite with his preaching. 'It is about the entrance for the gospel', it sounds as justification. That is not the way Paul works. His rejection of mixing will cost him dearly, as the sequel shows.

### **Acts 16:19-24 | Thrown Into Prison**

*19 But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, 20 and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, 21 and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." 22 The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order [them] to be beaten with rods. 23 When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; 24 and he, having received*

*such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

If satan cannot reach his goal with flattery, he turns into a roaring lion (1Pet 5:8). His instruments are the masters of the girl. Their source of income is lost by these people. They are not at all grateful for the deliverance of the girl, but extremely angry now that they see their profits evaporate. They drag Paul and Silas directly in front of the government which is represented by chief magistrates. The chief magistrates were the Roman governors, a kind of mayors.

The masters of the girl delivered by Paul accuse Paul and Silas of causing riots. This is a heavy accusation, because anything that endangers the unity and peace of the Roman Empire is severely punished. In their cunning, these people make what Paul and Silas did a political theme. They know that by doing so they stand a good chance of a conviction of Paul and Silas. They also respond to the hatred against the Jews by talking about "these people, who are Jews".

Furthermore, they accuse Paul and Silas of proclaiming customs that go against Roman customs. They apparently think that Luke and Timothy are less important, so they let them go. Customs have to do with culture. They accuse them of wanting to destroy their culture with that gospel. Culture has been put in the nature of the people by God and is different for all peoples, but in the hand of satan it can become a means to oppose the gospel. When the accusations have been made, the crowd, always looking for amusement, also stands up against Paul and Silas.

The chief magistrates consider further investigation unnecessary. Without any further form of trial, the clothes of both servants of God are torn from their bodies by the judges, who order them to be beaten with rods. Those who perform the beating do not take their task lightly and strike both preachers "with many blows".

God allows His servants to be beaten and it is their honor not to resist. It becomes a means by which an even more shining testimony of His Word and of His servants is given. As for the body, the world is stronger than the Christian, if God allows it; but in his heart, the Christian is above circumstances if he can realize the presence of God. His presence is greater than

all circumstances and can overcome everything else (1Jn 5:4). One can then rejoice in suffering (Acts 5:41; Rom 5:3).

After being beaten with rods, they are thrown into prison. The jailer is ordered to guard them carefully. He leaves nothing to chance and throws them into the inner prison. You can't go any deeper. As if that doesn't offer enough security, he carefully fastens their feet in the stocks as well. Escape is impossible. It seems that they are completely eliminated and the enemy has won. How discouraging it would be if they thought that this was their reception in Europe, when they clearly recognized the Lord's guidance to go here.

### Acts 16:25-26 | Praying and Singing in Prison

*25 But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; 26 and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.*

But look, and above all, listen, how the evangelists reacted to all the pain and humiliation afflicted. Instead of becoming despondent or lamenting or crying out to God for vengeance over the defamation inflicted on them, they pray and sing. Prayers and singing are powerful weapons with which great victories over the enemy are achieved (2Chr 20:1-22; Acts 4:23-37). They seek their strength with God and praise Him for Who He is. They do not do this softly, but understandable to all prisoners.

The prisoners do not shout at them to keep their mouths shut, but listen to them. They have never experienced and heard anything like this. The more difficult our circumstances are, the greater will be the impression our joy makes on those who are watching us in our difficulties.

While Paul and Silas are praying and singing and the prisoners are listening, God suddenly makes Himself heard. He responds to the praying and singing of His servants by a sudden, great earthquake. It is a very special earthquake. It is limited to a building. The ground doesn't tear open and all the walls keep standing. Only the doors open and the chains of all the prisoners are unfastened! An additional and possibly even greater wonder

is that no one takes the opportunity to escape. They all stay where they are, nailed to the ground. Such special earthquakes are necessary in one's life to make him realize the necessity of salvation.

### **Acts 16:27-34 | Conversion of the Jailer**

*27 When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" 29 And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, 30 and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33 And he took them that [very] hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his [household]. 34 And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.*

Because of the earthquake the jailer also awakes. When he sees that the doors are open, he can draw no other conclusion than that all the prisoners have fled. It is his job to guard them and in that, he feels he has failed. He wants to kill himself, but God intervenes and lets him proclaim salvation. When the man is about to kill himself, Paul's voice sounds in darkness.

Paul cannot have seen that the man wants to commit suicide. It is pitch-dark and he is in the inner prison. God makes the situation clear to him. His words "we are all here" bear witness to the same. The God Who unfastened the chains also prevents any prisoner from escaping. No one can resist Him and escape. Thus, all sinners in hell will be held there by God's power for all eternity.

Paul's words prevent the man from killing himself. That means that he believes Paul. He wants to go to Paul, but for that he needs light. He gets that and then he rushes in and falls down before Paul and Silas, trembling. We do not read that the earthquake made the jailer tremble, but we do read that the voice of Paul that came to him from the pitch-dark does so.

He must have experienced that as the voice of God, the God for Whom darkness is light as day (Psa 139:12).

Grace has a crushing effect on the convinced sinner. At the same time, grace also works the request for salvation. With this question the jailer addresses Paul and Silas, whom he now addresses with “sirs” and thus acknowledging them as his superiors. He asks for the way of salvation. Possibly he has heard of it before. He may have laughed about it then, but now in his distress he asks about it. In this way God always works in the conversion of sinners.

Embedded in the jailer’s question “what must I do to be saved?” is the idea that he thinks he must do something for his salvation. But to be saved no one can do anything, it is even impossible to do anything about it himself. He does not get an order to do certain works. Paul proposes to him the only way through which someone can be saved and that is faith in the Lord Jesus.

It is about putting his trust in the Lord Jesus. He must throw his anchor in Him. That is not an achievement, but a necessity. Faith is no more an achievement than it is an achievement that someone grabs the rescue buoy that is thrown to him when he is in mortal distress.

Paul not only speaks of the salvation of the jailer, but also of the salvation of his household. Salvation means that a radical separation has come about with the world. As we have already seen with Lydia, it is the normal order that where the head of the house comes to faith, God extends the salvation also to the household members (verse 15). The house where the light of the gospel is lit is no longer in the realm of the world, but in the realm where the Holy Spirit works and the Word is spoken by Him. The order in that house is His order.

After having given faith in the Lord Jesus as the core of salvation, Paul and Silas speak “the word of the Lord” to him and to all who are with him in his house. Whoever has come to faith has placed his life under the authority of the Lord. That Lord makes clear through His Word – ‘the word of the Lord’ – how He wants to be served. Paul and Silas give further instruction about this.

The jailer shows his conversion by taking Paul and Silas with him in that hour of the night. Nothing more comes of sleeping, there is no need for that at all. Here is a man who has undergone a great change inwardly and gives proof of that also outwardly. He takes his former prisoners, of whom he has now become a brother, into his house and takes care of them by washing their wounds. Immediately after the good care, he is baptized, he and all his people. In Philippi, the light has begun to shine in yet another house after it has already been lit in Lydia's house. The jailer rejoices in the faith after having first known the sadness of his misery and having heard and accepted the gospel of his salvation.

Lydia was already a God-fearing woman (verse 14), but still had to be saved, just as we saw with Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2; 11:14). The jailer was a wicked man. He also needed salvation. Good and bad people both need salvation.

### **Acts 16:35-40 | Release of Paul and Silas**

*35 Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." 36 And the jailer reported these words to Paul, [saying], "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." 38 The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, 39 and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. 40 They went out of the prison and entered [the house of] Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.*

It seems that the chief magistrates know nothing of what happened in the night. They want Paul and Silas to be released. A beating and a night in prison is enough in their eyes to have taught these people a lesson. The jailer brings the message to Paul. If he has worried about what he had to do with Paul and Silas, the message that he can release the prisoners is a huge relief for him. He can tell them that they can go out and leave in peace.

But Paul does not agree with the proposal of the chief magistrates. He sees what it would mean if they left the city in this way. If they had been let out in secret, the suspicion would always have remained on them that they were agitators. After all, they had been beaten in public and thrown in jail, and this without trial. Everyone had seen that. That is why there had to be open justification, so that everyone would be aware that they were not agitators. The suspicion had to be removed that they had done something against the government. After all, that was the public accusation made against them on the market.

For this justification, Paul appeals to his Roman civil right. Silas, too, appears to have that civil right since Paul speaks of “us ... men who are Romans”. They did not use this civil right to prevent the brutal treatment and mistreatment. They did not want to escape the suffering for Christ. He uses his right only to remove the appearance that they had committed any crime.

Their justification is also necessary for the young church, so that it will be clear to them that Paul and Silas were mindful of what was honest. The newly converted would not be identified with them as evildoers by the outside world, which would otherwise have been the case.

When the chief magistrates hear that they have beaten Romans and imprisoned them, they become frightened. They realize that it could cost them their lives if Paul and Silas were to bring charges against them. The chief magistrates can do nothing but respond to the demand of Paul and Silas. They escort them out of prison and ask them to leave the city. They want nothing to do with the evangelists and with them they also send away the gospel as something with which they want nothing to have to do with (cf. Mt 8:34).

Paul and Silas do not immediately respond to the request to leave the city. When they go out of prison, they first go to Lydia to say goodbye to her. When they come to her, they find more believers there. The gospel has been accepted by more people.

It says so remarkably that they “saw the brethren”. They see believers with whom they share the new life and in whom they recognize it, they see new family members in God’s family. When they see them, they take the

opportunity to encourage them, that is to say, encourage them to remain faithful to the Lord. Then they leave.

The 'they' who go away are Paul, Silas and Timothy. Luke stays behind in Philippi. He places no emphasis on himself. As inconspicuously as he joined Paul's company in verse 10, where he writes about 'us', so inconspicuously he leaves it again. We can say, that partly through his work, Philippi has become a church where love and care were abundantly present.

## Acts 17

### **Acts 17:1-3 | Preaching of Paul in Thessalonica**

*1 Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and [saying], "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."*

When Paul, Silas and Timothy have left Philippi, they travel south to Amphipolis and Apollonia. In Apollonia they head west and then arrive in Thessalonica. The special mention that there is a synagogue of the Jews there may be an indication that there was no synagogue in the two previous cities and that he therefore passed those cities. We know that Paul acts as much as possible according to the principle 'first the Jew and then the Greek'. It is his "custom" (verse 2; cf. Lk 4:16) to first look for a synagogue in a city where he comes.

A synagogue has the advantage that there are not only Jews but also Gentiles who are interested in the God of Israel. It is a nice springboard to bring the gospel to prepared people. The synagogue is a place of learning where the Jews not only meet on Sabbath, but also on other days. It is therefore plausible that Paul, although conversing with the visitors of the synagogue mainly on the Sabbaths, also on other days converses with interested people.

The fact that Luke speaks of "three Sabbaths" also gives an indication of the time Paul spends in Thessalonica. That must be between three and four weeks. In those more than three weeks he reasons with them from the Scriptures. He opens these to them and quotes from them to show that the Christ, that is the Messiah, had to suffer at His coming and rise from the dead. He must first make this clear to them because they were looking for a messiah who, as their political leader, would free them from the yoke of the Romans. However, the Scriptures speak a different language and that

is what he first tells them. Then he can simply point to the Lord Jesus as the Messiah and say that in Him He has come.

The Christ of Whom he has just shown from the Scriptures what should happen to Him, is none other than “Jesus”, the subject of his proclamation. This one verse summarizes the core of the gospel, as it can be proclaimed today especially to the Jews. That core is that the Messiah Jesus came, suffered, died and rose again from the dead.

In these few weeks that Paul has been in Thessalonica, he has not only preached the gospel, but has also spoken about prophetic truths in which he has emphasized the second coming of Christ. His letters to them bear witness to this. In his second letter to them he reminds them of his oral teaching when he was with them (2Thes 2:5).

### **Acts 17:4-9 | Reactions on the Preaching**

*4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. 5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 When they did not find them, they [began] dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” 8 They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. 9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.*

The authority with which Paul and Silas spoke is not without result. They spoke the Word with conviction (1Thes 1:5). This made such an impression on three groups of people that they joined Paul and Silas. The first group consists of “some of them”, that is some of the Jews, because in their synagogue they have spoken (verse 1). The second group is formed by “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks”. These are not proselytes, but worshipers of the God of Israel who adhere to the Noahite covenant. The third group is “a number of the leading women”.

Even today, women are often in the majority when it comes to responding to the gospel. This may have to do with the fact that a woman is by her nature more familiar with the suffering in the world. She experiences this personally, for example in giving birth to children to which pain is connected (Gen 3:16). She also wonders, more than men do, why suffering is in the world and therefore often opens herself to the gospel. Men are more often insensitive to the consequences of sin.

After the three groups that joined Paul and Silas, a group that strongly opposes the gospel comes forward. The majority of the Jews does not want the message that Paul brings. As we always see, they reject the gospel and also begrudge others to hear about it. They take along people who hang around – this is the literal meaning of the word “mob” – in the marketplace. These idlers are easily persuaded to cause a popular uproar and bring the city into turmoil.

They head for Jason’s house, assuming they will find Paul and Silas there. Apparently Jason has given shelter to both preachers. Their intention is to bring Paul and Silas out to the people, that is to say, to have them sentenced by a people’s assembly. But they do not find Paul and Silas in Jason’s house.

In their frustration about this they seize Jason and some brethren and drag them before the city authorities, while shouting against them the accusation they had intended for Paul and Silas. In this way Jason and the brethren share in the persecution for the sake of the gospel because they identified with it because they accommodated Paul and Silas. Luke speaks more often about hospitality (Acts 16:15; 18:3; 21:16). The Lord Jesus expresses His appreciation about it (Mt 25:38-40; cf. 1Pet 4:9; 3Jn 1:5-8).

The accusation is that they upset the world. Thus they give unintentional testimony of the power of Christendom. At the same time they also say that Christendom is dangerous to the state. Nowadays Christians who are faithful to the Bible are also increasingly confronted with such an accusation. They are quickly called fundamentalists, people who are a danger to society. The uproar of the world – by which is meant the Roman world empire (cf. Lk 2:1) – finds its origin, according to the prosecutors, in the preaching of another king than the emperor: “Jesus”.

The word “another” has the meaning of “another of some other kind”, i.e. not of the kind of Caesar. It does not refer to just another person than Caesar, but to Someone Who is different according to His Being. If it is Someone Who has all authority in heaven and on earth, He is the greatest imaginable threat to the empire. We see here, just like when the Lord Jesus stood before Pilate, that it is about the contrast between Christ and the Roman Empire, which will also be seen in the end time.

The Jews still prefer to acknowledge the emperor as their king rather than accept Jesus as their King. After all, they already told Pilate that they had no king but Caesar (Jn 19:15b). In the end time the apostate people will confirm that choice by accepting the antichrist as their messiah and with him the dictator of the restored Roman Empire (Rev 13:11; Rev 13:1).

The accusation shows that Paul and Silas spoke about the kingship of the Lord Jesus. This kingship is also central in the two letters that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. He mentions it in almost every chapter. The kingship of Christ means that He has a kingdom. That kingdom is not yet public on earth, but it is present. It is present in the hearts of those who acknowledge Him as Lord over their life (Rom 14:17). However, it will also be openly established on earth when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven and takes His place on His throne on earth.

The first part of the accusation is not justified. Paul and Silas have nowhere acted against the emperor's decrees. Nowhere Christians are called upon to build the kingdom of God through political activities, but to wait for Him Who will do so.

With their actions, the Jews – and not the preachers of the gospel – stir up all those who hear their accusations. Opponents of the gospel never bring peace. Nor can they because the arguments they put forward against the gospel are baseless. Opponents of the gospel never have a clear story, but are vague in their language, no matter how self-confident they may speak.

Jason and those who were dragged with him before the city authorities are released after having paid a pledge. There is nothing else to do against them. It seems that they can't be punished for dealing with the subversive preachers. However, the city authorities do want a guarantee in the form of a pledge to ensure that they will not continue to support these intruders.

## Acts 17:10-15 | Paul and Silas in Berea

*10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily [to see] whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. 13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.*

The brethren think that Paul and Silas should leave Thessalonica. It is far too dangerous for them to stay there. Paul and Silas listen to the brethren. They recognize the voice of the Lord in what the brethren say. The brethren also decide where to go because they send them away to Berea. Paul and Silas leave unnoticed in the night. When they arrive in Berea, they act in the same way as always and go first to the synagogue of the Jews.

Luke calls the Jews they find in the synagogue “more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica”. They are not noble by origin, but the nobility of these Jews is the willingness with which they receive the Word. It is a nobleness of mind, of spirit.

The fact that they willingly accept the Word does not mean that they accept it blindly. They examine it in the light of the Scriptures. They hear all kinds of things about the Messiah, but they want to examine in the Old Testament whether what they hear is in accordance with what is written there. Examining means comparing Scripture with Scripture; it is a thorough examination. They don’t just do that on a certain occasion, but “daily”. Because of that examination many people come to faith. That faith is firmly based on the Word.

We see in the order – first receiving with great eagerness and then examining – an important clue for fruitful Bible study. It begins with an eagerness to learn; then comes the study of the Bible. Doing Bible study without the

eagerness to do what the Bible says leads to formalism and legalism. It does not lead to knowing God's thoughts, but to pride.

In addition to the many Jews who believe, many prominent Greek women and men also believe. The women are mentioned first, which may indicate that they are in the majority, or that they are more quickly convinced than the men.

This victory through the gospel in Berea is brought to the attention of the Jews in Thessalonica. That message hits them like a hammer. The impact is explosive. The Jews from Thessalonica go to Berea. Their jealousy of and hatred against the gospel are so great that they are willing to travel the distance of seventy to eighty kilometers to oppose the gospel also in Berea. They manipulate the crowds with their false ideas about the gospel, which also causes turmoil and confusion there. Also in Berea the brethren consider it advisable that Paul leaves.

The hatred of the Jews concentrates on Paul. Silas and Timothy can stay to teach the believers in Berea further in the faith. The brethren tell Paul to travel as far as the sea. Some of the brethren also go with him to accompany him. These brethren accompany him all the way to Athens. The accompaniment over such a long distance also proves their willing participation in the gospel. They are willing to do something for it. From there they return to Berea.

Paul gives them the message for Silas and Timothy that they will join him in Athens as soon as possible. By this he does not mean to put pressure on their service, but he expresses his desire for their company. He is very fond of their company because of the support in the service they give him. It is important that servants do not go their way as loners, but acknowledge that they need each other. It is an acknowledgment of the diversity of the gifts that the Lord has given which complement each other.

### **Acts 17:16-18 | Paul in Athens**

*16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing [Gentiles], and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. 18 And*

*also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," —because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*

The message Paul gave to the brethren concerning Silas and Timothy is very much alive in him. He is waiting for them in Athens. This seems to be the main purpose of his stay in Athens, but that does not mean that he will sit quietly in a hotel room waiting for the arrival of his two co-workers. This time he doesn't immediately go looking for a synagogue, but makes a tour through the city. During that tour he is deeply touched by the many idols he observes.

Athens is the great center of Greek civilization, scholarship and philosophy. It is also a city with a past glory that is full of idols. It has been said that the city had more idols than people and that it was easier to find a god than a human being. Unfortunately, God once had to speak about Israel in such a way (Jer 2:28; 11:13).

Because of what Paul sees, he cannot take rest. His spirit is being provoked within him when he sees so much that is false and makes people walk on the wrong path. He is forced to give his testimony. After all, he is not a tourist in the city, but a preacher. His first course when it comes to preaching is to go to the synagogue again to meet the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. He can also be found in the marketplace because there are always many people there as well.

He "reasons" with them, that is, he does not give a speech, but has a conversation, a dialogue, with them. Such a manner of discussion keeps the listeners sharp and involved. It forces them to think. Reasoning with somebody also requires to listen carefully to what the other person is busy with.

The inhabitants of Athens are characterized by an enormous spiritual activity and an insatiable hunger for new ideas, for the latest philosophical views. Among Paul's audience there are two groups of philosophers who attack him. They do not listen, but begin to argue.

One group consists of followers of the enjoyment doctrine of a certain Epicurus. This man taught that the highest virtue of a human being is in the satisfaction of one's own desires. If he can satisfy his wishes, he is happy.

They are materialists and atheists, and the purpose of their life is enjoyment (1Cor 15:32b). This also means that they escape suffering because suffering prevents enjoyment. Their way of life exalts them above others. It is essentially complete selfishness. There is no place for God. As a group they no longer exist, but today they have countless kindred spirits.

The other group consists of followers of a doctrine that implies that someone is only happy when he is completely free of mental disorders, of emotions. This doctrine is opposed to that of the Epicurean philosophers. The Stoic philosophers – named after the room, the Stoa poikile, where this doctrine was taught – say on the contrary that all earthly enjoyments as well as suffering must be suppressed completely. It is about being insensitive, to go through joy and suffering unaffected. Whoever does not let himself be influenced by inner feelings or outer circumstances, has complete control over himself and enjoys the highest happiness in this. This, of course, feeds pride and makes them independent of God.

In both groups there is no interest at all in Paul, whom they belatedly call “idle babbler”. By ‘idle babbler’ they mean someone who has collected different ideas from others – has picked grains everywhere; the literal meaning of the word translated with ‘idle’ is ‘grain picker’ – and then passes them on as if they were his own ideas. With this they want to ridicule the truth that Paul preaches and strip it of its originality. They deny its Divine origin.

Ridiculing the truth or presenting it as an unoriginal story is often a means in the hand of the enemy to turn people away from the truth. In doing so, he responds to people’s fear of identifying with something that is despised by a lot of people.

For others, what Paul preaches is a novelty. In “Jesus and the resurrection” that he preaches to them, they see idols about whom they have never heard anything so far. They understand from his words that he speaks about two gods: Jesus and Anastasis, the Greek word for ‘resurrection’. Such a view shows their total blindness to the revelation of God in Christ. Not only do they see Jesus as an idol, but they also see the resurrection as an idol. The resurrection from the dead is unknown to them, which is why they think

that the resurrection is also an idol. To their understanding Paul preaches a god and a goddess.

### **Acts 17:19-21 | Paul Brought to the Areopagus**

*19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)*

Curious as they are, they want to know more. There is no enmity, rather a benevolent permission they give him to give his testimony. They even politely ask Paul if they are allowed to know "what this new teaching is" he is talking about. For this they take him to the Areopagus, where 'the Department of Religion', in the presence of many interested people in the 'public gallery', wants to deal with these things. They want to hear Paul about what they judge to be "new teaching" and "strange things". To them, these are words with an unknown meaning.

Paul will certainly have spoken in plain Greek, but still the meaning of what he says escapes these highly gifted thinkers. They think they are enlightened in their thinking, but in reality they are darkened in their minds. Therefore they understand nothing of what Paul says (1Cor 2:14). In order to be able to do so, they must first repent. Paul's speech therefore culminates in a call to repentance that is connected to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (verses 30-31).

Before that happens, Paul is given the opportunity to explain what he is teaching. Offering this opportunity is in line with the attitude of the Athenians, for they like nothing more than to talk. Athens is a real city of talk. All they do is talk all day long. When a novelty presented itself, it was a rewarding occasion for a conversation.

### **Acts 17:22-29 | Speech to the Men of Athens**

*22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with*

*this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all [people] life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one [man] every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined [their] appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.*

Paul begins his speech by connecting with the world of the Athenians. He knows what kind of audience he has in front of him. Among the Jews he appeals to the Scriptures because the Jews also refer to them for they know them. The Athenians do not know the Scriptures and Paul does not quote from them, but everything he says is based entirely on the Scriptures. He does not begin with a condemnation of their idolatry (cf. Rom 1:22-23), but with a neutral observation. He does not express any appreciation or reproach.

He tells what he noticed when he went through the city. Among the many objects of worship, he had also found an altar dedicated "to an unknown God". An altar for an unknown god had been erected for fear of having overlooked a god who had to be honored after all. It could also be that it was a kind of 'garbage can god', where one would go if one had a business for which one could not go to the 'known gods'.

Starting from this gap in their cult of idols, Paul starts preaching to them the true God. He does not say that he is going to preach that unknown god to them, as if he is filling a gap in their arsenal of idols. He does not say 'who you worship in ignorance', but "what you worship in ignorance". What Paul is going to preach overthrows their entire system of idolatry. He does not correspond to their ignorance of a particular god, but to their ignorance of everything that has to do with the true God. Paul does not proclaim a new god, but the God of gods.

The first thing he says about God is that He is Creator. If we don't know Him like that, we don't know Him at all. In this intellectual city, Paul must descend to the lowest rung of the ladder of truth. That is the result of intellectual civilization without God. Paul addresses the basic questions that every thinking person asks: Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?

God made everything, the whole world and everything in it (Psa 146:6; Isa 42:5). This is at odds with the Greek thinking that assumes that matter is eternal. God made the world, the world came into being out of Him. He called the things which did not exist as existing (Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3). That means that everything that is, came forth from that one God. God is not part of creation or united with creation. He is there and is above creation.

Although He is above His creation, He cares for it. He is not a God at a distance, separated from His creation. He is also not a prisoner of His creation, as if He were locked in it. He is too big to live in something made by human hands, but not too big to deal with people's needs. People have to carry, nurture and even take their gods into captivity (Isa 46:1-2), but the true God Himself serves man and carries His own (Isa 46:3-4).

God needs nothing from man, but man depends on Him for everything he needs. The temples don't contain God, but the service in those temples doesn't add anything to God either. God cannot be limited spatially, He is omnipresent. Solomon, who built a temple for God, was aware of this (1Kgs 8:27). Gentiles have only local gods.

With these arguments Paul sweeps their whole system off the table. *God* is the Source of every good gift. He is so interested in man that He gives to all "life and breath and all things" (verse 25; Psa 50:12). To Him, all men are also equal, for He made them all come forth from one blood, that is, from one ancestor. To all those people God makes His gospel known. And God has not only given people life and breath and all things as individuals, He has also placed those people together in nations and given each nation its own territory. God leads the history of all nations and each of those nations He has given its own place on earth, taking His people Israel as a starting point (Deu 32:8).

God did not make man to leave him to himself, but that he might seek Him. In the deepest being of man there is a craving for God. This is how he was created by Him. God is not far from man. In the gospel He comes close to man. The sincerely seeking man will find Him. God has done everything to make it easy for man to find Him.

How much man is in darkness about God, Paul indicates by saying that people “grope” for God. Someone does something by groping when he has no light. Man lives in darkness, his understanding is blinded by the god of this age (2Cor 4:4). That is why he does not perceive God although God can be seen wherever man looks.

To make this fact of God’s nearness clear to the Athenians, Paul appeals to some of their famous poets who have said that humans are God’s offspring. What those poets said, they said with Zeus in mind, but Paul applies it to the real meaning for God. Adam was born of God, created by Him and therefore of His offspring [not: His children]. In that sense he is also called “son of God” (Lk 3:23,38). Man is created in God’s image and resembles Him in the qualities He has, through which man can act as a responsible being. Wherever people are, we see the image of God.

We can also recognize Him in creation, that is, His eternal power and Divine Nature are seen therein (Rom 1:20). In this sense, it is perfectly true that He is not far from each of us because we live and move in Him and exist in Him. The fact that man does not find Him despite all that, shows how great man’s alienation from God is. In reality, man is not looking for God either. There is no one seeking for God because they have all deviated from God’s original plan with man (Rom 3:11-12).

Subtly Paul draws attention to that deviation by pointing out that they should not think that the Divine Nature can be depicted by people. He has seen that Athens is full of that foolishness. If we are ‘His offspring’, that is, if God made us in His image, it is foolishness for us to make images of God in our own imagination. Anyone who makes an image of God does so according to his own image of God. The consequence of this can only be that the greatness of God as far as man’s knowledge of Him is concerned is completely nullified. If man sets to work with this, he cannot but destroy this image.

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**Acts 17:30-31 | Call to Repentance**

*30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all [people] everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."*

Paul comes to his actual message. The ignorance which they have admitted with the image of the unknown god is not merely a gap in their knowledge, but reflects their total ignorance. This ignorance extends over all the times that have passed. Paul puts an end to this ignorance. God is a God of patience Who has allowed all those times to pass without intervening. He still does not intervene, but in His grace He lets the gospel be proclaimed also now, in this day and age.

It means that people must repent, that is: totally change their minds. They think they have everything under control, but they have to realize that they are completely wrong. This is a sign of weakness for those who have always done everything in their own strength, from faith in themselves. It is also a proof of self-conquest when one bows down to the command of God. It is about obedience to faith (Rom 1:5).

God commands all people, without exception, good and evil, wherever they are, including in Athens, to repent. He also places a limit on preaching. God says to man that he must repent in view of a day fixed by Him that will come, which is the day of judgment. God's patience will come to an end and He will make Himself known as the God of righteous judgment. Righteousness is established by judgment (Isa 26:9b). Before there can be peace, both on earth and in the heart of a human being, righteousness must first have taken place in view of all that deserves judgment.

This judgment God will bring on the world through a Man. Paul does not mention the name of that Man, but merely gives a characteristic. This characteristic is of decisive importance and establishes beyond doubt that the judgment will come. That characteristic of this Man is that He is resurrected by God. Again Paul speaks of the resurrection. The Man Who was resurrected by God has a resurrection body. Also in the resurrection He is Man. And precisely because He is the Son of Man, He will exercise

judgment (Jn 5:27). God has given the proof that this Man will exercise judgment by raising Him from the dead.

### **Acts 17:32-34 | Reactions to the Preaching**

*32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some [began] to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

Until his remark about the resurrection, his audience listened attentively. But when he starts talking about the resurrection, the tongues loosen. For these Greek thinkers, the body is a dungeon in which the spirit is held captive and limited in its unfolding. It is therefore the greatest foolishness for them to think that the body would once again serve as a dungeon for the mind. The thought alone leads some to sneering remarks.

Others go away with a not too serious intention: "We shall hear you again concerning this." Those are the people who put off a decision. Thus Paul leaves from their midst, away of those who are mocking and hesitant.

However, there are also men and women who join him and believe. It's not a big harvest. Where the mind and philosophy prevail, the heart is not receptive to the gospel (cf. 1Cor 1:26).

## Acts 18

### **Acts 18:1 | Paul Comes in Corinth**

| *1 After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth.*

The next destiny of Paul is Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaia. The city had two ports on the Mediterranean Sea and was a competitor of Athens. As a port city, it was a meeting point and residence for all kinds of nationalities. Like Athens, Corinth was known for its wisdom and scholarship, but even more for its great corruption and immorality. This is evidenced by the fact that the name of the city was made into a verb, ‘Corinthianizing’. That word means as much as ‘living in harlotry’.

Paul does not come here with an attitude to teach a lesson to that worldly city. He is aware that he is entering a field where people do not take God and His commandments into account at all and where there is no respect whatsoever for human life. He comes there “in fear and in much trembling” (1Cor 2:3).

To win them for the gospel, he has not made use of excellence of words or wisdom. That would not have convinced them of their sinfulness, but rather made them insensitive to the gospel. No, when he went to them, he had determined to know nothing among them “except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1Cor 2:2).

In the face of all immorality, he presented Christ and Him crucified. He presented the Person of Christ and His work on the cross to them. Thus he announced God’s grace for them, and he also showed God’s judgment on sin in it.

### **Acts 18:2-3 | Paul and Aquila and Priscilla**

| *2 And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, 3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.*

Against the background of this extremely secular stronghold and his lonely arrival and stay in that city, the meeting with the couple Aquila and Priscilla must have been an encouragement to Paul. For this meeting to take place, God used the command of Emperor Claudius in Rome. In this way He always knows how to use the great ones of the earth to promote His work (cf. Lk 2:1-7). Emperor Claudius had issued an anti-Semitic command and sent the Jews away from Rome. The reason for this command is supposed to be the struggle and unrest that had arisen among the Jews because of the question whether the Lord Jesus was the Messiah or not.

Because Aquila was a Jew, as Luke explicitly mentions, he too had to leave Rome. We are not told whether his wife was a Jew or not. Aquila came from Pontus, in the south of present-day Turkey. Later he moved to Rome. Where he met Priscilla and whether they had children is not told to us either, nor the way in which they came to faith.

Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned here for the first time out of a total of six. They have become faithful and esteemed fellow workers of Paul, who risked their lives for him and who had the church in their house (Rom 16:3-5; 1Cor 16:19). Paul had them at heart until the very end of his life (2Tim 4:19). The three times Paul writes about them in his letters, he writes "Prisca" and not "Priscilla", as Luke does three times in this chapter. 'Prisca' is the diminutive form of 'Priscilla'.

Paul goes to them. He appreciates their company. He notices their interest in the things of the Lord. And he discovers another similarity: Aquila is a tentmaker by profession and so is he. Paul had learned a trade according to good Jewish custom, as was expected of all Jewish boys. 'He who does not teach his son to work, teaches him to steal,' the rabbis said. So the profession Paul learned is that of a tentmaker.

Because Aquila, so it seems, had a tent maker's business, Paul can go to work for him and stay there. In this way he can provide for himself. He does this to be completely independent of the Corinthians and without any suspicion that, by proclaiming the gospel to them, he would be after their money. He has accepted money from other churches. For example, when he was in Thessalonica, he received support twice from Philippi

(Phil 4:15). But in Corinth, where money and trade abounded, he did not accept financial support.

He works with his own hands. He had the right to live from the gospel, but does not use this right in Corinth (1Cor 9:14; cf. Acts 20:34-35). He did not in any way want to give the impression that he preached the gospel in order to earn money from it, or make merchandise of the gospel, just as everything in that city was merchandise.

### **Acts 18:4-8 | Paul's Preaching in Corinth**

*4 And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul [began] devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood [be] on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.*

In his spare time, i.e. on the Sabbath, Paul goes to the synagogue. Also in Corinth he goes first to the place where he finds the best connection for the teaching of the Scriptures. The public there, consisting of Jews and Greeks, is familiar with the Scriptures or is interested in them. Paul makes grateful use of this to find entry into the hearts.

He convinces both Jews and Greeks of what Scripture says about the Christ, the Messiah. It is especially important that he shows that Scripture speaks about the coming of the Messiah. He also speaks of the fact that He would be rejected at His coming, that He would be killed, that He would also rise and go to heaven. This conviction from Scripture is the preparatory work in order to be able to testify afterward that this Messiah has indeed come, namely in the Person of Jesus.

The latter he will do when Silas and Timothy have come from Macedonia and have joined him. It is plausible that Silas and Timothy brought financial support from the believers in Macedonia (2Cor 11:9), which enabled

Paul to devote all his time to the proclamation of the Word. The very arrival of the two brethren was, of course, also a great encouragement for the apostle. Supported by their presence, he devoted himself completely to the Word for which he now has the opportunity every day and not only on the Sabbath. The main thing in his proclamation of the Word is to testify to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. In doing so, he seems to address only the Jews.

While the Jews are at first convinced by him of everything written about the Messiah, a little later they resist and blaspheme Christ, that is, they deliberately speak evil of Him. They do not want to accept that He is the Messiah. They reveal their deep-rooted hatred of God's Anointed. When Paul sees this, he puts the responsibility for their lives on their own heads.

He has warned them and is free from the judgment that will affect them. He bears symbolic witness to this by shaking out his garments. There is no bloodguilt on his head. Loading bloodguilt on himself means being guilty of someone else's death. There is such a thing as a bloodguilt that we put on ourselves if we are negligent in preaching the gospel. The Christian is a debtor of all people (cf. Eze 3:18; 18:13; 33:4-9).

The rejection by the Jews opens the way for Paul to go to the nations (cf. Acts 13:46). Paul leaves them to their own responsibility, after he has fulfilled his responsibility. He is clean and because he is clean, he can go to the nations. Nothing more can be done for them. Significantly we read that he leaves there. He has to turn his back on them.

The Lord confirms his decision by connecting him directly with the nations in the person of Titius Justus. Titius Justus sympathizes with the Jews and has heard the Word in the synagogue. He receives Paul in his house. Also significant is the mention of Luke that the house of Titius Justus was "next to the synagogue". The house in which Paul and with him the gospel takes up his residence, stands "next to the synagogue". The blessing is no longer to be found in the synagogue, but remains as it were within reach for those who go there.

Yet it is a Jew, and even the leader of the synagogue, Crispus, of whom we read that in Corinth he is the first who believes in the Lord with all his household. Again a whole family is saved (cf. Acts 10:24,44; 16:15,34).

Crispus is baptized by Paul. By the way, Crispus is one of the few converts in Corinth who is baptized by Paul personally (1Cor 1:14-15). Just as in financial matters, Paul has always taken care in spiritual matters that he could not be suspected of being out for his own benefit.

Crispus and his house are the first fruits in Corinth. Many more come to faith after they have heard Paul, after which they are baptized. The work gets going. We see that this work is done in the order that is still customary today: hearing, believing, baptizing.

### **Acts 18:9-11 | The Lord Encourages Paul**

*9 And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid [any longer], but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." 11 And he settled [there] a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*

While the work is in progress and many are coming to repentance, one night the Lord comes to Paul in a vision with an encouragement. From what the Lord says, we can see that Paul is afraid and is thinking about remaining silent. It is not without reason that the Lord says that Paul should not be afraid and that he should speak and not be silent.

We could ask ourselves whether so much blessing at his work is not already a great encouragement and that his fear and his considerations not to preach any more speak of little faith or even unbelief. But we remember what type of a city Corinth is (1Cor 6:9-11) and that Paul is there with fear and trembling. Even the campaign of hatred of the Jews (verse 6) he does not suffer stoically. Paul has a great awareness of the enormous opposition. There is result, but what an environment!

Blessing gives no strength. Only the Lord gives strength. The Lord knows what is going on in His servant and He encourages him in view of the resistance of the Jews and in view of the great immorality of the city. Every servant who is aware of the world in which he lives needs such encouragement.

The Lord gives Paul two encouragements to continue. The first is that He Himself is with him. Knowing that the Lord Himself is with you gives

strength. We then know ourselves in the company of Him to Whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18) and Who has said: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20; Isa 43:5). It is the encouragement that we will also be able to perform the task assigned to us (Jdg 6:12).

No one will be able to do him any harm, for the Lord Himself will protect him so that he may perform his task. What that task is, we see in the second encouragement that consists of the announcement that the Lord has many people in the city. The Lord knows all who will believe in Him (Acts 13:48), but He wants to use Paul to make themselves public. So Paul is told that there are many chosen people, whom he has yet to approach with the gospel. He does not know who they are, but they will come forward through his preaching.

Although it has yet to become clear who all belong to His people, the Lord does not say 'I will have a great people in this city', but 'I have many people in this city'. To Him, something that has yet to happen is the same as if it has already happened. He can talk about future things as things that are already reality.

Encouraged by the Lord, Paul continues the great work in Corinth for no less than a year and a half, although he is on a missionary journey.

### **Acts 18:12-17 | The Case Law of Gallio**

*12 But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." 14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15 but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." 16 And he drove them away from the judgment seat. 17 And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and [began] beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.*

The Lord's promise that no one would lay hands on him will soon be fulfilled. Gallio becomes proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia in the

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thirteenth year of Claudius Caesar, which is in the year 53. So Paul must have arrived in Corinth around the year 52. When in the person of Gallio a new proconsul arrives, the Jews see their chance to sue Paul. They will all convince the newcomer Gallio what a dangerous man Paul is. They believe that Gallio will support their plan because the man wants of course to keep the peace in his province. They offer to help him do so, by bringing this hostile gentleman before him.

As in other cities, the citizens seem to have had the right to arrest someone and bring them to justice. This invariably concerned a threat to the established order. That is the accusation here as well. They accuse Paul of talking strongly to people in order to persuade them to worship God, which is very much against the law. The prosecutors wisely do not mention by which law. It is clear that they want to give a religious matter a political content, just as their tactics have been in Philippi (Acts 16:20-21).

When Paul wants to open his mouth to defend himself, he does not get the chance to do so. The Lord stands up for him through Gallio's reaction to the Jewish action. The Jews have completely misjudged Gallio. Gallio is not only an amiable man – as historians characterize him – but also a totally indifferent man. He knows why the Jews are worried and that is exactly what he is not worried about at all. With that he also says that the gospel is not dangerous for the state. He is not interested in the gospel, but it doesn't harm him either. So why would he take action against it? If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, he would certainly deal with the accusation of those whom he explicitly addresses with "O Jews".

By addressing them so emphatically he shows that he is well aware of the background of their intent. This he also declares when he states that it is nothing more than contentious questions about words and names and the law they have. He knows what it is all about. It also shows his total indifference toward the Lord Jesus and His work. He reduces the whole faith to a word, a few names and the law. Maybe he has heard a word like 'resurrection' or names like 'Jesus' and 'Christ' and has heard something about the Jewish law, but he is not interested in any of it. His total lack of interest is the blame of the Jews (Rom 2:24), but it does not make Gallio any less guilty.

Even today there are many of those indifferent people who are not interested in matters of faith because of the quarrels of Christians among themselves about peanuts. As Christians, we must confess our guilt. Yet for those who use the misbehavior of Christians as an excuse not to concern themselves with matters of faith, this misbehavior does not justify their indifference. Often such people also boast of their religious tolerance.

As for Gallio, he does not let himself be tempted to pass judgment on the case brought before him. He doesn't want to hear another word about it either and drives them all away from the judgment seat. However, the Jews do not give in and find a new victim in Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue. Out of frustration at the failure of their accusation against Paul, they treat him rougher than Paul, because they beat him in front of the judgment seat.

If this Sosthenes is the same as the one that Paul mentions as co-sender of his first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 1:1), it is plausible that at this moment he has already shown his interest in the Jesus preached by Paul as the Christ. Sosthenes, who probably succeeded Crispus as leader of the synagogue, is then in their eyes a new traitor. That must have made them even more angry. It doesn't matter to Gallio. Just as he was not disturbed by their story about Paul's alleged violation of the law, he remains indifferent about their violent action against Sosthenes.

Gallio's complete indifference also makes it clear how the acclaimed norms of Roman law were applied at the time. God used it here to protect His servants, but as an exercise of law it is done entirely arbitrarily.

### **Acts 18:18-21 | Brief Visit of Paul to Ephesus**

*18 Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. 19 They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, 21 but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus.*

In addition to the period of one and a half years that he has already been in Corinth, Paul will remain “many days longer” in Corinth. Then comes the moment when he says goodbye to the brethren. He goes to Syria with Priscilla and Aquila in his company. It indicates that also Aquila and Priscilla are not bound to a place. They are flexible and move easily to another place when the service for the Lord requires it.

There is still a curious remark by Luke about Paul. Paul, who resisted the law so strongly, submits to a Jewish ordinance. In any case, having cut his hair in connection with keeping a vow is reminiscent of this. It is reminiscent of the vow of the Nazarite (Num 6:18). In Acts 21 he does something similar (Acts 21:23-26). There it seems to be meant to be a Jew to the Jews (1Cor 9:20). It is difficult to think of that here, given the extremely hostile attitude of the Jews.

Luke does not tell us of what nature the vow is. It may be that Paul, due to the pressure of circumstances in Corinth, made a vow to the Lord that he would have his hair cut if the Lord would help him. In itself, a vow does not necessarily have to be wrong. However, we must take to heart the warning from Ecclesiastes 5 (Ecc 5:2-6). The question is whether making a vow suits the position of the Christian and whether Paul is not acting below that position because his actions are reminiscent of an Old Testament custom.

We may apply these considerations to ourselves, but not to Paul. We simply do not know what motivated him. Luke only mentions that he had his hair cut, that he did so because of a vow and that he had it done in Cenchrea. It is not contrary to his preaching against the law, because he does not block the way of someone who wants to keep the law. In the same way, it does not have to be a problem for us if Messianic Jews want to keep the law. What brings Paul to the fiercest opposition to the law is when the law is imposed on the nations. That must also be our reaction to the preaching of the law.

After having had his hair cut in Cenchrea, they sailed from Greece to Turkey. When they arrive in Ephesus, Paul goes his own way apart from the couple. The couple stays behind in Ephesus when Paul travels on. Before he travels on, he first visits the synagogue, where he reasons with the Jews.

What he tells the Jews about Christ does not meet resistance, but rather appreciation, because they ask him to stay longer. For the time being, however, it must remain with this one-time meeting, because it is not Ephesus that is the goal of his journey, but Jerusalem. At least that seems to explain the hurry he is in to continue his journey and the expression “went up” as the indication of Jerusalem as his goal.

His hurry to be in Jerusalem on time is then related to wanting to be present at one of the annual feasts, possibly the Passover (cf. Acts 20:16). Paul therefore does not let himself be held up in Ephesus. He leaves with the promise that he will return to them, stating that he will do so if it is in accordance with the will of God. The fulfillment of his promise we find in Acts 19.

### **Acts 18:22-23 | End of the Second and Start of the Third Missionary Journey**

*22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. 23 And having spent some time [there], he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.*

When he arrived in Caesarea by sea and landed there, he went on, that is, to Jerusalem – if the assumption is correct that this is the meaning of ‘he went on’. There he attends the feast – if the assumption is correct that this is why he was in a hurry –, greets the church and then leaves for Antioch. This is where his second missionary journey ends.

After spending some time in Antioch, he begins his third missionary journey. The account of this is described up to Acts 21:16. First he travels through Galatia and Phrygia, the area where Derbe, Lystra and Iconium are located. There he also went on his first and second missionary journey. Just like on his second missionary journey he does not preach the gospel there, but strengthens all the disciples. The churches in Galatia must have deviated from the truth of the gospel shortly after this visit by the coming and teaching of Judaic teachers, which forced Paul to write his circular letter, the letter to the Galatians, to them.

## Acts 18:24-28 | Apollos in Ephesus

*24 Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. 25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; 26 and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. 27 And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, 28 for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.*

While Paul is on his way to Ephesus, Luke tells us something about “a Jew named Apollos” coming to Ephesus. Apollos, from Alexandria in Egypt, is an “eloquent [or: learned] man”. He does not use his natural abilities for himself, but for the glory of God. The fact that he is mighty in the Scriptures does not mean that he is able to quote long passages of text – perhaps he could –, but that he knows the context of Scripture and understands its meaning.

In Apollos we have someone in whom the energy of the Holy Spirit reveals itself without any intervention of the apostle or the twelve. He is an instrument of the Spirit that works independently of the apostles. This is also how it is meant by the Spirit, Who gives to whom He wills (1Cor 12:11). We see that Apollos acts independently when he later does not follow Paul’s recommendation, but goes his own way, which is also accepted by Paul (1Cor 16:12).

There is no jealousy between the two servants. Between them there is not the idea that they want to win people for themselves, but both of them want to win people for Christ. It is completely reprehensible to them that the believers in Corinth have made them party leaders, causing a division in the unity of the believers (1Cor 1:10-12).

Apollos probably heard and accepted the gospel in Egypt and then became mighty in the Scriptures, by which the Scriptures of the Old Testament are meant. He was taught in the way of the Lord. This means that he was

taught in the way of the Lord Jesus, how that teaching should be brought into practice, and how that teaching should literally get hands and feet. The purpose of teaching in God's Word is always that it is worked out in life.

Luke does not tell how Apollos came to faith. That he really has come to faith is obvious from his life. He is completely absorbed by what he has discovered in the Scriptures. This has ignited a fire in him that is expressed in his speaking and teaching. This fervor of Apollos' spirit is not a trait, but a fervor of spirit which is of the Spirit of God and which we should all possess (Rom 12:11).

He knows the zeal of the Spirit, like the prophets in the Old Testament. He does not merely pass on knowledge, but is grasped by it himself. He has great knowledge of Scripture and is able to reflect that knowledge to others. Listeners can sense whether someone is passing on dry theory, or whether he is talking about something that has gripped him.

Apollos does not yet know anything about everything that has happened to Christ. The only thing he knows is John's baptism. This means that he has accepted the preaching of John, has repented and has believed in Christ Whom John has pointed out. However, he does not know about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. He stood, as it were, before Pentecost. But from what he knows he speaks boldly in the synagogue in Ephesus.

There also Priscilla and Aquila come and they hear him speak. In the beginning of the church the Christians (also) still go to the synagogue. This couple always meet interesting people. In Corinth they got to know Paul and here in Ephesus they get to know Apollos.

The meeting must have been very pleasant for them. When they listen to him, they notice that he still misses something. They notice that he does not know how things went on with Jesus of Nazareth. They don't get up in the synagogue to correct him, but take him home to tell him what is missing. It speaks in favor of the mighty orator Apollos that he allows himself to be taught by simple tentmakers. Aquila and Priscilla pass on to Apollos what they have undoubtedly learned themselves from Paul's teaching.

How beautiful it is when there are couples who can teach servants in God's Word and make their home and time available for it. Priscilla and Aquila together explain the way of God more precisely. Priscilla comes first, possibly because she was the first to recognize him as someone with whom something was missing. Women often have more sense of this than men. It is plausible that she then proposed to her husband to take him with them. Only as a third activity is it stated that they both explained to Apollos the way of God more accurately. When explaining the way of God more accurately, Priscilla will not have contravened the commandment that a woman is not allowed to teach or rule over the man (1Tim 2:12).

There is a general remark to be made in connection with this. A man is generally sensitive when someone knows more than he does. He sometimes has to overcome something first to invite the other. It does not mean that this has been the case with Aquila; that cannot even be assumed, but it is something that servants should consider. For example, it may happen that an older brother with a lot of knowledge of Scripture finds it difficult to accept that a younger brother has even more knowledge of Scripture.

Apollos was taught in the way of the Lord. That had led him to place his life under the authority of the Lord. Now he hears about the way of God, which is the way of faith for the Christian as it can be known from Scripture. In Scripture we learn how God has acted with His people and His own throughout the entire history of salvation. It must have been a joy for Apollos to receive this teaching.

When Apollos has received a more accurate explanation of the way of God, he wants to go to Achaia where Corinth is. How did he get the idea to go to Corinth? Why not go to Athens or Philippi? It is plausible that he heard about Corinth from Aquila and Priscilla. They must have told him that there is a need there and that may have been the reason for Apollos to go there. In this way, workers are given all kinds of indications to go somewhere.

The brethren in Ephesus see in Apollos a gifted servant of God and encourage and recommend him in his service. The letter of recommendation he receives is not about receiving at the Table of the Lord for partaking of

the Supper of the Lord, but about receiving as a servant of Christ (cf. 2Cor 3:1; Rom 16:1).

A letter of recommendation is not bound to a local church, but to the fact that the senders are known in the place where a servant goes and that the senders there are known as believers whose spiritual judgment can be trusted. If such believers give a testimony concerning someone who is not known there, it gives confidence in the servant who comes. Writing and receiving a letter of recommendation is in both cases a privilege and an expression of fellowship. A personal testimony from the servant himself is not sufficient (Acts 9:26-28; 2Cor 13:1).

With the letter of recommendation to the service with him, Apollos leaves Ephesus for Corinth. There he will water what Paul planted (1Cor 3:6). He may continue and expand Paul's work. The fact that his arrival in Corinth gives rise to division only makes the necessity of his service even more clear. There are people in Corinth who are particularly impressed by his oratorical talent and choose him as their leader, without him wanting it.

Luke mentions that he is of great help to the faithful. This is not due to his qualities, but to the grace of God. Also for him, it is true that he can do nothing without the Lord Jesus (Jn 15:5). Only grace makes us capable to help others. Every blessing we pass on comes from the Lord.

The service of Apollos focuses especially on the Jews who, time and time again, put Christians in trouble, by opposing the truth. Apollos unequivocally refutes all these attacks from the Scriptures, for he proves that Jesus is the Christ. He overthrows all the arguments of his opponents with the Scriptures. Demonstrating means to present something in a convincing, vivid way. The Word of God is the evidence.

## Acts 19

### **Acts 19:1-7 | The First Disciples in Ephesus**

*1 It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they [said] to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they [began] speaking with tongues and prophesying. 7 There were in all about twelve men.*

After the interlude on Apollos, Luke continues to describe the third missionary journey which Paul began in Acts 18:23. Apollos does his work in Corinth, separate from the apostle Paul, but completely in accordance with his teaching that he received through Aquila and Priscilla. While Apollos is in Corinth, and by grace is of great support to the believers (Acts 18:27), Paul fulfills his promise by going to Ephesus (Acts 18:21). He reaches Ephesus through "the upper country", that is, through the Galatian region and Phrygia (Acts 18:23).

Perhaps the expression "upper country" already symbolically refers to the heavenly regions about which Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians. The heavenly regions are the area where Christ is, where the Christian has his blessings (Eph 1:3) and where the Christian's struggle takes place (Eph 6:12). The latter would fit well with the spiritual darkness in which Ephesus found itself. Ephesus was known for its occultism and magic. Paul comes here in a fortress of satan. In verses 1-20 there is much talk about the Holy Spirit and about spirits and also about the Lord Jesus, the Conqueror of all evil powers.

Luke begins with the description of a remarkable event. Paul finds in Ephesus "some disciples". In his contact with them it becomes clear to him

that they are believers, but not Christians. Possibly they are followers of Apollos, before he was further taught.

To find out what their spiritual position is, Paul asks them some questions. The first question relates to the Holy Spirit. He asks if they received the Holy Spirit when they came to faith. It is not clear how Paul came to this question. He will certainly have told them about the Lord Jesus and everything that happened to Him. From their reactions to this he will have concluded that they could be lacking the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Their answer confirms that conclusion. These disciples are ignorant of the presence of the Holy Spirit on earth. Their answer is not about not believing in the Holy Spirit. They do. They know from the Scriptures that God would pour out His Spirit (Isa 44:3; Joel 2:28). They believe that the Holy Spirit has always been there, but they do not know that He has come to dwell on earth since the day of Pentecost as a result of the glorification of the Lord Jesus (Jn 7:39).

Because they have not received the Spirit, they are not Christians either (Rom 8:9). They have come to faith, but have not yet been sealed with the Holy Spirit. Someone receives the Holy Spirit when he has believed the gospel of his salvation (Eph 1:13). The gospel of salvation means that a person believes that Christ died for his sins according to the Scriptures and was buried and raised according to the Scriptures (1Cor 15:3-4). This gospel of salvation has not yet been preached by these disciples and so they have not been able to believe it (Rom 10:14). They are in the condition of Old Testament believers, a condition we also encounter today in certain parts of professing Christianity.

Now that Paul knows that they have not received the Holy Spirit, he asks another question. This question is about baptism. He does not ask *whether* they have been baptized, but *into what* they have been baptized. From the answer they give to that question it is clear at what spiritual stage they are. They are as far as Apollos was when he came to Ephesus (Acts 18:25). They have heard the message as John the baptist preached and they have repented. Paul can connect to this. When it is clear to him where they have got stuck in their spiritual development, he makes the full gospel known

to them, for that is what they lack. He tells them that “Jesus” is the One to Whom John referred and he can announce to them that He has come.

We see here the enormous difference between the faith in the Messiah Jesus according to the Old Testament presentation and the faith in Him as the Christ Who has come Who is now glorified. The difference is the accomplished work on Calvary and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. These disciples have believed in John’s call to believe in Him Who came after him. That is what they have done, but that is where it ended. They have not received any further information about the rejection, death, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah and therefore not that He sent the Holy Spirit from heaven.

When they hear the full gospel from Paul, they accept the Lord Jesus as the Christ Who came, died, rose and was glorified. Then they are baptized to the Name of the Lord Jesus. Through this they are joined to a dead Christ. So they are baptized again. Yet this is not a ‘rebaptism’, because the baptism they undergo now is a completely different baptism. They are baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus, that is to say, they are joined to the Lord Jesus, who is made Lord and Christ by God (Acts 2:36). By being baptized they express that they no longer want to live for themselves. They are baptized to His death and symbolically buried with Him in the water grave (Rom 6:3-4). From now on they acknowledge Him as Lord of their life, they want to follow Him and live according to His will.

After they are baptized, Paul lays his hands on them. He identifies himself with them by this gesture. He acknowledges them by this as fellow Christians. Then God puts His seal on them by giving them the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit does not come upon them through the laying on of Paul’s hands, but follows after that. Neither is the laying on of hands with Peter and John the means by which the Holy Spirit came, but the proof of unity between Samaria and Jerusalem (Acts 8:14-17). This sign of unity expressed by the laying on of hands is confirmed by God by giving the Holy Spirit.

The course of events with the “about twelve men” is unique. The reason is the special intermediate position this small group held. Here, by apostolic authority, these believers who were still on an Old Testament basis had to be made New Testament Christians in the true sense of the word. The

remarkable nature of this event is underscored by speaking in languages and prophesying as we saw on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:4,17). The sign of speaking in languages underscores that it is about something entirely new that goes beyond the Old Testament and faith that is connected to that. This is at this same time the last mention of speaking in languages in this book of the Bible.

### **Acts 19:8-10 | The Synagogue and the School of Tyrannus**

*8 And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading [them] about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. 10 This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

After his meeting with that special group of disciples, Paul goes to the synagogue in Ephesus. There he speaks and reasons and persuades people concerning the things of the kingdom of God, for that is present on earth, albeit in secret. So his subject is not so much the church. He *does not preach the gospel of the kingdom*. That was preached by John the baptist (Mt 3:2) and then by the Lord Jesus (Mt 4:23), because that has to do with the public reign of the Lord Jesus. Because the Lord Jesus was rejected, the public form of the kingdom of God has been postponed.

In another sense, the kingdom of God is also now the subject of preaching, not as imminent, but as present. The things of the kingdom of God are in fact all things that have to do with the authority of Him Who rules over the kingdom of God, that is the Lord Jesus. Although He is not visible as King on earth, He is already present and active in the hearts of believers. The teaching concerning the kingdom of God is therefore of great importance because it concerns the discipleship of all those who acknowledge Him as their Lord.

This message encounters increasing resistance from some Jews, which manifests itself in hardening, disobedience, and speaking evil of “the Way” before the people. “The Way” is the new doctrine, the new direction of faith that we call Christendom. It encounters opposition from the Jews,

which only serves to separate the true disciples of that Way from the Jews. There is a break with the Jews.

Paul moves his location of teaching from the synagogue to the school of Tyrannus. This change is also a symbolic indication for the new that is being formed, the church. Here we see how the church forms a separated community, separate from the Gentiles and separate from the Jews. It is a new group that consists of Gentiles and Jews who together form the church. This makes the church in Ephesus the prototype of the church. There is no letter in which Paul so clearly explains what the church is than in the one sent to the church in Ephesus. There is also talk of “disciples”, which indicates that the characteristics of the kingdom are also present in this company.

Both the church and the kingdom belong to the sphere of power of the Lord Jesus. This sphere of power expands through the daily teaching of Paul, no longer in the synagogue, but in the school of Tyrannus. ‘Tyrannus’ is derived from ‘tyrant’. A tyrant is someone who exercises power over others without compassion. In that school, where satan exercises his power as a tyrant, the power of the Lord is unfolded opposite to the power of satan.

Paul has thoroughly trained the disciples in the principles of the kingdom of God. Even longer than in Corinth he has worked and taught in Ephesus and has done so every day. This also proves the importance of the church in Ephesus.

The disciples did not only receive teaching, but they also spread the Word in Asia. All who live in Asia have been reached with the Word of the Lord. All people have heard the Word concerning Him Who has authority over the kingdom. The spreading of the Word will not only have been done by Paul, but also by the disciples. Teaching leads to activity. Thus, separating the disciples in the school of Tyrannus did not mean isolation. Paul teaches in separation, but the testimony goes out to all Jews and Greeks.

### **Acts 19:11-17 | Powers of God and Devilish Counterfeiting**

*11 God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12 so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the*

*diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. 13 But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." 14 Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. 15 And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" 16 And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 17 This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.*

God underscores the preaching and teaching of Paul by doing extraordinary miracles or works of power by his hands. What is happening resembles powers of paganism. It seems as if all kinds of materials are given a magical effect. In what Paul does, however, nothing of the devil is present. God is the origin of these works of power. It is not Paul's handkerchiefs or aprons that provide healing, not the material, but God does it. God shows His power in an extraordinary way in the field where the devil thinks he is lord and master. It is a signal to his address and to all those who honor him, that all power resides with God.

God uses the hands and garments of the apostle Paul for the development of His power. Also with Peter we have seen a special manifestation of God's power (Acts 5:15). These are the signs of an apostle (2Cor 12:12). Today we no longer have apostles and with them we do not have that manifestation of signs and wonders and works of power. Nor are these things that all believers do at that time. Apart from the apostles, we only read that Philip and Stephen performed signs and wonders.

We do read that others wanted that power too, but they were exposed as impostors, as workers of injustice. We have seen this with Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:18-24) and we see it here in the following history.

As a general remark this: The Lord enables us to do God's work in faith and to overcome the power of satan. The conditions are: prayer and fasting and faith and a mind of forgiveness (Mk 9:29; 11:22-25). At the same time, the conditions we have to meet make clear the great distance that exists

between us and the Lord Jesus. For the Lord Jesus, every exercise of power was and is an unfolding of His own majesty.

The power of satan tries to join the work of God and thus to infiltrate the kingdom of God to thwart its progress. It corresponds to what the spirit of divination wanted to do with regard to Paul's preaching in Philippi (Acts 16:16) and also to what the sorcerers in Egypt did imitating the wonders of Moses (Exo 7:10-11). Here satan uses Jewish exorcists.

God in His grace has given some in His people the power to cast out demons (Mk 6:7; 9:38; Lk 10:17). However, there are also Jews who exercise this power, such as the sons of the Pharisees, i.e. disciples of the Pharisees (Mt 12:27). The category of moderators also includes seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest. This Sceva did not raise his sons in the fear of God, but rather introduced them into the dark practices of the power of satan.

There are seven of them who have gone out to perform their occult arts wherever they can. On their roundtrip they also came to Ephesus. When they notice the success that Paul achieves there in using the name 'Jesus', they also take the name of Jesus in their mouth in an attempt to cast out evil spirits. They use the name 'Jesus' – obviously without calling Him 'Lord' Jesus – as a kind of magic formula, a magical word. But only faith in what His Name means gives strength, and not the word as dead letters.

They appeal to the "Jesus whom Paul preaches", which immediately makes it clear that there is no personal relation with the Lord Jesus. They use His Name without personal faith in Him, but only for what that Name works in others. Unfortunately, this is also what the religious life of many Christians looks like. There is a certain confession of faith, but it is not lived out (cf. 2Tim 3:5).

That the evil spirit is not impressed by these people is evident from his answer and his subsequent act. He knows Jesus and also Paul. His knowing is a factual knowing, a knowing without any inner connection. The devil believes (cf. Jam 2:19) and has knowledge because he knows that he is dealing with undeniable Divine Persons, but he does not submit. He reveals a deep contempt to those in his power, just as he has a deep-rooted hatred toward the Lord Jesus and those who faithfully follow Him. We see

here satan's contempt for his slaves whom he chases away as incompetent helpers, humiliating them spiritually and injuring them physically.

What was a ruse of satan has the ultimate result that fear comes over all who live in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, and that the Name of the Lord Jesus is being magnified. This does not mean that they all come to faith, but Luke mentions the testimony that emanates from this event. Thus, satan's striving to obstruct God's work is used by God to make the testimony of His gospel all the more emphatic.

### **Acts 19:18-20 | Effects of the Word of the Lord**

*18 Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. 19 And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and [began] burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20 So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.*

The testimony also has the effect on many that they come to faith. In all who believe, the power of satan is broken and his territory seized. There has been a breakthrough in this demonic city. The conversion to God and faith in the Lord Jesus is genuine. We see this when they come to confess and disclose their practices.

Those who have come to repentance and faith have nothing more to hide anymore. All selfishness and everything that has kept them imprisoned is confessed as sin. Among those who have come to faith are many who have practiced magic. They had mastered these occult occupations by means of books. They collected those books and set them on fire. As a result, no one else can be harmed by it.

Only after the books have been burned do they calculate their value. If they had calculated the value before they were burned, they might still have reconsidered. A fortune has therefore gone up in smoke. A silver piece can probably be compared to a drachma or a denarius. At the time of the Gospels, a denarius was the wages of a day laborer (Mt 20:2). The gross minimum daily wage for someone 23 years of age or older is €61.62 at the time of writing this commentary. That amounts to just over €50.00 net. For convenience, let's assume €50.00. The amount that goes up in smoke would

then, converted to today, correspond to 50,000\*€50.00 = €2,500,000.00. Fortunately, even today there are believers who show the authenticity of their conversion by burning or destroying demonic music, movies, and games that determined their lives before their conversion.

When the wrong things are removed, there is space for the Word, which here again is called the Word of the Lord. At the same time, Luke, with verse 20, again gives an 'in-between stand', as we have seen before (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 16:5).

### Acts 19:21-22 | Jerusalem and Rome

*21 Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." 22 And having sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.*

Then comes the time for Paul to say goodbye to Ephesus. He has another purpose. Jerusalem keeps him busy. He would like to attend the feast of Pentecost there (Acts 20:16). He even thinks beyond that. After he has been in Jerusalem he wants to go to Rome as well. And indeed he will come there, but not as he expects. Here he starts his journey toward Rome and at the end of this book he is there, as a prisoner. Jerusalem and Rome are the two places between which this book takes place. He yearns to bring the Word into the heart of the Gentile world, just as he brought it into the heart of the religious world.

He wants to go to Jerusalem because of a burning love for his people. He sends forward two of those who serve him, while he himself stays in Asia for a while. Of the two he sends ahead, we know Timothy. The other, Erastus, is unknown to us. Erastus, like Timothy, will have received teaching from the apostle. Together they will go to Macedonia, probably to Corinth, where they can pass on the teaching received from the apostle as his representatives. They may have taken with them the first letter to the Corinthians that Paul wrote at this time.

## Acts 19:23-32 | Demetrius Instigates a Riot

23 About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. 24 For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; 25 these he gathered together with the workmen of similar [trades], and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 26 You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods [at all]. 27 Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence." 28 When they heard [this] and were filled with rage, they [began] crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 29 The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. 30 And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. 31 Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater. 32 So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.

While Paul was preparing for his trip to Macedonia, a great disturbance arose in Ephesus. As in Philippi, this disturbance did not originate from Jewish sources, but from pagan sources. Luke describes the course of it in detail and vividly. He may do this to show that there is not only an inner urge to go to Jerusalem whereby Ephesus is to be left, but also an outer cause. The disturbance arises about "the Way". By the Way is meant the Christian faith that is propagated by those who have come to faith in the Lord Jesus. This manifestation of faith is not so much in words as in deeds, in walking the Way of faith.

The consistent imitation of the Lord Jesus has completely changed the life of many in Ephesus. Demetrius notices this in his wallet. Because of the many conversions, his business is no longer doing well. The demand for his silver temples drops dramatically. This manifests his deep-rooted

hatred against the gospel. The whole system by which he made his fortune is faltering, as is the prestige his profession brings him.

The temples he makes are dedicated to Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. This mother goddess is the great opposite of the Father God of the Bible. We see here the great contrast between the Way of Christian faith, and paganism. Behind the idols are demonic powers. Behind the idolatry is also Mammon, the god of money. In Demetrius money and religion go hand in hand.

When he sees his profits dwindling, he responds to the economic decline as a business that affects everyone in the company and also the supplying companies. People of the world cannot be hit harder than when they are deprived of prosperity and the luxury that goes with it. If that happens, there will be uproar. Demetrius appoints Paul as the culprit because he dares to claim that their gods are not gods.

The temples are therefore not merely souvenirs, but articles of religious significance. Paul's message makes an end to this. Without being aware of it, Demetrius acknowledges in what he means as an accusation to the power of the gospel. The gospel must have been accepted by many if Demetrius can say that the industry is under threat – although he may have exaggerated it – because his images are no longer so popular.

Then he cunningly brings forward the waning tribute to “the great goddess Artemis”. In this way he shifts the attack from the economic to the religious field. There is nothing in which a man is more fanatic than in his religion. If you touch him in that, he becomes out of his mind and is no longer susceptible to any reason. That becomes apparent immediately after his words. They all become furious and deliriously crying out they declare their solidarity with the Artemis of the Ephesians. The whole city becomes full of confusion.

But the confusion is not that great, or their anger seeks a way out in tracking down the insulters of their great Artemis. It seems that they cannot find Paul. That is why they drag just two of Paul's travelling companions along to the theater that is also used for holding a public assembly.

Paul wants to go among the people for the sake of his friends who have been dragged along because of him. The disciples prevent him from doing

so by stopping him. It would not have been wise to do so. Some Asiarchs, i.e. political or religious officials of the province of Asia, who are friends of Paul underline the correctness of the disciples' actions. They send a message in which they insist that Paul should not go to the theater. It takes a lot to stop Paul, but in the end he doesn't go.

The fact that some officials are also in favor of Paul shows the enormous impact that Paul's preaching has had under the blessing of the Lord. Whether these officials are believers is not clear. In any case they are on his side.

In the general turmoil most do not even know what is at stake, but are carried away by the general mood. When a person is in a crowd, there is a great danger that he will lose his personality and then also the ability to make a personal judgment of the situation.

### **Acts 19:33-41 | Calming the Popular Rage**

*33 Some of the crowd concluded [it was] Alexander, since the Jews had put him forward; and having motioned with his hand, Alexander was intending to make a defense to the assembly. 34 But when they recognized that he was a Jew, a [single] outcry arose from them all as they shouted for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 35 After quieting the crowd, the town clerk \*said, "Men of Ephesus, what man is there after all who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of the [image] which fell down from heaven? 36 So, since these are undeniable facts, you ought to keep calm and to do nothing rash. 37 For you have brought these men [here] who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of our goddess. 38 So then, if Demetrius and the craftsmen who are with him have a complaint against any man, the courts are in session and proconsuls are [available]; let them bring charges against one another. 39 But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly. 40 For indeed we are in danger of being accused of a riot in connection with today's events, since there is no [real] cause [for it], and in this connection we will be unable to account for this disorderly gathering." 41 After saying this he dismissed the assembly.*

After Paul with the disciples, and then the pagans, we see a third category, the Jews. They put Alexander forward. It seems that this Alexander is

the coppersmith for whom Paul warns Timothy that this man very much opposed him (2Tim 4:14-15). Timothy is then in Ephesus and will have known him.

Alexander the Jew wants to defend himself, but against what? The most obvious is that the Jews are afraid that they could also become the target of the hatred of the Gentiles. Then it is very appropriate to make it clear that they have nothing to do with Christians. Once he would have the word, he could then, after his defense, point his arrows at the Christians in order to put them in a bad light, so that the popular anger will focus even more emphatically on them.

But the emotions get way out of control and Alexander has no chance to defend himself on behalf of the Jews. Whatever he wanted to tell them, when the crowd notices that he is a Jew, they burst into an ecstatic shout that they continued for about two hours. They didn't sympathize with the Christians, but they didn't sympathize with the Jews either, because they too don't allow other gods than the one God. Without God it is impossible to resist the devil as the Jewish conjurers tried and failed (verses 13-16). It is equally impossible to stand up for the truth of the one God without God, as the Jews want to do here.

The only one who manages to calm the crowd is the town clerk. He is one of theirs. His tactics are very cunning. He starts from what they are completely sure of, from something that is acknowledged by everyone without contradiction. The fact that there are some Jews and Christians who do not know this or even oppose it is meaningless, isn't it? Do they have to worry so much about that?

After having given his statements, he urges them to keep calm and not to let themselves be carried away by their feelings. Then he points at the disciples they have taken with them. He is well aware of the activities of the Christians and knows that they are not iconoclasts and that in their preaching they did not rage against their goddess either. Paul and his people have proclaimed the Word without criticizing the religion the Ephesians practice. By the way, it is remarkable that in Acts the pagan authorities testify several times to the innocence of Christians.

As for Demetrius and the artists, they can bring their case before the courts on fixed days. There they can sue their opponent and the opponent will have the opportunity to defend himself. If they have other cases, it is laid down in the legal procedure that these will be decided in a legal meeting.

The word for 'assembly' is literally *ecclesia*. This word is also used for the congregation of Israel and for the church of the Christians. The word already existed. It means 'a [somewhere] called out community of people'. It is the called out people from the city of Ephesus who meet in the city assembly to discuss the interests of the city.

This word *ecclesia* is an important word in connection with the church of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus speaks in Matthew 16 for the first time in history about 'My' *ecclesia*. There he speaks about the church He will build (Mt 16:18a). The Gentiles have their *ecclesia* (here), Israel has His *ecclesia* (Acts 7:38) and now the Lord Jesus also has His *ecclesia*.

But what a difference there is between His *ecclesia* and the other two! When someone dies who belongs to the *ecclesia* of the Gentiles or the *ecclesia* of Israel, he ceases to belong to that *ecclesia*. However, whoever belongs to the *ecclesia* of the Lord Jesus will belong to it forever, even though he has died. That *ecclesia* cannot be conquered through the gates of Hades (Mt 16:18b).

The last argument used by the town clerk to appease the heated emotions, is the lack of any legal basis for this uproar. If the town clerk has appeased the crowd with an appeal to their wits, he dismisses the assembly. This means that the crowd disperses and the people go home or back to work.

## Acts 20

### **Acts 20:1-6 | From Ephesus to Troas**

*1 After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. 2 When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. 3 And [there] he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. 4 And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, [the son] of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. 5 But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. 6 We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days.*

After the uproar, Paul calls the disciples of Ephesus with him and exhorts them. He leaves them and goes on a journey to Macedonia, as he had purposed (Acts 19:21). There he writes his second letter to the Corinthians after hearing the good news from Titus about the reaction of the church in Corinth to his first letter to them. In a few words the journey through Macedonia is depicted, without place names or length of stay.

During his transit Paul did visit and speak to the believers each time. Although there is no mention of a long stay, he did not speak fleeting and superficial words. He admonished or encouraged the believers intensively, with “much exhortation”. He has encouraged them, built them up on their most holy faith.

Then he arrives in Greece, without any place being mentioned here either. In the three months that Paul is in Greece, he will certainly have visited the church in Corinth. In these three months he writes from Corinth his letter to the Romans. He renounces his plan to sail to Syria. He would have been happy to sail to Syria, because then he would have been able to go via Antioch to Jerusalem and carry out the first part of his purpose. But the forming of a plot of the Jews against him prompted him to change his itin-

erary. They decided to launch another attack against him. This led him to decide to return by land through Macedonia. In this he was undoubtedly guided by the Spirit, but it is also connected with his own considerations how he should react to the plan of the Jews to kill him.

Luke then lists Paul's travelling companions. There are seven of them. The list of names shows the interest that God has in people who accompany Paul and support his service. They come from different places where Paul preached the gospel and taught the believers.

Sopater comes from Berea, where the believers have willingly accepted the Word that Paul brought, while examining daily the Scriptures to see if what Paul said corresponds to it (Acts 17:11). Such a willing believer, shaped by the Scriptures, would have been a great support for Paul. He is the son of Pyrrhus, which means 'ardent'. Perhaps Sopater, like Apollos, is 'ardent in spirit'.

Aristarchus and Secundus come from Thessalonica where Paul preached the Lord Jesus as King (Acts 17:7). They put themselves under His authority. Aristarchus is called by Paul his 'fellow prisoner' and his 'fellow laborer' (Col 4:10; Phlm 1:24). Secundus means 'second', a name that indicates that he takes the second place and that to him the Lord Jesus is the First.

Gaius comes from Derbe, where Timothy also comes from. Tychicus and Trophimus come from the province of Asia, and we know of Trophimus that he comes from Ephesus (Acts 21:29). Tychicus is called by Paul "the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord" and "fellow bond-servant in the Lord" (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7). Trophimus was not able to make the entire trip. He became ill and Paul had to leave him sick at Miletus (2Tim 4:20).

These seven men travel ahead to Troas, where they wait for Paul and Luke. We can see from the use of the word "us" that Luke has now rejoined Paul. See the word "they" used in Acts 16 (Acts 16:40), after the word "we" also in Acts 16 (Acts 16:10). Paul and Luke sail after the days of Unleavened Bread from Philippi.

Incidentally, there is a period of six or seven years between the time when Paul leaves Philippi while Luke stays there, and the time when they meet here again. All this time, Luke has undoubtedly served the church. He says

nothing about that. He figures himself away. What matters to him is God's work by means of the vessel chosen by Him for that purpose.

Luke mentions as the time of sailing away from Philippi that it is "after the days of Unleavened Bread". Until the day of Pentecost, when Paul wants to be in Jerusalem (verse 16), there are only seven weeks left. Haste is needed. This haste does not lead to rush, because when Paul and Luke come at Troas, they stay there for seven days.

### Acts 20:7 | The First Day of the Week

*7 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul [began] talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.*

The reason for the seven-day stay in Troas seems to be no other than to celebrate the Lord's Supper in Troas (cf. Acts 21:4-5; 28:14). They do this on the evening of the first day of the week. The meeting is in the evening because Sunday is an ordinary working day. Paul and Luke therefore arrived on Monday. They do not organize a meeting on Monday or Tuesday to celebrate the Supper, but they wait until Sunday.

That is the appropriate day to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the context of the local church (1Cor 10:14-22; 11:17-34). There is no mention of the celebration of the Lord's Supper with his companions somewhere along the way apart from a local church. The whole group meets with the local believers on the first day of the week to break bread. Thereby Paul takes the same place as the youngest believer.

The first day of the week is the day of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Mt 28:1-10). Twice on that day He appeared to His disciples as they came together (Jn 20:19,26). This day is also aptly called "the day of the Lord" (Rev 1:10). It is the appropriate day to celebrate the "Supper of the Lord" (1Cor 11:20).

It is significant that in both cases in Greek a word is used for the words "of the Lord" that only occurs in these two cases which means "belonging to the Lord". Surely here we have a strong clue to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the day of the Lord. If we thereby take what we find here with the believers in Troas, where it is stated so emphatically that they come togeth-

er on the first day of the week to break bread, then surely we have clear indications for the day on which Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The fact that no commandment is given, but that indications are given, is in line with Christendom. The search for alternative days generally means leaving the Christian position in order to return to Judaism connected with creation. Whoever does this, forgets that the seventh day of creation has given way to a new beginning from the dead. Instead of a rest after a week of work done, the life of the Christian begins with rest. We may express this in the Lord's Supper.

When Paul has celebrated the Lord's Supper with the believers, he speaks to the church. The first goal of the church meeting is to break bread even though the great apostle Paul is in their midst. After the breaking of bread, the church gives Paul the opportunity to bring to them the Word of God.

### **Acts 20:8-9 | The Fall of Eutychus**

*8 There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together.  
9 And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead.*

Then Luke describes an event that has an important meaning within the context of Paul's service. We see in what happens to Eutychus the danger that threatens every church and every individual believer. Luke first gives a description of the room in which the believers are together. It is an upper room, somewhere in an ordinary house on the third floor. Nowhere does Scripture mention a specially consecrated building in which Christians gather.

Apart from the fact that it is an upper room, Luke mentions that there are many lamps. It may be that he mentions this, so that we can imagine that it is quite warm, because oil lamps not only give light, but also warmth. The conclusion then is that this has contributed to Eutychus falling asleep. That could be the case. It does raise the question of how the others in the room were able to endure it. After all, Eutychus was sitting where he had the freshest air. Because of his position he even blocked the inflow of the much-needed fresh air into the undoubtedly full upper room. Therefore, it

seems that the mention of the “many lamps” means more than indicating a natural cause of Eutychus’ fall.

Undoubtedly, this history contains a lesson for us. We see that Eutychus has taken a dangerous place. He sits in the window, which means on the border between two worlds. On one side there is the room with lots of light, on the other side he hears below him the entertainment of the world. The word “overcome” indicates that he has not suddenly fallen asleep, but that he has slowly but surely fallen asleep.

It becomes his death sleep because he falls down and is picked up dead. He must be raised from his death sleep. That is what Paul does. It is an illustration of what Paul is saying to the believers in Ephesus. He tells them to wake up because they are asleep. They must wake up and rise from the dead (Eph 5:14). There is as little activity with the sleepers as there is with the dead.

The discussion whether Eutychus was really dead or whether his soul was still in him is not so important. It’s about a situation where there is no life visible anymore. We can end up in that situation if the light we have received is not connected to Christ. Life only becomes visible when Christ shines on us. Maybe we should ask ourselves the question: What really keeps me awake? Christians who are nodding off when the sermon lasts for an hour can stay up a whole night to catch some fish, or follow sports events, or attend concerts, or watch lengthy movies.

Eutychus was not inside and not outside. Perhaps he had come to see the great apostle once and hear him speak. In this way, even today young people can come to see big names without attending meetings as a custom. Maybe it was a bit disappointing after all and he gradually lost interest in what Paul said. Maybe he saw his friends or thought about them and the nice things he could have done with them, while sitting here in a dull room with dull people listening to a dull sermon.

Eutychus had to learn – and each of us has to learn – that it is not the preacher who makes the Word valuable, but the condition of the listener’s heart. Often a fall, a sinful act, is the result of slackening in spiritual things. Before Eutychus falls out of the window, he first falls asleep. In this way we too can fall asleep when we listen to Paul, that is, when we read his

letters. The sleep in which the church has fallen and the dead or near-death condition as a result, is also because there is no longer any attention for what Paul has said.

### **Acts 20:10-12 | Recovery of Eutychus**

*10 But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, "Do not be troubled, for his life is in him." 11 When he had gone [back] up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. 12 They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.*

It is wonderful and instructive how Paul deals with Eutychus. In the first place Paul goes down to him. He descends to the level of the fallen young man, showing the attitude of the true shepherd. In the second place he falls upon him. He doesn't shout from the third floor, from his own high position, all kinds of reproaches at the young man, for instance that he shouldn't have been so stupid as to sit in the window, a place that asks for trouble. No stories about own guilt. That wouldn't make any sense at all, because Eutychus didn't hear anything anyway. We shouldn't approach someone who has gone astray like that. It's important to descend to his level and then speak to him. By falling upon the young man, Paul identifies himself with him as it were (cf. 1Kgs 17:21-22; 2Kgs 4:34). In the third place, Paul embraces the young man. He makes him feel his love and acceptance instead of rejection.

In this way we can apply the three floors that Paul descends to three steps necessary to bring someone back into fellowship with Christ and the believers. First descend to his level. Then fall upon him, that is to identify with what he did and tell him from that attitude what he did. Finally, embrace him, that is to try to win him in love for Christ against Whom he has sinned.

To the others, Paul tells them not to be troubled. All sorts of excited situations about someone who has deviated are pointless. It is important to support pastoral work with supplicating prayer instead of just talking about the fall someone has made. Through the Spirit Paul gets the power

to restore the functions of life. The bonds between soul and body are restored.

After Eutychus' recovery, Paul goes back upstairs. He is not shocked or upset by what has happened. He did get hungry. That is why he breaks the bread and eats. Breaking the bread here is not the celebration of the Supper, as some interpreters assume. Breaking the bread by one person is an indication for starting an ordinary meal (cf. Acts 27:35). The celebration of the Lord's Supper is not a personal act, but a communal event. The addition "and ate" makes it clear that Paul here eats food to strengthen his body. Then he talks with them for a long time, realizing that he will not see them again on earth. By daybreak it is time, not to go to bed, but to leave. Paul is a man with an unprecedented energy.

He leaves the believers in Troas with a large supply of teaching and a great comfort through the recovery of Eutychus. Paul's words and what happened to Eutychus will have served as a powerful impulse for the faith life of the church in Troas for a long time.

### **Acts 20:13-16 | From Troas to Miletus**

*13 But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land.  
14 And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene.  
15 Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus.  
16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*

Early in the morning of Monday the company left Troas. The next destination is Assos. That destination will be reached by ship, but Paul wants to go on foot to Assos, about forty kilometers from Troas. That Paul undertakes this walk after a sleepless night makes once again clear that he possesses great willpower and also great physical strength.

Luke doesn't tell us why he wants to go on foot. Yet we can imagine that he does so in order to be alone and to talk to the Lord about His work. He wants to listen to Him, to be in His presence, without the presence of

people who, unintentionally, often cause some “noise” in his interaction with the Lord. Every servant needs such a time once in a while, so that he can see his work and the responsibilities it entails, as God sees them.

In Assos Paul joins them again. Luke and the others take him on board. They will have welcomed him warmly. They may have talked to each other about why Paul went on foot. After all, he was in such a hurry. It seems that they don’t ask him any questions and take him as he is. There is confidence in them that he is going his way with the Lord. This trust is of great significance in every situation in which someone goes a way that is different from the way we go. When we know that someone lives with the Lord, it is important to welcome such a person warmly when he comes to us.

From Assos the company sails to Mitylene. After a day of sailing they arrive at Chios. After another day of sailing they are at Samos. Another day later they arrive in one of the harbors of Miletus. They have passed Ephesus. Paul consciously did that. He knows that docking in Ephesus would cause a long delay. His plan is fixed and time is running out.

### **Acts 20:17 | Paul Calls the Elders of Ephesus to Him**

| *17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.*

Although Paul cannot go to Ephesus due to lack of time, he still longs to have contact with the church. He cannot call the whole church to him, but he can call the people in charge of the church, the elders. That is why he uses the stop at Miletus to call these elders to him.

That he does this with a purpose and not from an emotional whim, is clear from his speech to them. Of his two earlier speeches, one was to the Jews (Acts 13:15-41) and one to the Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31). Here he addresses the elders of the church in Ephesus and in them the whole church there and over their heads then also the worldwide church.

Elders are always mentioned in plural and are only connected to the local church. So there is no such thing as a reverend or a teaching elder. Elder and overseer is the same person. This is clear from verse 28 where Paul calls this same group of elders overseers (cf. Tit 1:5,7).

Luke has again reserved a lot of space for this speech. This speech is not only important for the elders of Ephesus and the church there, but for the whole Christian church. It gives us an overview of Paul's ministry. It is not so much about the outward effect of his ministry, the results for others. It is especially about the inner side of his ministry, what he himself has experienced and endured, the struggles and soul exercises that went with it, the tears, the care, the commitment with which he carried out his ministry. In this small company of these responsible brothers he feels free to express his feelings, to share them with them as with friends.

His speech also has a prophetic meaning. He speaks about what the impact of his ministry will be in the history of the Christian church if he and the other apostles have passed away.

In his speech he looks

1. back (verses 18-21),
2. to the present (verses 22-27) and
3. to the future (verses 28-31).

He speaks of his ministry as

1. evangelist (verses 21,24),
2. teacher (verses 25,27),
3. prophet (verses 29-30) and
4. shepherd (verses 31-35). As a shepherd he has an eye for the whole flock, mentioning his care for the weak specially (verse 35).

We can divide his speech into four parts, with the words "and now" or "and now, behold" marking the different parts:

1. his example (verses 18-21),
2. its way (verses 22-24),
3. the developments after his passing (verses 25-31) and
4. his commendation (verses 32-35).

### **Acts 20:18-21 | Paul's Service With the Ephesians**

*18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19*

*...serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

When the elders have come to him, Paul begins his impressive farewell speech. We can compare this speech with the farewell speeches of Joshua and Samuel (Jos 23:1-16; 24:1-28; 1Sam 12:1-24). It is clear from his speech that he is not calling for submission to his authority or to that of any successor, but that he is asking for following his example.

He begins his speech by reminding the elders of their first encounter. He did not come to them with the request to show him the city and to visit all sorts of interesting places. He did not need time to familiarize himself or to explore things or to create a certain atmosphere for his message in a diplomatic way. From the very beginning he dedicated himself to his task. They have seen that. His behavior among them has been transparent, there was no need to wonder what he was doing. He has been “with” them, that is to say, he has been one of them and not a preacher standing above them.

The first thing to which he remembers, therefore, is his ministry. Further on Paul gives an overview of his ministry:

1. testifying of repentance and faith (verse 21),
2. testify of the gospel of the grace of God (verse 24),
3. preaching the kingdom (verse 25) and
4. declaring the whole purpose of God (verse 27).

He begins, however, by expressing what is in his mind. It is not only about what someone says, but also about who says it and how he says it. He has done it in humility. In this way he has served the believers. Yet he does not say that with those words. Here he says that he has served the Lord. Serving the believers is in fact serving the Lord and that service will be rewarded by Him as such (Mt 25:40).

He served in humility and not as a celebrated highness who required others to serve him. He is a true follower of his Lord from Whom he has learned this humility (Mt 11:29). Extra meaning was given to this humility

by the tears that appeared while serving. He did not serve coolly, from on high or from a distance. His tears expressed his compassion for the other. He was not ashamed of his tears (verses 31,37; 2Cor 2:4; Phil 3:18). God counts these tears (Psa 56:8) and He will soon wipe every tear from his eyes (Rev 7:17).

That humility and those tears were not signs of weakness. They were accompanied by trials and attacks on his life from the side of the Jews. If you can resist them, you are not a weakling but a man of courage, strength and determination.

He was guided by what was useful to the believers and not by his own preferences. Always he was concerned with the Lord, and since with the Lord the interest of others is always paramount, it was also paramount with Paul. Because he looked for what was useful for others, he did not withhold anything. He proclaimed everything that was entrusted to him for the church. Withholding something would mean that he was unfaithful to his Sender and that he did not share in the feelings of the Lord Jesus for His church. Paul had served the believers both “publicly”, that is in the synagogue and the school of Tyrannus, and in a smaller circle “from house to house”.

The first part of that service was to testify of repentance to God with, inextricably linked to it, faith in the Lord Jesus. He gave this testimony, which is the basis of everything, to the Jews and Greeks – the Jews first and foremost. Repentance to God means that one sees oneself in the presence of God and then comes to total self-condemnation. In God’s presence everything is judged as it is in God’s eyes. We no longer apologize and we don’t want to.

The result is confession of sins before God through a conscience that feels itself in His presence (Heb 4:12). We justify God in our condemnation, while at the same time trusting in His grace, for He Who is light is also love. This brings us to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Faith in the Lord Jesus means that we trust in His work through which sins have been put away, because He died for our sins. Then He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb 1:3). It is about His Person as

the object of faith. He is also our righteousness before God. We are made pleasant in Him.

If true repentance has taken place in God's presence and before Him, trust and peace come through faith in the Lord Jesus. Repentance and faith are both necessary and inseparable. Only when both aspects are present, one does become a child of God.

### **Acts 20:22-24 | The Gospel of the Grace of God**

*22 And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.*

Then Paul shares with the elders the purpose of his journey and the urge he feels to do so. For a long time, he was strongly pressed inwardly to go to Jerusalem. The fact that he says "bound by the spirit" – that is his own human spirit and not the Holy Spirit – could indicate that it was an obligation of love for his people that did not have its direct origin in a commission from God, although not necessarily against God's will. It is like the wish he expressed to be separated from Christ with a curse for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:3).

These desires of Paul have nothing to do with the sinful flesh, but could, at most, be a zeal of the noblest motives. If it turns out to be a weakness, then any selfishness in this desire is absent with him. The only motive is his burning love for his own people. This love drives him, as it were, into the lion's den.

Paul is in fact a slave – which is included in the word 'bound' – of his own mind. He is forced in such a way that no other way is open to him. Although it is possible that Paul does not act under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, but from the weakness of his own mind because of his love for his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Lord will still use that for the honor of His Name. There is no self-deception with Paul.

We also see this in what the Holy Spirit expresses to him. Following the testimony of the Spirit, Paul could have sought a way out, but he does not. He knew what the Holy Spirit said to him and that could mean that he did not have to go. The Spirit did not directly tell him not to go, but only told him what was in store for him.

Paul consciously chose what was in store for him, out of love for the Lord Jesus and His earthly people, to save some of His people. He knew that God's hand was in this. And we know that God would use his captivity to write letters with the highest Christian truths.

All suffering could not prevent Paul from conforming to the will of God. He had learned from his Master how suffering in a world full of sin and misery can have an effect of glorifying God. Paul carried the marks of that suffering in his body (Gal 6:17).

Paul could count. On the one hand he calculated the value of his life for himself and on the other hand he calculated the value of his life in the service of his Lord. From that calculation it appeared that all profit lay with the Lord Jesus and the commission He had given him (cf. Phil 3:7-9). He saw his life as God's gift to him, with which God had a plan: a service to fulfill it to the fullest. He would indeed accomplish his course (2Tim 4:6-7). To Paul this means, that to accomplish his course, he must also testify the gospel of God's grace to his own people.

The gospel of the grace of God is the full gospel. The grace of God is more than repentance and faith. In repentance and faith, the emphasis is more on the need of the sinner. In the gospel of the grace of God, the emphasis is on the side of God, everything He has done by revealing His grace. We find this gospel in the letter to the Romans. Among other things we learn there that the believer stands in the grace of God and that he is justified by faith alone, on the basis of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Rom 5:1-2).

### **Acts 20:25-27 | The Kingdom and Purpose of God**

25 *“And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26 Therefore, I testify to*

*you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27 For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.*

Paul announces his farewell. It will be a definitive farewell. He knows that they will not see each other again. Against the background of this announcement, he reminds the elders that he went around among all of them to preach the kingdom. The kingdom is mentioned here for the fifth time out of a total of seven times mentioned in Acts (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31).

Paul did not only speak about the kingdom in its future glorious form, as it will be when the Lord Jesus reigns on earth. He also proclaimed the meaning of the kingdom that it has in this day and age, in which it is not yet visible, but is present (Col 1:13; Rom 14:17). The believers are subjects of the Lord Jesus in that kingdom. Linked to the kingdom is the idea of dominion and service. Believers acknowledge the Lord Jesus as their Lord and serve Him. The kingdom has to do with our acknowledgment of the reign of the Lord Jesus in daily life and in every area of it.

Because they will no longer see his face, “therefore”, he declares on this day that he is innocent of the blood of all men. Earlier he said to unbelievers that he was clean of their blood (Acts 18:6), here he says that to believers. He knows that he is not in debt to them. After all, he told them everything he had to tell them. The word “for” indicates the reason for his being innocent of the blood of all men, not just the elders: he has not withheld anything from the whole purpose of God.

The proclamation of the purpose or counsel of God is the fourth part of his ministry. Later on he will record this counsel, especially in the letter to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians. It is the counsel of God that extends from eternity to eternity. His ministry concerning the counsel of God has come to an end, because he has communicated everything he had to communicate. No new things will be revealed after what has been entrusted to him (Col 1:25).

### **Acts 20:28-31 | Warnings**

*28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He pur-*

*chased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.*

Thus he has accounted for his motives and his ministry. Now he turns to the elders. He calls upon them to be attentive to their own spiritual mindset in the first place. Only when this is in order can they also be on guard for the flock to provide it with what is needed (cf. 1Tim 4:16). As said, Paul speaks to this group of elders as overseers. He also reminds them of the origin of their service. No one less than the Holy Spirit has given them that place in the church in Ephesus.

There is no mention of any appointment of elders by the church or by any human institution. The Holy Spirit appoints them. If there is a human being involved, it is an apostle or his envoy. This is evident from the few times that there is talk about the appointment of elders (Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5). Since there are no more apostles, the appointment by man ceases.

As mentioned before, elders and bishops are names for the same person. In the church this has been handled differently. The Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*. That has been corrupted to our word 'priest'. The Greek word for 'bishop' is *episkopos*. That is corrupted to our word 'bishop'. Soon in the Christian church a distinction was made between the priest and the bishop. That distinction does not exist in the New Testament. It indicates the same person, but with a different accent. With the elder it is more about age, wisdom and life experience; with the overseer it is more about the task, the supervision of the flock.

Elders or overseers perform their task in the local church. The local church is a miniature of the worldwide church. That whole church is the church of God. He has "purchased it with the blood of his own" (verse 28, Darby Translation). It is the blood of Him Who is of Himself, i.e. of His Son. "The blood of his own" or "his own blood" is not the blood of God. That goes too far, Scripture does not speak that way anywhere. The blood is connected to the Lord Jesus, the Son of God Who became Man, to be able to give His blood as purchase price for the church.

It is the church of *God* and not that of the elders or any other human being. It will happen unconsciously by some, but every pastor who speaks of 'my church' speaks pretentiously and steps into the rights of God. Only the Lord Jesus has the right to speak of "My church" (Mt 16:18). No one has purchased that church; the Lord Jesus has done so. Therefore, it is wrong for a person to speak of 'my church' after all.

Then Paul speaks about the very near future. He speaks about 'after my departure'. In the first place he foresees that savage wolves (cf. Mt 7:15; Jn 10:12) will come in from outside to do their destructive work in the church. They can come in because the shepherds have not remained vigilant. We have an example of such people in John's second letter, in which we also have the indication that such savage wolves should be denied entry (2Jn 1:10-11).

Second, people will arise from among the church who distort the truth. They do this to make themselves the center instead of Christ. False teachers not only bring false doctrine, but also seek followers. They set themselves up as sect leaders. They are often more difficult to recognize than the savage wolves. In the third letter of John we have in the person of Diotrephes a telling and cautionary example of these dangers from within (3Jn 1:9-10).

In connection with what is about to happen, Paul warns to be on the alert. He binds their own responsibility upon them. They must always remember what he has told them to keep them on the right path and also how he has done it. Incessantly, night and day (cf. Gen 31:38-40; 1Sam 25:16), he has been doing this, for three years. Each time tears appeared; thus he was moved by the fate of his beloved Ephesians. His message is soaked with tears. Such words do need to hit home in hearts in which true concern for the church is present.

### **Acts 20:32 | God and the Word of His Grace**

*32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build [you] up and to give [you] the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Paul has spoken about his service, both in terms of his mind and behavior and in terms of its contents. He also reminded them of their responsibility

in view of the upcoming developments. Now he commends them to God and to His grace as expressed in His Word. Paul and the other apostles have not placed their authority in hands of men. There is no apostolic succession whatsoever. What remains when the apostles disappear is God and the word of His grace.

The Word has always remained. From that source the believer can draw in all times the strength to know God's thoughts about the Lord Jesus and to live to His honor. But also the attacks have remained that are aimed that the people of God will not draw their strength from that Word. Attempts are being made to add new revelations to the Word, both in the form of traditions and in the form of people who say that God has shown them certain things. In the history of the church, traditions have soon determined the explanation. Today, the authority of the Word is challenged and criticized.

All these attacks can only be turned down if we give the Word its full authority over our life and if we are aware that the grace of God wants to help us in this. Then the Word not only offers protection, but also builds up, establishes and comforts us and encourages us and brings us into the inheritance. We already have a share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Col 1:12) and we will actually participate when we reign with Christ (Eph 1:10-14).

"Among all those who are sanctified" means in the midst of all the saints, together with them. Those who are sanctified are a group of people set apart by God to possess this inheritance together. To belong to those who are sanctified is a great privilege and solely due to God and the word of His grace.

### **Acts 20:33-35 | Paul Again Points to His Example**

*33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. 34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my [own] needs and to the men who were with me. 35 In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

Paul left not only his teachings with them, but also his example. Doctrine and practice belong together. Passing on the doctrine must go hand in

hand with setting a good example. For some Christian leaders, money is the driving force of their work. They see religion as a source of income (1Tim 6:5). This was not the case with Paul. He wanted to be completely independent of them. He also did not feel too good to just work with his hands. He showed the elders his furrowed, callous hands. By doing so he had not only worked for himself, but also for those who were with him.

What an unbridled dedication this man showed and all that for the benefit of others. He especially cared about the fate of the poor. We should not take advantage of the weak, but rather dedicate ourselves to them. How easily we only want to dedicate ourselves to people we enjoy ourselves or because of the advantage it gives us. Then we do not resemble the Lord Jesus. That is exactly what Paul wanted and that is what he presents to the elders and to us.

To underline the importance of working like this, Paul quotes a word that the Lord Jesus spoke. If we read the Gospels, we will not encounter that statement. But does this statement not show the whole tenor of the Lord's life and does it not correspond to the teaching He has given about 'giving' (Lk 14:14)?

### **Acts 20:36-38 | The Farewell**

*36 When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37 And they [began] to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, 38 grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.*

Paul is not waiting for an answer. He spoke from his heart to those he loved. What remains is to add the deed to the word and to commend them to God and to the Word of His grace. Therefore, he kneels down and prays with them all. Whether or not they have prayed is not clear. What we do read, however, is that they burst out in weeping aloud. What Paul said made a deep impression. That also has certainly to do with the contents of his words concerning future events. What makes them most sad, however, is that Paul has said that they will not see his face again.

By this subtle remark, the Holy Spirit perhaps wants to tell us that they did not quite understand the seriousness of what Paul has said. Would they

otherwise not have wept more about the imminent dangers that Paul has announced than about his departure? We know that already in those days the church was threatened by great dangers (1Tim 1:3-4; cf. Rev 2:1-5).

Be that as it may, they loved him wholeheartedly. Their grief about his departure was sincere. Their expressions of love were intense. If we have ever experienced the loss of someone who has meant a lot to us, and the impression that has made this on us, then we can also somewhat imagine that his final departure gives them great sadness. After the heart moving scene of weeping, embracing and kissing, they accompany Paul to the ship.

## Acts 21

### **Acts 21:1-3 | From Miletus to Tyre**

*1 When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; 2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo.*

After his impressive speech to the elders of Ephesus, Paul must head on again. The elders won't let him go just like that. How much they would have loved to keep him with them. Paul and his companions have to part – this is an expression of effort, it implies force, in the sense of tearing themselves away. It indicates what a strong bond Christian affection is.

What follows is an ordinary travel account. God is interested in everything His servant does, also in the unspectacular things. In the same way, the Lord Jesus spent most of His life in secret as far as people's eyes are concerned. All this time He was a pleasure to His Father. We may do the most ordinary things to the glory of God, such as eating and drinking (1Cor 10:31).

At the same time, we also see the hand of the Lord in the travel log. We read about 'finding' a ship that brings them to the destiny of their journey. Won't Paul also have been grateful for a favorable wind and a quiet voyage?

What will have been going on in the apostle's mind when they "came in sight of Cyprus"? That too is not said without reason. Will it not have raised in him the memory of Barnabas and Mark (Acts 13:4-5; 15:39)? Tyre may also have reminded him of the old days, of the time when the Lord Jesus was there in the neighborhood (Mt 15:21).

The delay there, is as much from the Lord as is finding the ship in verse 2. The reason for the delay is a very practical one, because the ship has to unload its cargo. Guidance from the Lord is usually by very natural means. The question is whether we have an eye for it.

**Acts 21:4-7 | With the Believers in Tyre and in Ptolemais**

*4 After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. 5 When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until [we were] out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. 6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again. 7 When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day.*

For Paul and his companions, the delay in Tyre offers a wonderful opportunity – not to admire the city, but – to look up the disciples. Once they have found them, they stay there seven days. As in Troas (Acts 20:6-7), this cannot but mean that they want to celebrate the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week in Tyre as well. On every day Paul will have taught God’s Word there.

The disciples have not only listened to Paul, but they also have a message for him. They tell him not to go to Jerusalem. It is a message of which Luke tells us that it comes from “the Spirit”. We have already read in Acts 20 how the Holy Spirit is engaged with Paul about his purpose to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:23). What we read here goes beyond that. There it seems as if the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to think about his purpose to go to Jerusalem by certain directions. Here, however, it is no longer a reflection on whether he will go, but a clear warning not to go.

The highest way for Paul would have been not to go. Yet the will of the Lord is accomplished in his going to Jerusalem. He is the apostle of the Gentiles, but he cannot repress his love for his people. That love is so great that he deviates from the path of faith and chooses the path of natural love.

It remains difficult to say of a man like Paul that he consciously went against the will of the Holy Spirit. In my opinion there is no direct disobedience. Paul is driven by completely selfless motives. It is not a question of black and white, but of a choice between the good and the better. It does not suit us to criticize the apostle for this.

We read that the disciples “through the Spirit” tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but they do not say: ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says.’ Later Agabus

will do so, however, not in a warning but in a foretelling sense (verse 11). How often have we noticed that others have said something to us 'through the Spirit'?

In the weakness of his love for his compatriots, he is willing to go to Jerusalem, despite the bonds and afflictions that await him there. He is even prepared to die for it, as he says further on (verse 13). It is not to ignore an explicit command of the Holy Spirit, but to follow a natural love for his people. Nor is it overconfidence that does not know what he is doing if he does not heed the warnings of bonds and affliction. He knew these things only too well.

On top of all this, the Lord, once Paul is captured in Jerusalem, encourages him with the command that he, as he witnessed to Him in Jerusalem, must witness to Him at Rome also (Acts 23:11). There is no reproach from the Lord's mouth. How, then, should we condemn Paul's actions or blame him?

We can see that in his desire to go to Jerusalem, he does not walk on the heights of the faith he preaches among the nations. God did not send him to Jerusalem. We can also observe that he does not act at the height of faith when, in order to please his brethren according to the flesh, he submits himself to a law of purification (verses 21-26). He preaches everywhere that the believer is not under the law. One would wish that all Christians would share Paul's desire to bring the gospel to his people. However, it is to be feared that many do not even reach that level with regard to the people with whom they are connected by natural bonds.

The days of being together with the disciples in Tyre are coming to an end. The journey must be continued. All the disciples with women and children escort them out of the city. Also the children are present to say goodbye to 'uncle' Paul. The apostle will certainly have shown his interest in them, following the example of his Lord Who also had this interest (Mt 19:13-15).

The whole group kneels down on the beach and prays. It will have impressed the people who may have seen it. Those people also saw how they greeted each other when they said goodbye. Here we have the expressions of the new life. There is loving God and loving each other. One cannot do

without the other. This beautiful testimony of the new life is given on the beach, in the open air.

After greeting each other the paths separate. Paul and his companions board the ship to continue their journey to Jerusalem. The others go home, to continue their testimony there.

From Tyre they sail to Ptolemais. Also in Ptolemais, where they stay only one day, they spend time with the brothers. Each time we see how Paul seeks fellowship with the local believers. He does not only *preach* about the church, but he also *practices* the church.

### Acts 21:8-14 | With Philip and the Believers in Caesarea

*8 On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. 10 As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents [began] begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"*

The sea voyage ends in Caesarea. From there, the journey will continue over land. In Caesarea, Paul goes to see the evangelist Philip, who was one of the seven deacons (Acts 6:5). After his preaching in Samaria and his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip had come to Caesarea (Acts 8:5,40). He continued to live there. He is married and has four unmarried daughters who all prophesy.

The house is explicitly called "the house of Philip the evangelist" and the prophesying of his daughters is related to this. This is how Deborah prophesied at home (Jdg 4:4-5). The Lord also gives the gift of prophecy to women. The daughters of Philip spoke for edification and exhortation and consolation (1Cor 14:3). They did this at home and not in the church,

because women are not allowed to do so there (1Cor 14:34). Therefore it is not the daughters of Philip who have a message for Paul in the church. Therefore Agabus is sent by the Lord from Judea to Caesarea.

Agabus first visualizes his message. He takes Paul's belt and binds himself with it, of course first his feet and then also his hands. The belt is a picture of service. Paul's service to the Jews would lead him to be captured by them. Then Agabus pronounces as the mouth of the Holy Spirit what will happen to Paul in Jerusalem.

What the so-called prophets say today when they say 'so says the Lord', we do not find with any New Testament prophet, but only with prophets in the Old Testament. The so-called contemporary prophets with such a statement are certainly not New Testament prophets.

Agabus has a message that comes directly from the Holy Spirit. This message is not meant to persuade Paul to give up his plan to go to Jerusalem, but is a further interpretation of the earlier testimony given by the Spirit (Acts 20:23).

When the company accompanying Paul and also the local believers hear what Agabus says through the Holy Spirit, they want to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem. Paul's response to their urgent request not to go is the response of an inwardly deeply convinced man. Where Paul has been warned in other places and has fled the danger, he does not do so here, because of his strong natural love for his people according to the flesh. God stands above this and uses all of this to achieve His purpose.

Their tears may affect Paul, but they do not change him in his purpose. His motives are good, he is not selfish, he is interested in his blind compatriots to whom he would like to present the Lord Jesus as Messiah. He does not think of himself. It suits us not to blame Paul, but to admire him. This admiration does not apply to man Paul, but to his dedicated love.

He talks about not only being bound, but even dying in Jerusalem, not for his people or his ideals, but "for the name of the Lord Jesus". That is the only thing that drives him. That is why his determination is not to trust in the flesh, as it became visible with Peter in his denial of the Lord (Lk 22:33-34). His concern in everything is the Name of the Lord Jesus.

When it is clear that Paul will not change his mind, both the travel company and the local believers place the matter in the hands of the Lord. They remain silent. There is a time to speak, there is also a time to remain silent (Ecc 3:7). They realize that they cannot take matters into their own hands. God's will is sometimes too complicated for us to understand. God's will is always accomplished, but sometimes so much different than we would have thought. It is a testimony of wisdom especially then to say: "The will of the Lord be done!"

### Acts 21:15-16 | From Caesarea to Jerusalem

*15 After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. 16 [Some] of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.*

Everything is prepared for the last part of the journey. Although Paul's companions tried to stop him from going to Jerusalem, they go with him. They are convinced that it fits the Lord's will that Paul should go after all. Although in their opinion it is better that he does not go, they still go with him. They also see that there is no question of his own will. The same goes for the local believers. They too have urged Paul not to go. If he does go, some disciples from Caesarea go with him.

This shows great trust, not in Paul, but in the Lord of Paul. They see that the Lord is going with Paul and therefore they can go with him as well. It means that it is not a question of who is right, but of whether we acknowledge the will of the Lord in a matter.

If they see that they cannot convince Paul not to go, they surrender the matter to the Lord. This is a great example for us. We can sometimes see that someone in his love for the Lord and His own goes a way that we are convinced he should not go. We can even be instructed by the Lord to point out to others not to go that way. If we then see that the other person is going that way after all, while we also notice that there are really selfless motives behind it, we must be able to come to the sincere statement: 'The will of the Lord be done!'

This is a test for our view of the matter. It may just be that we become irritated because the other does not want to listen. We do not notice this in

the travel companions of Paul and the local believers of Caesarea. On the contrary, they accompany him further to Jerusalem. This means that they also expose themselves to the dangers that were foretold for Paul.

They go with him and bring him to Mnason of Cyprus. He is “a disciple of long standing”, which means that he is a disciple who has been a follower of the Lord Jesus for a long time. Paul and his travel companions lodge with him.

It is remarkable how Paul and his companions have received hospitable reception and accommodation from believers time and time again. This can only be worked by the bond of faith. Faith has gained access not only to the hearts of believers, but also to all their possessions that they have put at the disposal of the gospel. Thus, many believers unknown to us have contributed to the spreading of the gospel and to the promotion of the Lord’s work. This way of contributing to the gospel is still open to every believer today.

### **Acts 21:17-19 | Paul Visits James**

*17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 After he had greeted them, he [began] to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.*

With his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul’s third missionary journey ends, as does his public service as a free man. Until the end of the book, Luke describes in detail what happens to Paul because of his desire to win his Jewish brothers over to the gospel, or at least to remove every obstacle to win them over to the gospel. For this he is willing to submit to some Jewish customs. In order to win the Jews, he wants to become as a Jew to them, and to those who are under the law, as under the law (1Cor 9:20). He does it all for the sake of the gospel (1Cor 9:23).

However, it seems that his purpose works the opposite. His desire to bring his compatriots the delivering gospel drives him into the hands of the hostile Jews and then into the hands of the Gentiles. This development ends with his imprisonment in Rome.

Paul took the first steps in this development in his heart some time ago and put them into practice by his journey to Jerusalem. This has set in motion an irreversible process. The steps that follow flow from the previous ones.

Paul is warmly received by the brothers in Jerusalem. That does not mean that they wholeheartedly agree with the course he is taking, but they accept him. The fact that they have their questions about Paul's course of action is evident when he visits James the next day, where all the elders of the Jerusalem church have also come. James is the brother with the most influence in the church in Jerusalem.

God has sanctioned that there is a church in Jerusalem that has remained entirely Jewish. He even inspired James by His Spirit to write a letter to that special group of Jewish Christians which we have as the letter of James in the Bible. The Jewish Christians distinguish themselves from their unbelieving Jewish companions in nothing else but the acknowledgment of the Messiah in Jesus. Furthermore, they continue to hold on to all Jewish statutes and customs.

We should not condemn what God has endured for some time. Through James, these believers have freed the believers of the nations by the Spirit from putting themselves under the Jewish commandments and statutes. We have seen this in Acts 15 (Acts 15:1-31). But when someone joins them and enters the sphere of their experience and practice of faith, we notice how great their influence is on those who join them. This will be shown by the actions of the apostle of the nations, who knows for himself that he is not under the law and can also be as a Jew to win them over to the gospel.

After the usual greeting – which is more than a formality, it expresses connectedness – Paul opens things up completely. He speaks about God's work among the Gentiles through his ministry. Undoubtedly the Lord wants to expand the hearts of Jewish believers through this. They are focused only on the development of Jewish Christendom and are hardly aware of what God works among the nations in their Gentile brethren.

### **Acts 21:20-21 | Reactions to Paul's Report**

20 And when they heard it they [began] glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those

*who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.*

Paul's account is received enthusiastically by James and the elders of Jerusalem. They glorify God. But then they immediately start talking about what worries them. They speak to him as "brother", by which they consider him as one of them. Then they point out the large number of Jews who have believed. All these Jews are zealous for the law. All these Messianic Jews are unfamiliar with true Christendom and heavenly blessings because of their adherence to the law.

As has already been said, God endures this too, but for anyone who is familiar with true Christendom and heavenly blessings and nevertheless engages in how they experience faith, it is a danger. That is exactly what Paul does. Paul is now in the surrounding where all attention is focused on Judaism where the demands of the law apply. The atmosphere that prevails there does not correspond to the special mission given to him: to preach the glorified Christ. Nor can he do so, for this company is not open to it. Once again: God tolerates this Jewish Christendom. However, this does not mean that believers from the nations should behave in the same way, and certainly not the apostle Paul. But Paul cannot go back.

He is confronted with an accusation. In Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians have heard that he is teaching to forsake Moses. They also say what that forsaking consists of. Paul would teach that Jews among the Gentiles should not circumcise their children and that they should not walk according to Jewish customs. This means that he hits these Jewish Christians in the heart. He brings down the pillars of their faith.

Now these are evil rumors. Evil rumors have already caused a lot of trouble. They are uttered and passed on without questioning the truth. Many servants of God have already been put in a bad light because of this. Rumors are gladly listened to. Nehemiah, for example, has experienced this (Neh 6:6).

### **Acts 21:22-24 | The Proposal to Paul**

*22 What, then, is [to be done]? They will certainly hear that you have come.*

*23 Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;*

*24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.*

Nothing of the rumors about Paul is true. For example, we know that as far as circumcision is concerned, he himself circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). James and the elders do not ask Paul if these rumors are true. They do know that those rumors are not true, but the “many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed” do not. They need convincing proof that Paul does not preach against the law and circumcision at all.

The many thousands of Jews who believe are eager to circumcise their children and maintain the law. Not that for them salvation still depends on circumcision, but they maintain it as a God-given institution. They are so bound by it in their conscience that they continue to do so. Because Paul does not preach circumcision to the Gentiles, the unbelieving Jews put him in a bad light. From the fact that he does not preach circumcision and the law, they have made out that he preaches against circumcision and the law.

To show the many thousands of Messianic Jews that none of these accusations are true, the brethren in Jerusalem make a proposal to Paul. If he does what they propose, he will show that nothing of those accusations is true. If he refuses to accept their proposal, he will give the crowd the impression that the rumors are true. However, if he accepts their desire, he will not accept the guidance of the Spirit in freedom and love as a rule. This problem arises because Paul did not get there based on a direct command of the Lord, but driven by his affection for his beloved Jewish compatriots. Paul has ended up in a situation that he can do no other than please the believing Jews.

Nevertheless, it will turn out that here too the Lord uses circumstances to achieve His purpose. Because Paul accepts the proposal, the persistent opposition of the unbelieving Jews will become so apparent that it will also make it clear to the Messianic Jews in what kind of system they still find themselves where the evil about the gospel is so persistently spread. The rest of the book of Acts makes clear how depraved the whole leader-

ship of the religious and at the same time God-hostile Jerusalem is. It will help the believing Jews become inwardly detached from Judaism and fully conform to the new.

It will also make them receptive inwardly to the teaching of the letter to the Hebrews. Although the letter does not mention a sender, the contents show that it could not have been written by anyone but Paul, most likely from the prison in Rome (Heb 13:24). This letter is a consequence of this whole development through which Paul finally ends up in Rome.

The proposal of the brothers of Jerusalem, which also contains a certain element of coercion, is that Paul should join four men who made a vow. These four men are Jewish Christians. The vow they made seems to be the Nazarite vow, in which they committed themselves to do or not to do something for a certain period of time. In the time of their vow, something will have happened that has made them unclean and they will have to shave their heads and cleanse themselves (Num 6:8-12).

What is asked of Paul is not something sinful. He acts out of his love for the people. But does Paul, by agreeing to their actions, not give the impression that he is under the law and takes the law as the norm for his life?

### **Acts 21:25-26 | Paul Accepts the Proposal**

*25 But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.” 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.*

The brothers of Jerusalem make it clear to Paul that they realize that their attitude does not apply to the believers of the Gentiles. They repeat what they have written to the believing Gentiles. That remains valid for them. Nor do they try to impose the law on the Gentiles. The decision that was made about this in Jerusalem (Acts 15:19-20) was passed on to the Gentiles by Paul, among others (Acts 15:22-29). But through his return to Jerusalem, Paul is now forced to submit to the same law, no matter how well-intentioned the motive may have been.

Paul is so much a prisoner of his love for his kinsmen according to the flesh, that he does what they suggest to him without any response. He even takes the initiative. He takes the four men and purifies himself with them. He also announces when the days of their purification will be fulfilled, that is, when the sacrifice has been made for each of them.

Here we have the curious thing that the apostle takes upon himself to offer sacrifices, as if these sacrifices were not all set aside by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Paul moves into a position that David takes when he joins the Philistines to fight against his own people (1Sam 27:1). Fortunately, the Lord prevents Paul from really offering a sacrifice through the uproar that arises, just as He prevents David from really fighting against his people (1Sam 29:6-10).

### Acts 21:27-30 | Paul Seized the Temple

*27 When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, [began] to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30 Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.*

Paul spent the seven days of purification in the temple. When that period is almost over and he almost wants to sacrifice, things still go wrong. Jews from Asia, where Paul worked for so long, especially in Ephesus, through which many know him and have worked against him, recognize him. They are also present in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. When they see him, they stir up all the crowd. They seize their chance and also Paul. While Paul, by his actions, has just wanted to show that he is one of them, in order to gain access to the gospel, they turn against him en masse.

The uproar that takes place here is reminiscent of the uproar in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). There it is about a pagan temple, here it is about God's

temple. There it is caused by idolaters, here it is caused by God's old people. In both cases it happens with impure means.

While they hold him, they cry out for the help of the men of Israel. They have caught the man who teaches and also practices the most terrible things. In the eyes of these unbelieving Jews, Paul is an apostate Jew. He does not preach the exclusivity of Judaism and does not demand submission to the statutes of the law. He opens the door to God for the Gentiles by preaching the gospel to them, without obliging them to enter Israel and impose the law of Israel.

They accuse him that no man, "all", and no place, "anywhere", is safe from his evil teachings. His evil teachings concern "our people and the Law and this place". His teachings against "our people" are evidenced by ignoring the exclusivity of Judaism, by offering salvation outside Judaism. His teachings against 'the Law' are evidenced by not imposing it on the Gentiles but, on the contrary, by saying that the believers of the Gentiles are free from the Law. His teachings against 'this place', that is the temple, are evident from his teaching about the church which he also compares to a temple (1Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21-22).

They make accusations that Paul, according to James and the elders, by submitting to the law, should just negate. His enemies, however, add to this by suggesting that he also led a pagan into the temple, not only in the court of the pagans, but in the part where only Jews are allowed to come. By doing so he desecrated the temple.

They do not limit themselves to one Greek in whose company they have seen Paul, but speak of Greeks he is said to have brought into the temple. They base their assumption or conclusion on the fact that they saw Paul in the city together with his originally pagan friend Trophimus. It is a foolish assumption, but it is nevertheless expressed. That accusation inflames the situation. A lot of people are present because of the feast, and because of their shouting, a popular uproar arises.

Feelings become more and more heated. Paul is taken hold of and dragged out of the temple. Immediately behind him the doors of the temple are shut. Outward holiness is everything. The temple is defiled in their eyes and must be cleansed before it can be used again. They may also do this to

prevent Paul from loosening himself and fleeing into the temple to grasp the horns of the altar and escape his punishment (Exo 21:13-14; 1Kgs 2:28-29).

### Acts 21:31-36 | Paul Freed by the Romans

*31 While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the [Roman] cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 At once he took along [some] soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he [began] asking who he was and what he had done. 34 But among the crowd some were shouting one thing [and] some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. 35 When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; 36 for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, "Away with him!"*

It seems that Paul's time is up, that's probably how he experienced it. The Jews, his people, are against him. We hear nothing more from his Jewish-Christian fellow-brothers. Then the Lord arranges for the commander of the Roman cohort to hear about it. He acts resolutely. He knows the highly inflammable Jews and certainly because of the hustle and bustle of the feast he will have put his soldiers in the highest state of readiness to intervene as soon as there would be an uproar. In the Antonia Fortress there was always a garrison of soldiers ready to act. From the fortress they had a good view over the temple square.

The commander takes a department of soldiers with him and goes to the place where the lynching is in full swing. When those who attack Paul see the commander and the soldiers, they stop beating Paul. Surely he must have had a lot of fists and kicks by then. The commander frees Paul, but not to release him. He gives the order to handcuff Paul with two chains. Someone who incurs the folk anger in this way must have had a lot on his conscience, he must have thought. He immediately saw that it was not an ordinary quarrel. He asks the crowd about the person of Paul and about the crime he must have committed. As so often, the crowd is not

unanimous because many have become involved in this uproar without knowing what it is all about.

The commander does not learn anything from the crowd and orders that Paul be brought into the barracks of the Antonia Fortress in order to interrogate him there. This is done via the steps leading from the courtyard of the Gentiles to the fortress. These steps become the grandstand for Paul's speech to the people. It is symbolic that he speaks to the people gathered here in the court of the Gentiles. By the way, the court of the Gentiles was made in response to the word that the house of God would be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa 56:7).

Paul may have been freed and captured by the commander and the soldiers, but that does not mean that the bloodlust of the crowd is stilled. They see their prey escape and try to get their hands on him again. The soldiers must protect him from the violence of the crowd by taking him in their midst and carrying him. While their prey escapes their hands, they shout: "Away with him!" This cry also sounded against the Lord Jesus (Lk 23:18). In this Paul experiences the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10).

### **Acts 21:37-40 | Paul Wants to Speak to the People**

*37 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he \*said, "Do you know Greek? 38 Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people." 40 When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying,*

Paul does not want to evade his persecutors just like that. He is not someone who gratefully takes advantage of his liberation from the hands of those who want to kill him. Because of his love for them, he wants to defend or justify himself for them. He is always out to win the Jews for the gospel. He asks the commander for permission to speak to them, thus recognizing the power of the one whose prisoner he is.

Paul speaks to the commander in Greek, the language of civilization. The commander is surprised about this, because he had a totally different impression of the man who was the cause of such a tumult. He thought he had scored big and got hold of the Egyptian who had managed to lead no less than the four thousand men of the Assassins out of the city into the wilderness in order to make new attempts among the people. The Assassins, or Sicarians, are the members of a fanatical Jewish party that mixed with the people during the festivities to secretly stab their opponents with a short sword, the sica.

Paul states that he does not belong to such a party. On the contrary, he has a respectable Jewish background and an equally respectable bourgeois status, coming from the famous university town of Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia. The commander must have been surprised to learn that Paul is a Jew and wondered what these Jews boiling with anger would have against him. Also the place of origin of this Jewish man must have surprised him. In any case, the commander is satisfied with that information to allow Paul's request.

After Paul has received the requested permission, he motions with his hand as a request for silence and with the purpose of saying something. A deep silence arises. Paul stands full of dignity on the steps of the fortress, while he must have been full of blood and wounds because of the mistreatment of the people he is about to address. He speaks to them in Hebrew, their own language, the language they used among themselves as members of God's people.

## Acts 22

### Acts 22:1-5 | Origin and Former Life Walk

*1 “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now [offer] to you.” 2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he \*said, 3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.*

Paul addresses his audience with “brethren and fathers”. The form of address “brethren” indicates his connection with them, while by addressing them as “fathers” (of the people) he expresses his respect for them. He asks them to hear his defense toward them.

It was already dead quiet on the square, but it becomes even more quiet when they hear how he speaks to them in their own language. He places himself as close to them as possible. Paul’s defense consists of telling them about his conversion. He tells his story here to the Jewish crowd. In Acts 26 he will tell his conversion history once more, there to King Agrippa and his entourage, in front of an audience that consists of people of standing. In Acts 9 we have already read that history, but then as it was given to Luke by the Holy Spirit to write down.

His accountability to the Jews here is to indicate that he is a faithful Jew and not an apostate. He also makes it clear that wherever he makes followers of the Messiah, he does so without obliging them to keep the law. He declares that he does not do this of his own accord, but because he has received a calling to do so from above, from heaven.

He repeats for the people what he also said to the commander concerning his origin. He is a Jewish man, therefore one of them. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, today’s Turkey, where a large Jewish community existed.

Stephen argued in Jerusalem with Jews from Cilicia (Acts 6:9), but those men could not resist Stephen's spirit and wisdom. Now there is also a Jew from Cilicia here, but a very different one from the Jew who agreed with Stephen's death at the time. How that change came about, he will tell in a moment.

First he takes his audience with him on his life journey, showing how much he and they have in common. He tells them that he moved from Tarsus to "this city", Jerusalem, to be brought up here. Paul grew up in Tarsus in the midst of paganism. In Jerusalem he became deeply rooted in the ancestral law to which he completely submitted himself in all his behavior.

He sat at the feet of the generally respected Gamaliel and received education from him. According to tradition Gamaliel had five hundred pupils, among whom Paul excelled above all others (Gal 1:13-14). All traditions related to the law he absorbed and have shaped him. Everything he learned he put into practice with unprecedented zeal, as they still do. As for himself, he speaks in the past tense, as for them, in the present tense.

His former life's walk is entirely in keeping with their conceptions. He gives them the compliment that they are zealous for God. In the letter to the Romans, he says it is a zeal not in accordance with knowledge (Rom 10:2). He tells how, in blind zeal for the maintenance of the ancestral law, he fought against everything that pushed aside the importance of that law. That is why the Christians had to pay for it.

This new "Way", this new sect or movement in Judaism, as Christendom was seen in the early days, was in his eyes an enormous threat to the religion of the fathers. Anyone who chose this Way deserved to be killed. To this end, without making any distinction between men and women, he handed those who belonged to this Way over to chains and in prisons.

In his passion he even travelled to Damascus to bring disciples to Jerusalem. Once he had captivated them, he did everything he could to prevent them from escaping him. That is why he chained them and carried them captivated to Jerusalem. The testimonies concerning the truth of his conduct can be obtained from the high priest and all the Council of the elders. They know about this because they have provided him with letters to do his 'work'.

## Acts 22:6-10 | Paul Meets the Glorified Lord

*6 "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, 7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' 9 And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.'*

Here Paul comes to an important point in his defense. His zeal in the persecution of Christians takes a radical turn here. He is going to tell how that change has happened. When he traveled to Damascus and almost arrived there, an unexpected and sudden event took place. He remembers that it was around noon – we don't read that in Acts 9 – that is, when the sun is highest in the sky and shines brightest. If at that time a light is seen that is even brighter than the sun, it must come from heaven (2Cor 4:5-6). It is light that comes from the presence of God, a light that transcends the light of the sun, of creation. The result was that he fell to the ground. Paul is not ashamed to tell that.

He goes on to tell his audience that he heard a voice saying to him: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" To persecute the believers meant to persecute Him Who spoke to him from heaven; such unity is He with His own on earth. He also remembers what he answered to that question. These were the first words from Saul to the Lord. His answer consisted of the question to the Lord: "Who are You, Lord?" This is the question with which everyone who comes to faith must begin. It is the question about the Person of the Lord Jesus. It is about getting to know Him.

The answer to his question must have been staggering. He appeared to be dealing with "Jesus the Nazarene"! He persecuted Him! So he did not persecute deceived Christians who had to be rid of delusions in any way, but a truly living Jesus. Jesus, Whom he persecuted, was no longer in death, but glorified in heaven. This should made the Jews he was addressing

think, because they still believed the lie that the soldiers had spread after bribery by the religious leaders (Mt 28:11-15).

The Lord Jesus calls Himself 'the Nazarene', i.e. the One from Nazareth. This is how the Jews had known Him when He was on earth and this is how they had despised Him. To Saul's dismay He appeared to be the glorified Christ.

Saul's fellow travelers were the undeniable witnesses of what was happening, but the message was meant only for Paul. They did not hear "the voice", but a sound of a voice (Acts 9:7; cf. Jn 12:28-29). They heard that something was said, but not what was said. So many today hear the sound of the gospel without understanding the message.

Then Saul spoke to the Lord for the second time, again in the form of a question. The second question he asked the Lord was: "What shall I do, Lord?" This question must be asked by every believer as a principle of his whole life. To answer the question 'Who are you, Lord?' it is necessary to sit at the Lord's feet to feed on Him and get to know Him (cf. Lk 10:39). Next comes the question of being busy for the Lord, being active for Him. The Christian life is a balanced relationship between education and practice.

To Saul it meant that he had to go to Damascus, where the Lord had prepared a simple disciple to give him further instructions. He did not have to go back to Jerusalem to be directed by the apostles. Saul no longer determined his life, but God determined about him what he had to do. That is also the case with us. What matters is that we walk in the good works, which God prepared beforehand (Eph 2:10).

### **Acts 22:11-16 | Paul in Damascus With Ananias**

*11 But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. 12 "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, [and] well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. 14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. 15 For you*

*will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'*

The glory of the light was so great that he was blinded by it. He was converted and yet still in darkness. He still had to hear the saving word. Therefore he was taken by the hand of those who were with him. This is how he came to Damascus. That was a different entry than he had imagined. He also describes this scene without being ashamed of it. He, the great persecutor of Christians, who thought he had or would have everything under control, completely lost his orientation. He must be taken by the hand to be taken where he needed to go, to meet someone for whom he had come to Damascus to handcuff him.

This man was named "Ananias", which means "Yahweh is merciful". He was a devout man by the standard of the Law, so Paul tells his audience. And that was not just a testimony he gave of himself, but all the Jews in Damascus knew him that way. They all gave a good testimony of him. That should convince his audience that what Ananias did to him was entirely within the framework of their thinking. Paul always points to the connection with Judaism, not only before his conversion but also during and after.

This Ananias came to Saul and stood near him. It was the Jew Ananias who was at Saul's side, as it were, to assure him of his support. Ananias underscores this by the words "brother Saul". He accepts him as a brother, as a member of the family. On these words Ananias lets follow the delivering words: "Receive your sight!" Saul received it immediately. He got his eyesight back and could see Ananias. He looked up to him. This also means that he gave Ananias a higher place than himself. Saul first saw the Lord and now he saw a brother. That always goes together. It is not possible to see the Lord and not have an eye for our brothers and sisters.

Then Paul tells what message Ananias had for him on behalf of God. Ananias called God "the God of our fathers". By mentioning this he again connects himself in his history with his Jewish listeners. He also says it to make it clear to the Jews that they are dealing with *God* and that opposition to him, Paul, means opposition to the God in Whom they say they believe.

Paul had seen “the Righteous One” on the road to Damascus. This beautiful name for the Lord Jesus aptly describes His whole revelation on earth. On earth He was the Man Who was perfectly righteous in all relations and gave to everyone what was rightfully his due. That also included His relationship with God. Paul saw Him as the Righteous One in heaven, because what He was on earth, He is also in heaven. God had predestined him to be a witness of that Righteous One to all men.

In this word “all men” it is already implied that Paul would be a witness not only for the Jews, but also for all non-Jews. He had a calling for the whole world. At the beginning of Acts, the twelve apostles always testified of a resurrected Lord. They had Him in their midst for forty days as the risen Lord and so they could bear witness to that. Paul would testify of a glorified Lord, the glorified Man at God’s right hand. He had seen Him in glory (1Cor 9:1) and heard His voice from the glory. Paul’s testimony therefore has a unique character.

After these words Ananias urged him to activity. He had to get up and be baptized. Saul stood inwardly, in his heart, on the side of the Lord Jesus, but outwardly he was still on the side of the people who had rejected Him. He still had to be saved from the perverse generation outwardly (Acts 2:40-41). Through baptism he was not born again. He had already been born again. Therefore, the washing away of sins has not to do with his salvation for heaven, but with the outward testimony that is connected with baptism. Baptism does not bring in heaven, but adds to the company of disciples on earth. Baptism washes away sins before the eyes of men, blood washes away sins before God.

Through baptism there is a separation between the former existence in Judaism and belonging to Christendom. Everything that is connected with baptism only has to do with the outward side of conversion. What happened in Saul’s heart regarding the relationship between him and God, only God and Saul know. Baptism had to take place in order to make this visible to the people, to show it to the outside world as well. In this way he would separate himself from Judaism outwardly. While being baptized, he had to call on the Name of the Lord Jesus. Calling on that Name is giving testimony of His Name as the only Name he addresses and to Whom he submits.

## Acts 22:17-21 | Paul's Missionary Commission

*17 "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, 18 and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.' 19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. 20 And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' 21 And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"*

After his contact with Ananias, Saul returned to Jerusalem. There he went, he continues, as still faithful, though now converted, Jew in the temple. While he was in the temple in prayer, he fell into a trance (cf. Acts 10:10). A trance is a state in which the ordinary consciousness and understanding of natural circumstances have disappeared and the heart is only receptive to what God shows. Saul was so absorbed in his prayer that he forgot all natural things. Then the Lord appeared to him for the second time. We have heard nothing about this appearance in Acts 9. For the second time he saw the Lord Jesus in His glory. The Lord appeared to him now only to tell him that he had to leave Jerusalem because they would not accept his testimony about the Lord.

Paul says this here to make it clear to his Jewish listeners that his departure from Jerusalem is on the explicit command of the glorified Lord. He does not mention here that the Lord also used the brethren for this, as we read in Acts 9 (Acts 9:30). These two aspects are not opposite each other either, but represent two sides of his departure from Jerusalem.

His Jewish audience is still very quiet, but with all of them the anger will be growing. Paul dares to say that the Lord said that his testimony would not be accepted in Jerusalem, Jerusalem so famous for its connection with Yahweh. How dare he assume that the people of Jerusalem are people who do not listen to God, while the Gentiles will hear! That finally leads to their emotional outburst. Yet they could know through the prophet Isaiah that God's salvation would also go to the nations (Isa 49:6). This has also been confirmed by the two thousand years of world evangelism behind us.

Paul tells how he was not immediately willing to go and how he entered into conversation with the Lord about the commission he received, just as Ananias and Peter had done (Acts 9:13; 10:14). He would much rather have stayed in Jerusalem. There as a witness he would have come out much better. There they knew him as a zealous persecutor of the Christians. Wouldn't he even be able to bear witness to his conversion there in order to win them to the Lord?

As an extra powerful argument to convince the Lord he pointed to his agreement with Stephen's death. He had helped with this by watching out for the coats of those who stoned Stephen. Paul speaks of Stephen as "Your witness". He does not accuse the people of shedding Stephen's blood. In this way he does full justice to Stephen without making a direct accusation against the Jews.

Then he speaks the words the Lord said to him, putting an end to Paul's objections. He is told: "Go!" He had to leave Jerusalem. He is also told where the Lord would send him, namely "far away to the Gentiles".

### **Acts 22:22-23 | The Reaction of the Jews**

*22 They listened to him up to this statement, and [then] they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" 23 And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air,*

When Paul speaks about his mission to the Gentiles, the measure is filled up. A Jew wanted absolutely nothing to do with a mission to the Gentiles (cf. Deu 32:21). That it is precisely at this point that they explode into anger is because it is precisely this point that affects them in their exclusivity. Since childhood they have heard that they are the only people who have any connection with God. They alone are the chosen people. If there is blessing for other peoples, then only through them.

The idea that the Messiah – and Paul says he believes in Him – instead of restoring Israel to its former glory, will make the Gentiles His people, is totally unacceptable to them. As if the Gentiles are on the same level, yes, even higher than Israel. It is impossible for them to make proselytes that do not belong to Judaism. It is all completely impossible to accept.

We see that Paul's testimony has no other result than a manifestation of hatred. The outburst of anger manifests itself in shouting, throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air. This manifestation of hatred confirms what the Lord said to him twenty years earlier and what was also expressed recently by the Holy Spirit. But the grace of the Lord is also present here in support of Paul when he gives his testimony.

### **Acts 22:24-30 | Appeal to Roman Civil Right**

*24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. 25 But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard [this], he went to the commander and told him, saying, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman." 27 The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born [a citizen]." 29 Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains. 30 But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.*

The commander sees the matter escalating again and takes action. He is tired of this man letting the case get out of hand for the second time. Because Paul gave his speech in Hebrew, he may not have understood a thing. That must have pretty much frustrated him. He gropes in the dark about what was said. Now the hidden intentions have to come out of this man. Under scourging he will be made willing to tell the truth. While they are preparing for this, Paul quietly asks about the legal basis for the treatment he has to undergo while he is a Roman citizen. Paul has the right to do so. He recognizes government as an institution of God to bless those who do good (Rom 13:3). He points this out to the government here.

It may be that, as has been suggested, he is not in accordance with his high calling here. In a certain sense, he has ended up in these difficulties

through his own actions. In Philippi he did not appeal to his civil right when he was treated unjustly (Acts 16:23). He did, however, when they wanted to release him a little later in secret. That was because it served the cause of Christ at that time (Acts 16:37). But this is about him. Earlier he had declared himself to be a Jew, now he declares himself to be a Roman. Both were not sin, but was this the power of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of Christ? However, we are equally entitled to ask where the Lord desires His own to surrender to unnecessary suffering. And in general we can say that for all those who criticize the behavior of the apostle here, it is easier to be a martyr in theory than in practice.

Paul's appeal to his Roman civil right brings the preparations for scourging to a standstill. The centurion assumes that Paul speaks the truth and lets his superior know that Paul is a Roman. The commander must have certainty about this. He asks Paul if he is a Roman. Paul confirms that question with a brief and concise "yes". He does not elaborate on what that means. What matters to him is only to point out that something is happening that is contrary to the right that Rome claims to uphold.

The commander looks at Paul with suspicion. Anyone can say that he is a Roman. He himself bought that civil right for a lot of money, because Roman civil right gave a lot of advantages. Where would this little man have gotten that money from? Paul, however, by being born in Tarsus, automatically had that civil right.

Paul's appeal to his Roman civil right directly delivers him from the threat of flogging, but the commander still wants to know where he stands with Paul. He releases Paul and orders the chief priests and all the Council to assemble. The commander places Paul before the Council, not because that is a court of law, but to find out from the confrontation between the two parties what it is all about.

This shows the power of the Romans over the religious system of the Jews. It also shows the extent of slavery to the nations in which God's people ended up because of their sins. It shows again how blinded the people are and how presumptuous it is to get excited about the fact that God's salvation goes out to the Gentiles.

## Acts 23

### **Acts 23:1-5 | Paul in Conflict With the High Priest**

*1 Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." 2 The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" 4 But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'"*

Paul turns to the Council and addresses them. He is not questioned first, but immediately takes the floor. He is on the same level as them, for they are both parties to the government represented by the commander. With his opening words "brethren", he again makes clear the bond he has with them, he identifies himself with them and assures himself of their attention.

He begins with the testimony of a perfectly good conscience before God. He has always had this (2Tim 1:3), even when he persecuted the church. After all, he believed he was offering a service to God (Jn 16:2). It shows how relative the conscience is. His change, his conversion, has no consequences for the functioning of his conscience. Even after his conversion he did nothing else than what he was convinced of before God. He is always careful to keep his conscience free from any charge against himself (Acts 24:1).

A good conscience can be kept when one performs sincerely and severely everything to which this conscience instigates. At the same time, the conscience is a strictly personal matter. Only if it is subject to God's Word can it function in a way that is a blessing to others and to the honor of God. Precisely because the conscience is so strongly personal, it is not a

strong argument for defending a decision. It is very subjective and cannot be checked by anyone.

These words about his conscience are the only words Paul can say. He does not get a chance to say anything about the Lord Jesus. The high priest is very annoyed, possibly both by Paul's promptness and by what Paul says. How dare this apostate Jew speak about a walk before God with a good conscience! He immediately wants the initiative back and takes it by ordering that Paul be forcibly silenced. When Paul hears this, he immediately reacts with a sharp remark. His answer is justified, but it does not reveal the gentleness of Christ (cf. Mk 14:60-62). The judgment Paul makes here has the character of a prophecy which, according to profane history, has also come true.

The expression which Paul uses for the high priest, "whitewashed wall", he did not invent himself. He borrowed it from the prophet Ezekiel, who uses this expression for the hypocritical rulers of Israel who led the people astray (Eze 13:10; cf. Mt 23:27). Their manner of speaking resembled the use of white lime, which covered cracks and holes so that they could no longer be seen. Their words not only made the cracked state among the people invisible, but gave it a beautiful appearance. God, however, will reveal and judge this state of affairs.

The bystanders are outraged by the scolding of the high priest. To them, he is the high priest of God. Apparently the high priest is not dressed in his ministerial habit and therefore not recognizable as such for Paul. It is also possible that Paul did not see him well. He had bad eyes (Gal 4:15; 6:11). Paul shows respect for the ministry, not for the man. Nor does he speak of 'the high priest of God'.

However, he does accept the correction for his outburst because he is reminded inwardly of a word from Scripture (Exo 22:28). The Word brings Paul to confession. The quoted word is not about a high priest, but about someone who has authority over the people. The principle is general and therefore also applies to the high priest, because of his ministry, no matter how unworthy the man may behave in that ministry.

Paul does not try to put his statement into perspective by explaining the text differently. This is an example for us. What the Lord could say does

not apply to him: "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?" (Jn 8:46a). Nor would the Lord ever have to say: 'I did not know.' He answered the high priest in a perfectly dignified manner and for this He also received a slap in the face. His response was as perfectly worthy as His earlier remark (Jn 18:22-23).

### **Acts 23:6-10 | Paul Causes Division in the Council**

*6 But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul [began] crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" 7 As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 9 And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and [began] to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" 10 And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.*

Paul sees that there is no willingness whatsoever to listen to him. Then he uses his knowledge of both parties to play them off against each other. When they turn on each other, a unanimous condemnation of him is far away. He knows that one part of the Council consists of Pharisees and the other part of Sadducees. With a loud voice he addresses the Council again with "brethren". Then he declares that he is a Pharisee, not because he joined this guild, but because his father was already a Pharisee, making it clear which of the two groups of the Council he is connected with. At first that group will have experienced this as anything but an honor.

Then Paul comes up with the statement which leads to division in the Council. He is a Pharisee who on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead. In the Council the two groups kept well with each other, avoiding the things that separated them. But now that this doctrinal matter is brought into their midst, it becomes a point of conflict.

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Paul's statement that he is a Pharisee is not false, but it is below the level of his own words in Philippians 3 (Phil 3:7). There he distances himself from this, because in the light of Who Christ is, that fact has no meaning to him. Nor does Paul speak about the resurrection *from* the dead, the truth connected with the glorified Christ Who returns for His own, but about the resurrection *of* the dead. The resurrection *of* the dead is confessed by every God-fearing Jew and even by God-fearing pagans (Job 19:25-27).

The spirit, the atmosphere of the company in which Paul finds himself, asserts its influence on his testimony. Paul is in the process of proving his faithfulness to the law and this includes being a Pharisee. This includes the resurrection as the hope of Israel. As a Pharisee he speaks about the Messianic hope of Israel because the hope of Israel is the Messiah. He seeks what binds them as Jews and that is the expectation of the Messiah.

The fight that ensues between the Pharisees and Sadducees is not a fight for Paul or for the truth, but for the party. Party people look at everything from the point of view of their party and not from the independent source of God's Word. Sadducees are the liberals. What they cannot prove, they do not believe. That is why they say that there is no resurrection and also that there are no angels and spirits.

That was also apparent from their lives. Life on earth was everything to them. They bathed in luxury and indulged in the crudest forms of pleasure. They lived exuberantly according to the principle: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1Cor 15:32b). Yet they saw themselves as orthodox, because they believed the five books of Moses, the superior books of the Jews. They said to strictly abide by the law of Moses, which for them was the Word of God.

The Pharisees did believe all the books of the Bible, i.e. the Old Testament, and thus also in the resurrection and angels and spirits. They had a Messianic expectation. However, they had added many things to God's Word. Therefore, in the eyes of the Sadducees, they were the liberals.

If we know the confession of the Sadducees, it is not surprising that in Acts especially the Sadducees reveal themselves as the enemies of the gospel. After all, in Acts the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is preached with great power. During the life of the Lord Jesus, the Pharisees revealed themselves

as His adversaries, which is not surprising either, in the light of their confession connected to their unbelief.

The result of Paul's 'dexterity' is telling. His performance before the Sanhedrin gives a minimum of testimony and a maximum of confusion. A great shouting ensues, with the predominance of some of the scribes of the Pharisees' part. The scribes of the Pharisees become cautious because of what Paul said. Imagine that this man had a message from the invisible world. Instead of denouncing Paul further, they now declare that they are on his side to form a front with him against the Sadducees.

The commander who has watched everything so far fears for Paul's life again. He intervenes for the second time to prevent Paul from being murdered by his own people.

### **Acts 23:11 | Paul Is Encouraged by the Lord**

*11 But on the night [immediately] following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."*

Paul will not have felt happy. This is not because his ruse failed, because if he had deliberately expressed his faith in the resurrection in order to set the two parties against each other, then that ruse had succeeded. Above all, his discouragement will be that his testimony was not accepted, that he did not even have the opportunity to testify. When he is in prison, in the darkness of his cell and the darkness of the night, with despair in his heart, the Lord appears to him. He makes it light for him, so that the darkness has to depart.

The Lord does not blame Paul. This fact alone should lead us to be cautious in our judgment of the way Paul has gone. In his discouragement the Lord meets him. The Lord knows from experience what it is like when your service is rejected and you get the feeling that everything has been in vain (Isa 49:4).

The testimony Paul gave in Jerusalem did not bring him what he hoped for. He may see it as a failure, through his own fault. But hear the judgment of the Lord. The Lord judges his testimony in Jerusalem as sufficient and adds that he must also testify in Rome in the same way. Even though

there are no direct results attached to a testimony, the Lord knows how to appreciate it. With the encouragement to “take courage” He cheers up Paul (cf. Acts 18:9-10; 27:22-25; 2Tim 4:16-17).

### **Acts 23:12-15 | A Conspiracy Against Paul**

*12 When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty who formed this plot. 14 They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near [the place].”*

The Jews are furious that there has been no condemnation of Paul. Their great enemy is still alive and that is intolerable to them. That is why they decide to take the law into their own hands. More than forty Jews form a plot, a conspiracy, to kill Paul. They are so serious that they bind themselves under an oath. Their oath means that they will neither eat nor drink until they have killed Paul. They must have broken this oath or they must have died of hunger, because their conspiracy is discovered, as it turns out.

There are forty of them who go to the chief priests and the elders, who mainly belong to the party of the Sadducees. Nothing is said here about the Pharisees, to whom mainly the scribes belong. After all, they are no longer so keen on the death of Paul. The first thing they say is what they have imposed on themselves because of their boundless hatred of Paul. They are filled with only one thing, and that is his death.

They present their plan to the Council. The Council must make it clear to the commander that he must bring Paul to them again. The excuse is that they want to investigate his affairs more thoroughly. They will then lay an ambush in order to kill him from that ambush when he is on his way to the Council. With the forty of them they can easily deal with the few men who will accompany Paul.

### Acts 23:16-22 | Paul's Nephew Discovers the Conspiracy

*16 But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." 18 So he took him and led him to the commander and \*said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." 19 The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, [began] to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" 20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. 21 So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." 22 So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things."*

Man can think of so much, but God is above all. Man, who makes plans without God, is always ashamed. To thwart the evil plan of the Jews, God is this time using a relative of Paul. We hear here of a sister of Paul and her son, thus Paul's nephew. After this event we hear nothing more from them. They appear on stage for a moment because God wants them to.

Every time God works, He does so in His own and often surprising way. There is no standard procedure that He uses for His work. He doesn't come to Paul again in a vision to warn him. He uses ordinary ways. He controls the circumstances in such a way, that Paul's nephew hears of the conspiracy. He reports this to Paul.

When Paul hears this, it is a lawful means for him, which he is happy to use to report an evil matter and thus ensure his safety. The Lord's promise in verse 11 does not make him fatalistic. He will have known his nephew as a reliable young man who does not come to him with fabrications.

Paul calls one of the centurions to him. This means that Paul has a certain degree of freedom and also a certain degree of respect among his guards. He asks the guard to bring his nephew to the commander because he has something to report to him. No explanation follows. The guard does what Paul tells him to do and brings Paul's nephew to the commander. Correct-

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ly the guard reports the request of “Paul the prisoner”, a name which Paul also uses for himself several times (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2Tim 1:8; cf. Phil 1:7,13,17). The commander takes the young man seriously because he comes on behalf of Paul and he has got to know “Paul the prisoner” somewhat in the meantime. This special prisoner must have impressed this rather hardened man. It will be the same for him if it happened to the centurion who, at the cross of the Lord Jesus, also came to the conviction that he was dealing with an innocent One [literally “righteous” One] (Lk 23:47).

Of course in all this we see the hand of the Lord of Whom Paul is first and foremost a prisoner. He also controls the feelings of a hardened man who, like Paul, takes the young man seriously. With his keen sense of imminent danger, he takes Paul’s nephew aside. What this young man has to tell him is not meant for other people’s ears.

He invites the young man to tell him what he has to report. Then Paul’s nephew reports his discovery. He tells about the agreement the Jews made with the Council to ask the commander to bring Paul to the Council. He tells them the reason for this request. The young man tells in detail what the more than forty men proposed to the Council.

Luke does not mention how he found out. An obvious explanation could be that a secret to be kept by more than forty men is difficult to keep. In such a large company, a leak easily occurs. But even then, it is questionable whether such a thing is heard first hand and in such detail, or through a whole circuit of rumors. Either way, the Lord has ensured that Paul’s nephew has heard of the conspiracy and knows exactly how everything was planned.

Paul’s nephew is not a little boy. He can think independently and also conclude. To underline the seriousness of the matter he urges the commander not to allow himself to be fooled by the Council. It seems that the commander has already received the Council’s request when Paul’s nephew comes to tell him his discovery. The young man says that the Council is “ready and waiting for the promise from you”. It also makes the story plausible to the commander. Otherwise he could have waited for the request and checked whether the young man’s story was true.

The commander recognizes the threat, because in the meantime he has become well acquainted with the Jews' hatred of Paul. He orders the young man not to talk to anyone about the content of their conversation and lets him go. With this, this family member disappears from the scene. For a moment, the Lord has used him for His purpose. Now the Lord takes the commander by the hand again, without him being aware of it, so that the commander can get his prisoner Paul where the Lord wants him to be: in Rome.

### Acts 23:23-30 | Lysias' Letter to Felix

*23 And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." 24 [They were] also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. 25 And he wrote a letter having this form: 26 "Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. 27 "When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28 "And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; 29 and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 30 "When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you."*

The commander does not waste any time. He gives orders with a view to the transport of Paul. The hour of departure is fixed at the third hour of the night, that is nine o'clock in the evening. The size of the escort is not for the safety of Paul as a Christian, but as a Roman. The commander would make a bad turn if under his reign a Roman would be killed.

The commander takes the matter extremely seriously because he knows how fanatical religious people are. That is why he sends an army of no less than four hundred and seventy-two men to protect Paul. He even provides mounts to put Paul on, so that he doesn't have to walk. His intention is to transfer Paul to Caesarea, where the governor Felix lives. The case has grown over his head, he feels, and Felix as his superior and responsible for the legal order in Judea has to give his opinion on this.

In order to explain the transfer of the prisoner, the superior writes a letter to Felix, the content of which is communicated to us by Luke. We don't know how Luke found out about the content of the letter. In the same way, the superior could not suspect that what he meant only for Felix is now read by all who read the Bible. That does not mean that his letter was inspired, but that Luke was inspired to include this letter in God's Word. There are also statements from unbelievers and even from the devil in the Bible. Unbelievers or the devil are not inspired, but the Bible writer who mentions these words is.

From the beginning of the letter, we get the name of the man about whom we have read so much and who until now has always been referred to as "commander". This commander is called Claudius Lysias, further on called "the commander Lysias".

In his letter Lysias reports about the reason for sending Paul to the governor. Thereby he gives the facts as they are advantageous for himself with the result that he violates the truth here and there. He did not rescue Paul at all because he had learned that Paul was a Roman. He only learned that fact from Paul when he wanted to have him scourged. He makes it more beautiful than it really was. Furthermore, he gives a correct account of the events.

Moreover, it is important to note that in this official letter it is recorded that Paul did nothing worthy of death or imprisonment. Again, the pagans testify of Paul's innocence. The letter also shows that he has informed the accusers of Paul's transfer to Caesarea and that they could go there to present their charges against Paul.

### **Acts 23:31-35 | Paul Sent to Felix**

*31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. 33 When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also," giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.*

The transport of the prisoner begins. As befits good soldiers, they act according to the orders of their superior (Mt 8:9) and pick up Paul. The first part of the journey takes place at night and is aimed at Antipatris. The next day the foot soldiers return and the horsemen continue with Paul in their midst to Caesarea. In Caesarea they go to the governor Felix and give him the letter from Claudius Lysias explaining the reason for their visit. That reason is also placed in front of him in the person of Paul.

After reading the letter, Felix asks which province Paul comes from. The answer is that he comes from Cilicia, where Tarsus is also situated. That doesn't fall under Felix's authority, but he doesn't see any reason to send Paul to that district. Perhaps he didn't want to offend the Jews too much who would have to travel all the way to Cilicia to express their accusations.

He tells Paul that he will interrogate him as soon as his accusers have arrived. Roman law prescribed that the accused and the accusers had to appear in court together. The accusers could then put forward their accusations, after which the accused was given the opportunity to refute them.

After his communication to Paul, Felix ordered that Paul be kept in Herod's Praetorium. The Praetorium of Herod is the palace built by Herod the Great, which was intended by the Romans as the governor's residence.

## Acts 24

### Acts 24:1-9 | Paul Charged Before Felix

*1 After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney [named] Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. 2 After [Paul] had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying [to the governor], "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, 3 we acknowledge [this] in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. 4 But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. 5 For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. <We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. 7 But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, 8 ordering his accusers to come before you.> By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him." 9 The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.*

The Council took its time to prepare the matter well. They also hired an attorney, literally an orator. After five days they appeared before the governor with this orator, one Tertullus, and brought charges against Paul. Tertullus was thoroughly informed by the Council and would bring their case forward with verve, but without success. He was hired because of his oratorical talent, but has no inner connection with the case itself.

He starts his speech with an enormous show of flattery. The "much peace" they "attained" and the "reforms ... for this nation" that Tertullus praises as having been brought about by Felix's policies are gross lies. There is nothing known of such a policy by this man who, on the contrary, was known as a man of low morals. The gratitude is extraordinarily feigned, it is hypocrisy of the highest order. The Jews could drink this man's blood, but they kept quiet or nodded in agreement with this hypocrisy.

With his judicial flattery, Tertullus wants to address the stadholder's feelings. The governor only had to listen for a moment and the matter would be perfectly clear to him. Then the governor could get back to dealing with the really important and difficult matters. The man standing in front of him turned out to be a pest. It is a sick man who also spreads sickness. It is abundantly clear that he is a cause of riots among all Jews throughout the entire empire. Could anyone be an even bigger criminal? In addition, he is also the leader of a state dangerous sect, that of the Nazarenes.

Tertullus easily swings from one extreme to the other. He praises Felix as a high-ranking man of stature, while in the same breath he presents the high-ranking apostle as a pest, someone who is harmful to public health. With all this, Tertullus wants to give the impression that Felix is rendering the whole world a great service when he condemns this man. He removes a rotten fruit that would otherwise further destroy all the beautiful fruits of Roman policy, of which the Jews are also a beautiful fruit.

Indeed, "this man" was "a fellow who stirs up dissension". Everywhere he went, there was commotion and unrest among the Jews. Only they, the Jews, were the troublemakers themselves. Tertullus presents Paul as a gang leader of "the sect of the Nazarenes", a name for the Christians that we only find here. He turns the followers of the Nazarene, the Lord Jesus, into a gang.

Tertullus also makes the great accusation, albeit in a weakened form, regarding the desecration of the temple. He presents it as if Paul 'tried' to desecrate the temple, which actually means that he did not do it. But also, the attempt has been a reason to arrest him and judge him according to "our own" law. It is still the old lie that Paul wanted to bring his Greek friend Trophimus into the temple.

To reinforce the accusation, Tertullus refers to what Lysias did in delivering Paul. It seems that Tertullus means that Lysias shouldn't have done that, because then Felix wouldn't have had to spend his good time on this matter. By talking about "much violence" Tertullus also hints how much they would have liked to get rid of this man. But this is how the case turned out. They did what Lysias commanded and have come to Felix. Felix will understand that you don't do that if you're not very sure about your case.

While Tertullus made his plea like this, the Jews repeatedly showed their consent. They have supported Tertullus by asserting that everything is as he presents it.

### Acts 24:10-13 | Paul Refutes the Accusations

*10 When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: “Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, 11 since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city [itself] did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. 13 Nor can they prove to you [the charges] of which they now accuse me.*

Then Paul gets the opportunity from Felix to defend himself. He defends his own cause. He does not need an orator like Tertullus (Mt 10:18-20). He does so with a dignity that completely overshadows the drivel of Tertullus. Without a hint of flattery, he recognizes Felix as a judge over the people of the Jews. Paul mentions that he knows that Felix has held that position for many years. This means that Felix is well acquainted with the customs of the people. It gives Paul good courage in his defense. It makes a big difference whether you have to explain something to people who understand your subject or to people for whom the matter is completely unknown.

He begins by pointing out that no more than twelve days ago he came to Jerusalem. So it makes no sense to present him as someone who has built a reputation as a troublemaker. And then the reason he came to Jerusalem. It was no other reason than to worship and to bring the money of a collection of the nations to the poor believers in Jerusalem (verse 17). Are these activities of a gang leader?

Paul speaks of worship, but not in the Christian sense of the word, but according to the Jewish norm. He speaks here as a true Jew among the Jews. Christian worship is not connected to a place like Jerusalem. Here he is the Jew who still has a connection with Judaism. There was a Christian church in Jerusalem that he visited, but he did give the impression that he was not talking about Christian worship.

He dismisses his stay in the temple and the accusations they attach to it as all fabrications. Paul reject his accusers by stating that they cannot prove anything to Felix about their accusations against him.

### **Acts 24:14-21 | Paul Declares his Orthodox Faith**

*14 But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; 15 having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. 16 In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience [both] before God and before men. 17 Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings; 18 in which they found me [occupied] in the temple, having been purified, without [any] crowd or uproar. But [there were] some Jews from Asia— 19 who ought to have been present before you and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me. 20 Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council, 21 other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, 'For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.'"*

Then Paul declares that he is not an apostate Jew, but that he serves the God of the fathers. With this he confesses to serve the same God that his accusers confess to serve. He also confesses to believe everything that is in the law and the prophets. However, there is also a big difference and that he mentions as well. He serves the God of the fathers and believes that what is according to the law and written in the prophets is in accordance with the Way.

With this he confesses that the movement that within Judaism is considered a sect and is called "the Way" is the point of reference of his actions. With this he refers in veiled terms to the Lord Jesus, to Him Who is the Way from and to God. That is also the basis of the hope he has in God – a hope they too have – that there is a resurrection. Here too Paul points to the common ground on which he and his accusers stand.

At that time Christendom was still seen as a sect of Judaism whose followers confessed that the Messiah had come, but otherwise distinguished

themselves in nothing from the orthodox Jews. By always seeking that common ground, Paul says as it were: They rejected me, but I did not reject them. In this way he declares his solidarity with his people. How then could he be called 'a pest'?

The resurrection was known to the Jews from the Old Testament (Job 19:25-27; Psa 16:9-11; Dan 12:13), but the distinction between a resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous was not. The New Testament shows us that there is a gap of a thousand years between the two resurrections (Rev 20:4-6).

Mentioning the resurrection to Felix confronts the governor with the situation after death. Surely it is a hint for Felix to think about that. Paul presents the resurrection as a hope (Acts 23:6; 26:6; 28:20). This hope is the sure fulfillment of the promises God made to His people.

In that hope, in that expectation, Paul lived and that – "in view of this" – was the motive for him to serve God with a blameless conscience. In no way did he want to do anything that would cause him to lose his inner bond with God, nor lose sight of the fulfillment of God's promises. By speaking in this way, he also speaks to the conscience of the people before whom he appears (cf. Acts 23:1). Felix did not have a blameless conscience, nor did Tertullus and the unbelieving Jews.

Once again he points out that he was not in Jerusalem for many years and that when he got there again, it was not to cause unrest, but to do good. If Felix wants to, he can check all that and he will get it confirmed. He had come to Jerusalem with the money from the collection of the nations with him (Rom 15:25-28; 1Cor 16:1-4; Gal 2:10).

This was meant for "my people", who are his believing Jewish brothers from the church in Jerusalem, with whom he also wanted to present offerings. There was no problem until some Jews came from Asia. Felix should call them to declare under oath that they had found him with a pagan in the temple. As far as Paul is concerned, the Jews from Jerusalem who appeared before Felix may also come up with a real accusation.

The only thing they could accuse him of is what he shouted when he was standing among them. He shouted something that these Sadducees re-

fused to believe. But such an accusation wouldn't impress Felix at all. He would not concern himself with a theological dispute.

### **Acts 24:22-27 | Felix and Paul**

*22 But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case." 23 Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and [yet] have [some] freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him. 24 But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him [speak] about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you." 26 At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. 27 But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.*

Felix was embarrassed. He knows that Paul has done nothing for which Roman law holds him guilty. He knows 'the Way' quite well, of which he will have been informed by his wife Drusilla, who is a Jewess (verse 24). However, if he would admit that Paul is innocent, he would feel the anger of the Jews, and to him their favor is more important than the law. That is why he resorts to a way out and says he is holding on to the matter in order to investigate it more closely. He would wait until Lysias came. This is a worthless excuse, for when would he come?

You can be familiar with 'the Way', yet not go that Way. His way out means that Paul remains imprisoned. In addition he is given a considerable degree of freedom which shows that Felix does not see him as an enemy of the state. Pilate was also convinced of the innocence of the Lord, but he did not release Him.

After a few days Paul is given the opportunity to speak to the governor alone. This was done at the request of Felix, who returned to Caesarea with his wife Drusilla. Surely he wants to hear more from Paul about the faith

in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks about this and appeals to Felix's conscience. Fearless, he tells the wicked Felix what must affect his conscience.

He talks to him about "righteousness", which refers to his life in connection with others. In this he is certainly not righteous and still acts unjustly. He tramples underfoot the rights of others with the greatest ease, if it is to his advantage. In the same way he has appropriated his wife Drusilla who belongs to another man.

Also "self-control" is a subject about which Paul speaks. Self-control has to do with one's own person. He has no self-control whatsoever, but gives in to his lusts and is already married to the third princess.

Finally, Paul presents "the judgment to come" to him as something he should take into account. The judgment places Felix in his relationship toward God. But he does not want to take God into account either. Felix does not care that it is "now ... the acceptable time" (2Cor 6:2b).

Paul places all this in the perspective of faith in the Lord Jesus. Felix can escape the judgment on his unrighteousness and the unbridled life in sin by believing in Him. Felix feels himself in the presence of God. His conscience speaks, while Paul has said nothing of his depraved way of life. Paul has only made God's Word shine in power and that does its work.

But Felix does not want the light and sends Paul away. Many have undoubtedly been afraid when they stood before Felix, but here the roles are reversed. Christendom is too expensive for Felix. He doesn't want to give up his life of sin. He would have to sacrifice too much for it which is not what he would like to do. Felix responds in the same way many people have responded and still do.

Luke notices another hindrance for Felix to accept the gospel and that is his greed for money. Love of money is a root of all sorts of evil (1Tim 6:10). He hopes that Paul will give him money to let him go. Every time he talks to Paul, it is from that motive. That keeps him from making a choice for Christ.

Thus, two years pass. We now are in the year 60. Then Felix is succeeded by Porcius Festus. Although Felix is convinced of Paul's innocence and he has the opportunity to set him free, he still leaves him prisoner. This also

has to do with the fact that the accusers have still not appeared. But he doesn't care about justice. Money and public opinion are more important to him.

Paul has been imprisoned for more than two years. Yet he doesn't make use of the opportunity to buy himself free. And why is he imprisoned? Because of a humanly unfortunate cause he has imposed on himself. But God uses it. Because of this, governors like Felix (means 'happy') and Festus (means 'feast') come into contact with the gospel. If they would accept it, they would become truly happy and could really feast. As far as we have their history in Scripture, it seems that they have let the opportunity of a lifetime pass by.

## Acts 25

### **Acts 25:1-5 | Paul Charged Before Festus**

*1 Festus then, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. 2 And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they were urging him, 3 requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem ([at the same time], setting an ambush to kill him on the way). 4 Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly. 5 "Therefore," he \*said, "let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him."*

The scene around Paul has undergone a change. Festus, who succeeded Felix as governor over Judea, has come to live in Caesarea. Caesarea was the political capital, while Jerusalem was the religious capital of Judea, the heart of Judaism. Good relations with Jerusalem were of the utmost importance for the keeping of peace in his area. That is why, soon after moving into his official residence in Caesarea, Festus goes up to Jerusalem to meet the leaders there.

There he is immediately confronted with Paul's cause. After two years the Jews have not forgotten Paul and have not lost their hatred. Since his arrival in Jerusalem, the Jews have always had his death as their goal (Acts 21:27-31; 22:22; 23:10-15; 25:3). Their murderousness has not diminished. A new governor offers a new chance to get rid of their archenemy.

A delegation of chief priests and distinguished Jews lodge an accusation against Paul during his visit. The nobility of the group of prosecutors makes it clear how Paul's case still bothers them. In addition to their accusation, they also submit a request. Paul is still imprisoned in Caesarea and their request is to have him come to Jerusalem. Now that Festus is here and so are they, the case could be settled.

Their dirty plan is to ambush Paul on the way and kill him. They also have no confidence that Festus will condemn Paul. If they can arrange it in such

a way that they would kill Paul themselves, they are definitely rid of their enemy.

But that doesn't work. Festus may have heard of the earlier plans or read them in reports, but he does not grant the request of the Jews. Paul remained in Caesarea, where he himself would soon return. Here we see the hand of God. Festus wants to oblige the Jews in so far as he gives them the opportunity for the influential men to travel with him and prosecute Paul in Caesarea.

### **Acts 25:6-12 | Paul Appeals to the Emperor**

*6 After he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 7 After Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove, 8 while Paul said in his own defense, "I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." 9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these [charges]?" 10 But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to [the] Jews, as you also very well know. 11 If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is [true] of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar." 12 Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, "You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go."*

After eight or ten days, Festus returns to Caesarea. The day after his return, he took his seat on the tribunal or judgment seat and ordered Paul to be brought to him there. By taking place on the tribunal, the handling of 'the case of Paul' takes on an official character. But what kind of judge takes his seat? It is a person who is solely out for his own interests.

This also happened to Pilate at the time, of whom we also read that he sat down "on the judgment seat" (Jn 19:13) and that to judge the Judge of the whole earth (Gen 18:25) Who stood before him. The justice he spoke is the greatest and most gross form of injustice ever committed.

It is a great encouragement to know that in front of all the earthly judgment seats there is a heavenly judgment seat. On earthly judgment seats sit and sit people who are incapable of impartial judgment. On the heavenly judgment seat sits Someone Who will judge perfectly (Rom 14:10; 2Cor 5:10).

Before Festus, the Jews who came along at his invitation also appear. Luke mentions of them that they stand “around him”, which presumably refers to Paul. Like bloodhounds they surrounded him. Then their torrent of “many and serious charges” breaks loose. Luke does not go into detail about their contents. From Paul’s defense, we can deduce what points they accused him of.

Because the Jews have still not achieved a result in their accusation, they will have made the accusations very severe, and extended them as much as possible. In doing so, they have violated the truth in a terrible way. It is therefore not surprising that they are unable to prove a single accusation. It is precisely their exaggeration in the charges that makes it easy for Paul to defend himself.

In addition, what is important to the Jews does not interest Festus at all. What does he have to do with the law of the Jews? When the Jews accuse Paul of teaching the nations that they do not have to keep the law, that means nothing to him. The same goes for the accusation that he desecrated the temple.

The accusation that he would have done something against the emperor could be something important. This accusation was based on the preaching of another king than the emperor, namely Jesus (Acts 17:7). But no call was made by Paul to rebel against the emperor. On the contrary, he taught that one must submit to the government (Rom 13:1).

This is not a matter for Festus. No, it is clear to him that he is not dealing with someone dangerous to the state, someone who is endangering the widely acclaimed ‘Pax Romana’, the Roman peace. While Festus has so far acted correctly and should now have released Paul, he is making a proposal that is completely contrary to Roman law. He proposes that Paul should go to Jerusalem and stand trial there before him.

Luke mentions the motive of the proposal: Festus wants to do the Jews a favor. The main concern of Festus is to gain the favor of the Jews, as was the case with Felix (Acts 24:27) and Pilate (Mk 15:15). He wants to be in good standing with them. A good relationship with the Jews is more important to him than doing justice to a prisoner who causes trouble, or at least is accused of doing so. He foresees that his release will only cause him great problems.

Paul sees through his intentions. Earlier he wanted to go to Jerusalem, but now he no longer wants to. He does not want to appear before a Jewish court, but before the court of the emperor. By appealing to the emperor, he recognizes the way of the Lord with him, that He led him out of Jerusalem. He also recognizes the judgment seat of the emperor and appeals to him. The judgment seat on which Festus sits is that of the emperor. Festus, as his representative, exercises his authority.

The first Christians suffered many injustices, but the charges were always unfounded. They obeyed the laws issued by the government, so they could not be accused on that basis. What they suffered was due to the fact that they were Christians (1Pet 4:15-16).

Paul also speaks to the conscience of Festus by saying to him that he knows well that he, Paul, did not do any wrong to the Jews. By his statement he disqualifies Festus as a judge. Paul expresses his surrender to the law. If he had done something worthy of death, he would not refuse to die.

In veiled terms he even accuses Festus of wanting to surrender him to the Jews as a favor. He cannot simply accept this. That is why he appeals to the emperor. If we were to ask ourselves whether he would not have done better to place his cause in the hand of God, it would in any case become clear that God controls the circumstances in such a way that Paul comes to Rome, as the Lord told him earlier (Acts 23:11). There he would testify before the emperor himself.

It is also questionable whether we should ask ourselves if Paul should not have better placed his cause in God's hand. Is it not rather our duty to remind people of their responsibility and that this also applies, in some cases, to what the government asks of us?

It is not about opposing all the wrong decisions that a government makes or wrong laws that a government enacts. As mentioned earlier, Paul has never called for an attack on the government for everything that is wrong. He even says that we should submit to the government without question. As soon as the government says something we should do or not do in which our testimony before the Lord is at stake, we can go the paths that are provided for that purpose. That is why Paul appeals to the emperor here.

It seems that Festus did not count on this. What should he do now? He cannot release Paul, because then the Jews will explode. Paul does not want to go to Jerusalem and he cannot force him to do so, because Paul is a Roman citizen. Before he decides, he first confers with his council about what is best. He uses consultation with them to prevent a quarrel with them.

Luke does not tell us what has been discussed. That is not important, because the outcome is that Festus confirms Paul's appeal. The Lord has determined that Paul will go to Rome. With the words "you have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go", Festus assures Paul that he will go to the emperor in Rome.

### **Acts 25:13-22 | Festus Brings the Case Before Agrippa**

*13 Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. 14 While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix; 15 and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. 16 I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. 17 So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought before me. 18 When the accusers stood up, they [began] bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, 19 but they [simply] had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. 20 Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether*

*he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters. 21 But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar." 22 Then Agrippa [said] to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he \*said, "you shall hear him."*

The decision that Paul shall go to the emperor in Rome has been made. That does not mean that he will be put on transport immediately. There are still the necessary preparations to be made. The greatest concern for Festus, it turns out, is to make up a plausible reason that justifies the transport of this prisoner for the emperor.

To his joy King Agrippa and Bernice appear after a few days. They come to congratulate Festus with his new job. Their arrival was a relief because Agrippa knows the Jewish customs well. King Agrippa is accompanied by Bernice, his sister, with whom he lives.

Festus presents 'the case of Paul' to Agrippa. He tells how things went. Like everyone else in the world, Festus presents the case in the manner most favorable to him. He presents himself as the sincere upholder of justice, as if that must have its course and he is committed to it. The facts are as he knows them. He says that his predecessor Felix left behind a man in prison about whom he received an accusation in Jerusalem from the Jews who asked for his conviction.

With a straight face he also tells how he responded to the Jews that the Romans are not in the habit of delivering a man by way of favor. He forgets that he himself acted with Paul only by granting favor to the Jews (verse 9) and that Paul accused him of this in veiled terms (verse 11).

He mentions how he made "the man" come to his judgment seat without delay and listened to the accusers. The suspicions he had about what Paul might have misbehaved turned out to be unfounded. The accusations concerned only some points of disagreement with him about their own religion. He had also picked up something "about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive".

The way in which Festus speaks about the Lord Jesus is immensely disinterested. Festus has heard the core of the gospel, of which he passes on the summary to Agrippa: that the Lord Jesus died and rose (1Cor 15:3-4).

To Festus, the story of the resurrection is only Jewish superstition. Festus does not say ‘alive again’ nor does he talk about the ‘resurrection’. All in all, Festus expresses Paul’s innocence. Once again, the testimony of Paul’s innocence sounds from the mouth of a pagan government servant.

Because he no longer knew what else he could do about this case, he suggested that Paul go to Jerusalem to be tried there. He concealed the motivation for his proposal from Agrippa. He immediately goes on to mention that Paul’s reaction was that he appealed to the emperor. He accepted that appeal, ordering him to be held prisoner until the moment he was sent to the emperor.

Through this report, Agrippa has become so much interested in Paul that he indicates that he wants to hear “the man” himself. Festus promises him that he will give him the opportunity to do so tomorrow.

### **Acts 25:23-27 | Paul Brought Before Agrippa**

*23 So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. 24 Festus \*said, “King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. 25 But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. 26 Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you [all] and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. 27 For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.”*

The next day the remarkable meeting takes place between the distinguished of life and the scum of the world (1Cor 4:13b). Agrippa and Bernice entered the auditorium with great pomp and ceremony, having within their entourage the commanders and other prominent people of the city. When they have taken their seats, Festus causes Paul to be brought before them. In the midst of worldly splendor, a little man appears, shackled.

Thus the Lord led it to fulfill His word which He spoke when He said that Paul would bear His Name before kings (Acts 9:15). Therefore, the accused Paul is facing wicked people with depraved morals. Never before has he had such an audience.

When Paul is about to open his mouth, the scene changes. Then the judges become the accused and the accused becomes the judge. Pity may have filled the hearts of the dignitaries present when they saw the poor prisoner, but even more pity must have filled Paul's heart when he saw all the emptiness of these lost souls.

Festus opens the session. With the words "you see" he points to Paul as a curiosity. This is the man who succeeds in antagonizing the whole crowd of Jews to such an extent that they only wish for one thing: his death. But, Festus continues, I have not been able to discover what he would have done to deserve the death penalty.

Once again, Festus testifies to Agrippa of Paul's innocence, but now he does so in front of all the city's dignitaries (verses 18,25). However, he could not release him because the prisoner appealed to the emperor. The prisoner has appealed to the emperor and he will therefore send him to the emperor.

Then Festus comes up with the problem with which he now is confronted. He must send Paul to the emperor, but he has not yet been able to formulate a concrete accusation. Festus has put his hopes in Agrippa that he will be able to help him put something on paper so that he would not lose face if he sent Paul to Rome.

Festus speaks in this context of the emperor as "my lord". "My lord" is an indication for the emperor in the divine sense of the word. It is the recognition of the divine status of the emperor. Therefore, it is also offensive to the Romans that Christians do not recognize any other Lord but Jesus.

## Acts 26

### **Acts 26:1-3 | Beginning of Paul's Defense**

*1 Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and [proceeded] to make his defense: 2 "In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; 3 especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among [the] Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

After the introduction by Festus, Agrippa takes charge of the gathering. He gives the floor to Paul. As a greeting Paul stretches out his shackled hand. On other occasions where he was going to speak, he also stretched out his hand, but there it was to obtain silence (Acts 13:16; 21:40; cf. Acts 19:33). Then he starts his defense.

In this defense he tells what happened to him. Here he will speak extensively about his meeting with the Lord Jesus. To Festus, and also Felix, he has done this more succinctly, but here he stands before someone who knows all the customs and contentious questions of the Jews. For that fact he expresses his gratitude.

This is not flattery, but a justified observation. Agrippa will understand what he is saying, it will even appeal somewhat to his conscience. Moreover, Agrippa is favorable to him. It is pleasant for anyone who has something to say that his hearer will at least understand him.

Paul speaks in the Name of God. While he respects the position of the great ones of the earth, we see that he is morally far above them. The more than two years he has been imprisoned have not been able to depress his heart or faith. He vigorously testifies to what the Lord has done to him, even if it does not have the fervently desired effect on Agrippa and Festus. And there are others present. Maybe it has impressed one of them. Eternity will reveal it.

Paul does not repeat his conversion history just like that. Each of the two times he tells this history, it is in view of the audience he has in front of him.

In Acts 22 he stands before the Jews (Acts 21:40; 22:1-2). Here he stands before one who knows Judaism, of whom he even says further on, that he believes the prophets (verse 27). From everything we read of Agrippa, it is clear that to him, faith is only an outward matter.

### **Acts 26:4-8 | Paul's Youth as a Jew**

*4 "So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my [own] nation and at Jerusalem; 5 since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived [as] a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. 6 And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; 7 [the promise] to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve [God] night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. 8 Why is it considered incredible among you [people] if God does raise the dead?"*

Paul tells his life story, what happened to him. He came to Jerusalem quite young. There he excelled in the strictest sect, that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were already strict, but he put a little more on top of it. His enormous zeal was so striking that all Jews knew about it. He adds that he could call them to testify if they wanted to.

He has not been a one-day fly, but he has lived by it consistently. Paul was not just any Pharisee. Opposite Agrippa, who knows the Pharisees, he presents his background as a fanatical Pharisee, so that he will be impressed by the tremendous change that has taken place in him.

As a Pharisee, he believed in the fulfillment of the promises made by God to His people in the Old Testament. Those promises were still not fulfilled. Therefore, all "twelve tribes" were still looking forward to that fulfillment. Paul speaks of the twelve tribes. It is clear to him that the ten tribes that are in the scattering will share in the same promises.

There is no question of any of these tribes being lost. For faith they are there – Anna, the prophetess, for example, came from Aser (Lk 2:36) – and in God's time these tribes will also appear. By the twelve tribes that earnestly serve God night and day, Paul does not mean the unbelieving mass of the people, but the true Israel of God, the Jews who believe in the Messiah Who has come.

Precisely the hope that the Jews themselves had as a nation was the basis of the accusation against him. That accusation was made by the unbelieving leaders. They rejected Him with Whom the hope of Israel's future is indissolubly connected. That hope is the Messiah. That hope the believing Jews found in the coming of the Lord Jesus and that is the reason for the attacks of the unbelieving Jews.

The hope of the fulfillment of the promises, is also connected with faith in the resurrection. All believers to whom the promises were made in the Old Testament died without having received the promises. Nevertheless, they will receive what was promised to them in the resurrection. Promises and resurrection belong together. Above all, it is connected to faith in the resurrection of the Messiah, Who was rejected and killed at His coming to fulfill the promises. By talking about the future restoration of Israel, Paul offers his audience a broad perspective.

With his words Paul especially wants to reach King Agrippa. To that end he addresses him directly when he says to him: "O King." Afterward he also has a question for all those present. He asks his audience the penetrating question why they judge the raising of the dead by God to be unbelievable. This makes the resurrection the central theme of Paul's speech. Whoever believes in God must believe in Him as the God of the resurrection. This is the core of the difference of opinion between the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles on the one hand and the Christians on the other hand.

### **Acts 26:9-11 | Paul's Zeal Against Christendom**

*9 "So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.*

Paul is pre-eminently the man to whom applies what the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: "But an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (Jn 16:2-3). As a Jew he considered

himself obliged to do a lot of hostility “to the name of Jesus of Nazareth”. The name expresses everything that the person is. This Name was hated by Paul because it was against his deepest belief. For him, Jesus of Nazareth was the great deceiver.

In Jerusalem, Paul raged against Him in the persecution and torture of those he now calls “saints”. There was no pity at all for his victims. He forced them to renounce the Name of Jesus and say ugly things of Him. By the way, the fact that he forced them to slander does not mean that the Christians did the same.

He was so passionate about eradicating this sect that he did not confine himself to Jerusalem in his zeal to do so. The saints were not safe from him in foreign cities either. His persecution madness drove him there as well.

### **Acts 26:12-15 | Paul’s Conversion**

*12 “While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, 13 at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ 15 And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*

The chief priests had in him a great tool for their evil intent. They were only too happy to give him mandate and order to track down and eradicate this new movement in Damascus as well. And then the totally unexpected happens. At the height of his fanaticism comes the turnaround. In the fire of his report Paul experiences this impressive event once again. What he saw then, he cannot deny. How can someone deny a personal experience, something he himself observed?

Through the exclamation “O King” Paul speaks again emphatically to Agrippa in a personal way and emphasizes for him the observation he made. At midday he saw a light brighter than the sun. This cannot but be the light of the Lord Jesus, Who is called “the sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2). Until this moment, this man was blinded by his legalistic zeal against the grace of God in Christ. Then the light shines into his soul. Then that

same Christ reveals Himself and thereby erases everything on which he boasted as a Jew and in which he rested, and makes it to nothing.

This is the moment of his conversion. The jailer is converted in the very midst of the night (Acts 16:25,33), Paul comes to conversion at the clearest of the day. The impression this has made on him he presents here again stronger than the last time when he recounted his conversion history. Then he spoke of a bright light from heaven (Acts 22:6). Now he speaks of a light from heaven that is brighter than the sun. It shows that his impression of Who the Lord is, has become ever greater. This is how it should be with us. The longer we live with the Lord, the greater He must become for us. We should always be able to bear witness to that increasing greatness.

The light radiated not only all around Paul, but also all around those who travelled with him. They also fell to the ground. What may have been interpreted by Paul's companions as nothing more than a natural phenomenon, meant a lot more to Paul. He heard a voice addressing him in the Hebrew language and by his Hebrew name.

His name Saul reminds us of King Saul. It is possible that his parents called him so because they expected the same from him as they saw in Saul. King Saul was bigger than all the people and they wanted their son to be too. This parallel also came true in a spiritual sense and not only in the fact that he stood out in knowledge and zeal above all his contemporaries. King Saul became a persecutor of God's anointed King David; the New Testament Saul became a persecutor of God's Messiah, which means 'Anointed'.

In that way of resisting and persecuting the Messianic Jews, Saul was warned by God. God made him feel the goads of His Word (Ecc 12:11). We can discover these goads in Stephen's testimony and that of other believers Saul tortured. The words of those believers affected him, but he did not want to listen to them. Until the moment the breakthrough comes on the road to Damascus.

The answer to the Lord's question is a question from Paul which immediately shows all his submission. He asks: "Who are You, Lord?" The answer is that he persecutes "Jesus". But he persecuted the church, didn't he? Here we see that 'Jesus', the name of the Lord in His humiliation on earth, identifies Himself with His persecuted and humiliated church. Paul thought

Him dead and saw the Way he was persecuting as dangerous. That image and all his ensuing activities with which he thought he was doing God a service, are suddenly completely undermined by this encounter.

### **Acts 26:16-18 | The Lord's Command to Paul**

*16 But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; 17 rescuing you from the [Jewish] people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, 18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'*

From now on, his life will take a radical turn. The Lord has not only spoken to him to bring him to repentance and salvation. He has to get up and stand on his feet, because the Lord wants to make him a servant and a witness. Paul immediately learns the purpose of his conversion. This also applies to us (1Thes 1:9-10; Heb 9:14). There was a great work ahead of him. For this the Lord appeared to him.

His testimony has a glorified Lord as its object. He is a completely different witness than the twelve apostles who travelled through Israel with the Lord. Just as the service of Peter and John was typified by the Christ on earth, so his service is characterized by a glorified Lord, a Lord in heaven. Wherever the Lord will appear to him, it will have to do with revealing the mystery of Christ and the church.

His service will also be characterized by being detached from Judaism and all other people in order to be set apart for a service to them all. He occupies a chosen position both with regard to Judaism and paganism. He has a message from the Lord for both, Who sends him to them. He has to bring that message to blind Jews as well as to the Gentiles. Judaism has lost its privileged position.

In a similar way we have been detached from the world at our conversion (Gal 1:4). This is not to live in isolation, but to be sent straight back into it (Jn 20:21) to serve the lost people for the purpose of their conversion.

Only God can open eyes (Psa 146:8). If Paul is commanded to do the same, it means that he can act in the name of God. Opening eyes means that someone's eyes are opened for who he is toward God to then see what has been given to him by God. In order to open the eyes of others we must have an eye for the possibilities God gives for that. For example, Paul opened the eyes of the Athenians by pointing out the altar to the unknown God (Acts 17:22-23). Here he stands before Agrippa, whose eyes he also wants to open. He speaks to him in a penetrating way what this opening of the eyes means.

The few words the Lord has spoken to him about this and which he passes on to Agrippa, contain the fullness of the gospel. Through the gospel one's eyes are opened; he comes into the light and to God (cf. Col 1:12) with all the glorious consequences. In the first place it is about people turning from the power of darkness to light. Paul has just given an impressive personal testimony of this light. The power of darkness is the darkness in which the soul is enveloped by sin. This power of darkness also reigned in Paul's soul, despite all his religiousness.

People must also turn from the power of satan to God. The power of satan focuses more on the outward bondage through which people come to a life that revolves only around themselves and the satisfaction of their own needs. Paul has testified to this as well. In order to live meaningfully, conversion to God is necessary. God is the Creator and knows perfectly what is necessary for a life to His glory and He also gives what is necessary for that. Such a life "is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and [also] for the [life] to come" (1Tim 4:8).

The consequences of conversion are also great. This is what Paul also speaks about. It is a life based on the forgiveness of sins received through faith "in Me", that is in the Lord Jesus. The forgiveness of sins is the awareness that there is nothing more between the holy God and the sinful man who has converted. When sins are gone that make separation between God and man, it opens the way for the Lord to give every converted soul an inheritance among the saints.

Christendom is not some kind of fulfillment of Judaism, but goes far beyond it. It is about "an inheritance among those who have been sanctified",

an inheritance together with all the other saints, in the light. It is not an inheritance on earth, but “in the light” (Col 1:12). It is an inheritance with Christ (Eph 1:10-11). All these glorious things are connected with the faith in Him Who was once hated so much by Paul, but Who stopped him.

### **Acts 26:19-23 | Paul’s Work as an Apostle**

*19 “So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but [kept] declaring both to those of Damascus first, and [also] at Jerusalem and [then] throughout all the region of Judea, and [even] to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. 21 For this reason [some] Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. 22 So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; 23 that the Christ was to suffer, [and] that by reason of [His] resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the [Jewish] people and to the Gentiles.”*

With the argumentative word “so” Paul again addresses himself to King Agrippa personally. If the king has heard all this, it is clear that Paul could not disobey this heavenly vision, could he? That was simply impossible for him. It is as much about direct obedience to Him Who appeared to him as it is about making known the great privilege he saw. You simply want to testify to this; you are inwardly just forced to do so it. Such a personal experience can be fought by anyone, but cannot be cancelled by anyone. Such personal encounters with the Lord also determine the way in which we testify today.

Paul tells us what effect this encounter and the task associated with it have had on him. With the same zeal with which he first fought against Christendom, he dedicated himself to spreading it through the proclamation of the gospel. He started with this immediately in Damascus. Then he proclaimed it in Jerusalem, then throughout the whole country of Judea and then also to the nations. He brought the gospel in its most elementary form.

He tells what he preached, with which he also shows Agrippa and everyone else, the way of salvation. It is about people repenting, that is, changing

their minds, turning around and confessing their sins before God. At the same time with this inner change, a turning to God must take place, which means that God has the say in life and can determine the course of life.

Paul also tells his audience that it is not a confession with the lips. He points out that he has also proclaimed that repentance and conversion must be followed by works that are in accordance with this (Mt 3:8). Faith without works is dead (Jam 2:17). These are not works that lead to salvation, but works that result from salvation.

This preaching is the reason the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to kill him (Acts 21:30-31). That they did not succeed, he attributes to the help of God. God gave him life to testify and he still does, until this very moment. Here he stands before the great ones of the earth, but his testimony also applies to the little ones, the ordinary citizens. After all, small and great will have to account for and be judged according to everyone's work (Rev 20:12).

In all the testimonies he has given, he has in no way said anything that does not correspond with what the prophets and Moses have said. The prophets and Moses have announced the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom. The Jews were not mistaken in their expectation of the Messiah and His kingdom, of which Israel will be the center. What they are blind to, however, is the testimony of the law and the prophets that the Messiah had to suffer and be killed and rise from the dead.

This means that Paul did not proclaim anything contrary to the Old Testament. He brings nothing new, no anti teaching, but what the Old Testament has always presented as hope for Israel and also for the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:1-3). The Lord also makes this clear to the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:26-27,44-47). The suffering and resurrection of Christ form the core of the gospel for Jew and Gentile.

### **Acts 26:24-26 | Interruption by Festus**

24 While [Paul] was saying this in his defense, Festus \*said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! [Your] great learning is driving you mad."

25 But Paul \*said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. 26 For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to

*him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner.*

When Paul speaks about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, Festus interrupts him. He believes that Paul has now gone mad and is talking gibberish. How many times over the centuries have Christians been declared mad (1Cor 4:10; 2Cor 5:13). The Lord has also been scolded for this (Mk 3:20-21; Jn 10:20). Festus sees Paul's speech as the expression of a Jew's superstition, a dream of a man addicted to reading and studying.

The madness is the ecstasy that Festus thinks he perceives in Paul, while he understands nothing of what Paul is saying. Festus has no idea of the content of the words he hears. He resembles Paul's companions who traveled with him to Damascus, who heard the sound of a voice but did not hear what was said (Acts 9:7; 22:9).

Paul was not disturbed or insulted by the value judgment of Festus. On the contrary, he sees a new reason for the gospel. Faith does not go against truth and reason. On the contrary, faith bears witness to truth and common sense. He used to be out of his senses (verse 11), but not anymore (cf. Lk 8:35).

By the way, Festus has had his chance. Now Paul speaks to Agrippa who knows about these things. Paul speaks to Festus, but in the presence of Agrippa, expressing the conviction that Agrippa is fully aware of everything that has happened. It did not happen somewhere in a small town in a backward area. It is world news.

### **Acts 26:27-32 | Agrippa Must Choose**

*27 King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." 28 Agrippa [replied] to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." 29 And Paul [said], "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." 30 The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, 31 and when they had gone aside, they [began] talking to one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment." 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*

Then Paul turned directly to Agrippa and forced him to make a choice. Paul knows that Agrippa believes the prophets. Now the kind of faith Agrippa has does not bring someone to repentance. Familiarity with the facts of Christendom is not enough. There must be a work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, the application of the Word of God to heart and conscience, through which someone confesses his sins and resorts to the Lord Jesus. This does not take away from the fact that Paul takes Agrippa at his confession. He sees this as a starting point to win him to the gospel.

For Agrippa, who will have listened very attentively, this confrontation is too frontal. With a feint he turns away from the confrontation. He wanted to know everything about this new religion, but he does not want to be addressed personally. With a remark, perhaps mockingly intended, he avoids the pressure that Paul puts on him. He realizes that Paul's concern is to make him a Christian. He uses the name "Christian", which indicates that this name has become widespread and used for the followers of Christ since Acts 11 (Acts 11:26). He may be using this excuse because he does not really want to expose himself to the high society (cf. Mt 14:9).

In his reaction Paul makes an even broader appeal and speaks to all those present. The motivation of his heart is not only the salvation of Agrippa, but of all. He is rich in God and as such he can call himself an example of happiness. The years in captivity have been blessed years. The more than two years he has been unjustly imprisoned have not made him a bitter man, but a man who can make grace shine all the brighter.

He grants them his inward happiness, not his chains. He does not want someone to be treated as unjustly as he is. This is Christendom. Grace surpasses all evil. Grace desires the best, even for those who surrender to a temporary enjoyment of sin. For Felix, Paul was the preacher of righteousness (Acts 24:25). For Agrippa and Festus, he is the possessor of blessing far beyond all earthly glory.

After these words of Paul, there is no more mocking language, no more threatening language, but a standing up and going of the whole company. They retreat to confer. In these deliberations it is again established that Paul has done nothing illicit. The conclusion is that "this man" could have been set free. However, since he appealed to the emperor, he had to go to

Rome. They cannot decide otherwise either, for it is the path that God has determined in His sovereignty for His servant.

## Acts 27

### **Introduction**

This is a fascinating chapter. We find in it the account of the sea voyage of the prisoner Paul from Caesarea to Italy with Rome as his final destination. God wants Paul to be there so that he will bear witness before the emperor to Who He is. Luke, who is an eyewitness to all events, gives an account of Paul's experiences and of all those who travel with him.

Paul has often travelled by sea, as Luke already stated in Acts (Acts 13:4,13; 16:11; 18:18; 20:14; 21:1-3,6). He did not give us a detailed account of those voyages. That Luke, just before the end of the book, describes in detail precisely this sea voyage of the ship on which Paul, as a prisoner, makes the voyage to Rome, must have a deeper meaning. We will also notice this deeper meaning in the course of the chapter.

Before I continue, just a brief account of the 'deeper meaning' I think I see in this history. There will be readers who question the 'deeper meaning', or some aspects of it, or reject completely or partly. I can understand that. The reader does not have to agree with me in everything in order to learn lessons from this sea voyage. It is also good to remember that the application of a history can never be extended to the detail. In this sea voyage it is all about the big picture. I have gratefully used what others have said and written about it. As far as I have recognized their application and consider it responsible for myself, I have included it in this commentary. It is up to the reader to form his own judgment about this.

We can say the following beforehand. In the book of Acts we have the description of the first thirty years of church history. With the last verse of Acts 28 the book seems to end abruptly, but it is, so to speak, an open ending. The history of the church has only just begun and continues. How that history continues is presented to us in the history of the sea voyage.

It is not strange that certain historical events also have a symbolic meaning. Since ancient times, countless writers have depicted life as a journey. In particular, the sea voyage with its storms provides a recognizable pic-

ture of human life, in which also very difficult periods can occur. This also applies to the people of Israel, to the believer, to the servant of the Lord and to the Christian church.

We will therefore see that this history has a metaphorical meaning, just as we have in other marine histories described in the Bible. For example, there is a history where the Lord Jesus lies asleep in the ship while a great storm arises (Mt 8:23-26). There is also a history where He comes to His disciples who are in a boat in the middle of a storm (Mt 14:22-33). Both cases give a picture of the present time we are going through.

On the one hand, the Lord is in heaven, but on the other hand, He is also with us, although sometimes it seems as if He is absent. We also see that the faith life of the individual is compared to a voyage on a ship, where shipwreck can occur (1Tim 1:18-20). So we see that Scripture describes and uses events and expressions from shipping that are a picture for believers – see also the use of the word ‘anchor’ in Hebrews 6 (Heb 6:19).

If we look at the life of the believer and servant who is in the way of the Lord, we see in the journey that Paul makes that that way is not smooth. Paul is in the way that God wants him to go and is experiencing a huge disaster along the way. That shows that being in the way of the Lord does not mean that we will be saved from disasters. Anyone who wants to do a service for the Lord can get an accident or even die.

We do not read of wonders in this history. We know that Peter was delivered from prison by an angel, but here we see that Paul remains imprisoned. In the Gospels the Lord rebukes the storm, but here everything has its natural course. Here we see no intervention of God, but despair of people and the total loss of the ship. It is precisely in these circumstances that faith manifests itself and there is reason to witness to the living God. That is what Paul does. On his journey to Rome Paul is the master of the situation. He is just as calm during the storm as he is before rulers and kings.

Luke here shows how the faith of a single man can bring about a great change in the lives of many who are travelling with him. Paul is the one who gives advice in accordance with the message he received from God.

He encourages and acts in every way in the Name of God in the midst of the scene that surrounds him, a scene full of false confidence and fear.

In this history we also see how to look at the forces of nature. God has placed enormous forces in nature. Here they are unleashed. They have a devastating power. Natural laws are not independent of God. They are the result of the Son's action (Heb 1:3). They are in the hand of the Son. He disposes of them at His convenience. He Himself can walk on the sea and also enable Peter to do so (Mt 14:25,29), something that is normally impossible for a human being.

In connection with natural forces, angels also play a role. It is written of them that the Son makes them wind and fire (Heb 1:7). Was not Job struck by fire and wind when God allowed satan to make use of it (Job 1:12,16,18-19)? The Lord Jesus is also above that. He rebukes the wind and the sea (Mt 8:26). The word 'rebuke' is used to rebuke demons (Mk 1:25; 9:25). When the Lord rebukes the wind and the sea, He is actually rebuking the angelic powers that are behind the wind and the sea. In the storms, we can see the work of evil powers, but God remains in full control. Evil forces can do no more than God allows them to do, while serving His purpose.

The same goes for the storm that strikes the ship in which Paul is. Satan knows that Paul is on his way to Rome to bear witness before the emperor of God. This emperor was controlled by satan, so that the realm over which this emperor rules is in reality controlled by satan (cf. Lk 4:5 with Lk 2:1). Paul is on his way to preach the gospel to this satanic man. This makes the rage of satan all the stronger to torpedo this journey. But Paul gets there and performs the preaching during two imprisonments in Rome (Phil 1:12-13; 2Tim 4:17).

As already mentioned, Paul's journey to Rome also gives an impression of the development of the church after the first thirty years. The journey goes from Jerusalem to Rome and symbolically outlines the situation of Christianity that has arisen in Jerusalem and will completely decline to the roman-catholic church, where the professing church will find its end (Revelation 17-18). On that path Paul, as a representative of the truth of the church, is a prisoner. In the explanation of this chapter we will encounter several aspects of this.

### Acts 27:1-5 | A Calm Start and Headwind

*1 When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. 3 The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care. 4 From there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. 5 When we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia.*

Paul has appealed to the emperor and goes to the emperor. When the occasion arises, it is decided that the journey to Italy begins. By using the word “we”, we know that Luke will also go on board. He does not go along as a prisoner, but to keep Paul company on the ship. Paul, the bearer of the Christian testimony, is a prisoner. He is no longer a free man. As an application to our personal life, we can observe that it is a harbinger of a shipwreck if God’s Word can no longer act on us in its full force.

The man who has to make sure that Paul, together with some other prisoners, will arrive safely in Rome, is a centurion of the “Augustan cohort”, named Julius. It emphasizes that Paul is a prisoner of the emperor of Rome. Julius chooses a ship that sails a route that leads to Rome. Then the ship sails off for a long voyage.

Besides Luke, Aristarchus is also on board. Aristarchus has voluntarily chosen to accompany Paul and Luke on their voyage. In this way he makes himself one with the defamation of the gospel. He has suffered with Paul for the gospel (Acts 19:29), and in Rome he will voluntarily share Paul’s imprisonment with him (Col 4:10).

The beginning of the journey looks far from threatening. Julius treats Paul kindly. In the early days, the church did not suffer much from the secular government. The government even protected the church, as we have seen in Acts several times with Paul.

At Sidon Paul is allowed to go to the believers, who are called “friends” by Luke. In many places such a company of people has been formed by the grace of the Lord. Where the love of the brotherhood is present, one can

speak of “friends” (3Jn 1:15). Paul goes there to receive care from them, which means to enjoy the friendly attention of these friends for him. They will have given him what he needed for his body. This refreshment for his body will have meant an even greater spiritual refreshment.

After this encounter, both physically and spiritually invigorating, the journey continues. They experience a headwind, which forces them to sail close to Cyprus. Headwinds or storms do not mean that you are not in the way of the Lord. The Lord Jesus Himself has also been in a storm. It is important to sail the most cautious course, close to a possible harbor.

Then they sail through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, where Paul also sailed on his first missionary trip during his return to Syrian Antioch (Acts 14:24-26). All these names will certainly have brought back memories to the apostle and brought him to (extra) prayer for the believers in those regions. Then they land at Myra in the province of Lycia on the south coast of Asia Minor.

### Acts 27:6-10 | A Difficult Voyage

*6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it. 7 When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us [to go] farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; 8 and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. 9 When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul [began] to admonish them, 10 and said to them, “Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.”*

In Myra, there must be a change of ship. The centurion goes in search of a ship sailing for Italy and finds a ship from Egyptian Alexandria. The centurion and his prisoner are transferred to an Egyptian ship. That means that this ship becomes the ship of the Christian testimony. In Scripture we generally see in Egypt a picture of the world. By moving the prisoner Paul to that ship, we see how the world influences the church. The world takes in the church. This ship becomes the great trust of the entire crew, but how that trust is shamed. A great storm comes over this ship and it is eventually

lost. Until it is no longer possible to save it, all kinds of things have been tried to keep it sailing or afloat.

The first characteristic of sailing with this ship is the slow progress, because they don't have tailwind. Spiritually applied we see that in the church slowness, headwind and difficulty are caused by a clinging to religious forms (Heb 5:12) and false doctrine (Eph 4:14). These things put a brake on spiritual growth. Then it is time to reflect and not to continue, but to let ourselves be warned of imminent dangers.

This is the moment Paul admonishes. The time has come when it becomes dangerous to sail. Because of the headwind a lot of time has been lost. Luke mentions that "the fast was already over", by which he means the fast of the day of atonement. This fast is at the end of September / beginning of October. That is a period in which it becomes dangerous to sail on. The following winter period is even more dangerous.

We have not heard Paul speak on this trip before, but now he is making himself heard. He says what he foresees will happen if there is any further sailing. He can say this because he has heard this from the Lord in his dealings with Him. He can also say this because of his great experience with sea voyages. He is used to travelling by ship. He has learned the dangers of the sea and on three voyages he has even been shipwrecked (2Cor 11:25-26). So he really knows a thing or two about sailing. Paul doesn't say or think that all will go well, or that he will be saved anyway because he has the guarantee of the Lord to come to Rome. This doesn't say anything about the crew and he is concerned about the crew as well.

Here too the application is obvious with regard to the development of the Christian church. Paul warns in his letters of storms tugging at the ship (1Tim 4:1-3; 2Tim 3:1-9; cf. Acts 20:29-30). He who does not let himself be warned will suffer great damage in his life of faith and his faith may even be shipwrecked.

### **Acts 27:11-20 | Deprived of All Hope of Salvation**

*11 But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul. 12 Because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from*

*there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter [there]. 13 When a moderate south wind came up, supposing that they had attained their purpose, they weighed anchor and [began] sailing along Crete, close [inshore]. 14 But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15 and when the ship was caught [in it] and could not face the wind, we gave way [to it] and let ourselves be driven along. 16 Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the [ship's] boat under control. 17 After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on [the shallows] of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along. 18 The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; 19 and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. 20 Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing [us], from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.*

Paul's advice is ignored. He remains silent and does not open his mouth again until verse 21. In the same way the professing church did not listen to 'Paul' and that is the cause of the decline. The warnings we find in Scripture are ignored. The commanders, the people who say they know it and can show their diplomas for it, are in charge of the church. The result is that the ship becomes a prey of the elements of nature, adrift and without any light.

It is a situation that we recognize in church history in the dark Middle Ages. Then the Word of God was utterly despised and only the word of man had value. The church teaches and the church people swallow. There is a clergy who decides for the lay people how the Bible should be read. This situation can be found especially in the roman-catholic church, but we also find these things in the protestant churches. Problems are approached in a human way and human solutions are offered. According to the democratic principle the majority decides.

So it is also aboard the Alexandrian ship where Paul is present, but where he is not listened to. The general opinion is that the harbor is unsuitable for wintering. Most of them think it is advisable to sail away and try to reach Phoenix to spend the winter there. When it says that the advice of

“the majority” is followed, it also means that there are people who would rather follow Paul’s advice. However, they are a minority.

When the ship leaves the harbor, the first experiences seem to prove ‘the majority’ right and Paul wrong. With the moderate south wind, no one suspects what kind of strong character there is in the man Paul. That becomes manifest when the storm rises. Then the passenger and even prisoner Paul takes over. He makes decisions and gives instructions that mean death or life for all.

The impression of the right decision doesn’t last long, because they are barely on their way or off the island a northeasterly storm called Euraquilo suddenly rushes down. The storm is so violent that the ship cannot be kept on course. The crew is powerless in the face of this violence of nature. They surrender the ship to the whims of nature. It is a striking picture of a church dragged along with every wind of doctrine. Especially the roman-catholic church “has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird” (Rev 18:2).

The only means of rescue is the boat or sloop. The sloop is the escape route when things threaten to go wrong. Man wants to keep control of it and to a certain extent he succeeds in doing so. But all escape routes and safety measures do not bring the ship ashore. The storm continues unabated. Another precautionary measure that is taken is undergirding the ship. By doing so, the planks of the ship have to be kept together, so that it remains a whole. With the undergirding of the ship we can compare the external means used to try to keep the church sailing as a ship, such as councils. In spite of these measures the ship remains adrift.

Because there is also a great threat of running aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor. What could still help somewhat to keep the ship on course, but what the storm has now taken control of, is eliminated.. Although it may prevent an immediate danger, it does not offer a real solution. The raging storm continues.

This leads the crew the next day to jettison the cargo. It will possibly be part of the corn, the rest of which will be thrown overboard in verse 38. On the third day, they throw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. In this way, the storm wind is deprived as much as possible of any

hold. Every piece of the ship or the cargo that is thrown overboard takes away a little more of the ship's dignity and function.

Thus, over the course of the centuries, the Christian church has lost more and more of her dignity toward God's thoughts and her functioning for God and toward the world. Think, for example, only of "the third day", which recalls the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Hasn't that been jettisoned in almost all of professing Christianity? This may mean that the resurrection is radically denied, but it may also mean that the orthodox confession is there, but that its consequences for the life of faith are completely absent.

If this pillar of faith is undermined, the consequence will be that the faith will no longer be food for the heart and that people will wander in utter spiritual darkness. No more heavenly light is seen. What is characteristic of the dark Middle Ages because the Word of God is withheld from the people is also characteristic of today's professing Christianity. There is no longer anything the Christian can use to determine his course. The hope of salvation, the salvation based on faith, has disappeared.

### Acts 27:21-26 | Hope Is Glowing

*21 When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. 22 [Yet] now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but [only] of the ship. 23 For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, 24 saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' 25 Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. 26 But we must run aground on a certain island."*

When all resources are gone, God remains. He steers the ship to where He wants it. Now the way is opened for Paul to stand up as a representative of God. He stands up in their midst. Here we see a situation arise that the Word of God becomes central again. If no food has been provided for a long time, the Word regains nutritional value. Here we see the 'sola Scrip-

tura', only the Scriptures, of the Reformation. Here the hope of being saved reappears (verse 22).

When Paul begins to speak, he first recalls their refusal to listen to him, their disobedience. The Word first says what went wrong. Do we as a church listen to the Lord Jesus when He says to us that we have done something wrong? Paul does not say this to impress upon them how stupid they have been, but to make clear the true reason for the misery in which they find themselves. Everyone had to understand that he was right and that their attempts have all failed. If they acknowledge that all their wisdom is gone, that they are at their wits' end (Psa 107:27), they will now be happy to continue listening to him and obeying his commands. Tough times in our personal and communal lives can sometimes be avoided if we listen to God's Word.

Paul only begins to speak after he has had a message from God, not before. Not only does he have reproach, but he also has words of encouragement (Deu 31:6-7,23). In the midst of the expectation of death, come words of hope and life. He encourages them by predicting that all will make it out alive. Only the Alexandrian ship will be lost. In this history we see the saying come true: "God did not promise us a calm journey, but He did promise a safe arrival." In the words of Paul to the people of the ship we hear the certainty for the believer that no power can separate him from the love of Christ and from the love of God (Rom 8:35-39).

Paul explains why he can speak in this way. He was visited by a messenger of God, Who is the God Whose complete possession he is, the God Whom he serves with all that he is and has. In these circumstances this is a significant testimony. He tells about the promise he received personally from that God. He can also tell that God has promised that all those who sail with him will also be saved. Through the faithfulness of true Christians, salvation has often come for many, both for sinners and deviated believers. He who sails with Paul, that is to say, who lives in accordance with what Paul has written, will arrive safe with Paul.

In verse 25 he repeats his exhortation of verse 22 to keep up their courage. The confidence of faith is expressed. We see this in reformers who have rediscovered Scripture. It is the courage of faith in Scripture. God's Word

is reliable, trustworthy. That does not mean that there will be no more difficulties and that they do not have to do anything themselves. Nor does it mean that God gives all the details and there are no more surprises. God always tells us so much that we can trust Him to bring us home safely, while He also hides things to keep us dependent on Him. Paul doesn't know the name of the island. He says no more than he was told by God. So the one thing that remains is the look up to Him. The journey is not yet over. The reformation is not the end. A new night begins, without light.

### Acts 27:27-32 | Around Midnight

*27 But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors [began] to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28 They took soundings and found [it to be] twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found [it to be] fifteen fathoms. 29 Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30 But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the [ship's] boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31 Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." 32 Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the [ship's] boat and let it fall away.*

Significantly, Luke speaks of the fourteenth "night". That best reflects the experience of the sailors. The count has also been kept. Also the time has been kept. It is midnight when the sailors suspect that they are approaching land. This means that salvation is near.

The expression 'midnight' is a prophetic expression used in connection with the coming of the Lord Jesus as the Bridegroom (Mt 25:6). We can therefore connect this expression with the coming of the Lord. In this sense we can say that the land we are approaching is the heavenly land. It also means that the day is near, the day that He appears. All on board desire it to become day (verse 29).

To measure the depth of the water they take soundings. The first measurement indicates that the water is twenty fathoms, that is thirty-six meters, deep. When they take another sounding, it turns out that the water is only

fifteen fathoms, that is twenty-seven meters, deep. The water becomes shallower and shallower. That means that they are approaching land.

If we apply this to the situation of professing Christianity, we can compare the taking of soundings with the Word of God. If we take soundings in the Word, we might measure only five fathoms or even less. For us, too, the land is coming more and more into sight. It is also our desire that it becomes day, for the day means the salvation of the whole people of God (cf. Rom 13:11b-12a). The lamentable developments of Christianity and all attempts to keep the boat afloat have failed miserably. All that remains is the longing for the day.

There is also another side. That is the side of responsibility. Nobody can be saved on his own initiative. It is to be saved together and all along the same path. The actions of the sailors to sneak off with the boat are in opposition to the faith that Paul expressed.

Those who knew so well and set the course want to abandon the enterprise. That can be shocking for those who are left behind. Paul prevents it. To him, they are part of it and they too will be saved, but then they have to stay in the ship with Paul and do what he says. God has spoken that all will be saved, but in His way. This chapter also shows through everything the history of God's faithfulness. He will come to His goal with His people.

Now they do listen to Paul. In the midst of all the circumstances caused by the storm, Paul stands upright. In the storm there is faith in his word. His word is proof of his right. People of faith turn out to be people of faith in the storms. If there were no storms, we would not be able to show our faith.

### **Acts 27:33-37 | Paul Encourages All to Take Food**

*33 Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. 34 Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish." 35 Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. 36*

*All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food. 37 All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons.*

As the day is about to dawn, Paul encourages all to take food. Paul has an eye for the physical efforts all have made. Spiritual leadership has an eye for the whole human being. He has counted the days when they have not eaten (cf. Mk 8:2). For him it is not the fourteenth night (verse 27), but the fourteenth day. He proves himself as someone who is of the day (1Thes 5:8).

Also spiritually the exhortation to take food is important. More than ever, believers in spiritual darkness need to read God's Word as food for their souls. King Saul forbade the taking of food in battle. According to Jonathan, this was a foolish prohibition (1Sam 14:28-30). The food of the Word gives strength to salvation (2Tim 3:15).

The word "preservation" or "salvation" is a key word in this history. Opposite expressions such as 'to be lost' or 'perish' and 'not to be saved' also occur here several times. God could have saved them in their weakened condition even without them eating, but He preserves by taking food. He acts the way He wants. We cannot press God's actions into schedules. He acts sovereignly and saves here in a natural way. They need strength to be able to swim later on.

Not perishing one hair from one's head indicates a new period in church history, namely the period of the revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is the period that follows the revival in the Reformation, where access to the Word of God has been reopened. It is a movement of Bible study, reading the Bible in its context, especially concerning the future of Israel and the coming of the Lord. The Word becomes real food. Many bible commentaries are written as well. Spiritual growth and discipleship is taking place.

Earlier it is that no life will be lost (verse 22), now Paul says that not one hair from the head will perish. This is reflected in the increasing extent to which the believer discovers what certainty he has in Christ. This development also takes place in the life of the individual believer who studies Scripture.

Paul's encouragement to take this food is undiminished for today. Also as a church we must always take to heart the encouragement to read God's Word together and to be nourished by it. We all need it. We need to stir each other up to go to meetings where the Word is taught.

Paul himself sets a good example. After he has encouraged all, he takes bread himself, thanks God for it in the presence of all, breaks off a piece and begins to eat. We have here a practical example of how we should do when we have a meal in a public place (1Tim 4:4-5). From this also passes a testimony. Paul is not ashamed to do it aloud. Such a thing is done by a man who has spiritual strength. Paul's words and example is stimulating them all. It gives them courage and desire to eat. Their appetite was gone. When you stand face to face with death, you are not hungry.

As an application for the church we can see here a picture of worship and fellowship at the Table of the Lord. These things came to the fore in a special way during the revival.

And then Luke suddenly mentions the exact number of souls on board. Why is he doing that here? Why not earlier or only at the very end? If we may assume that in many aspects this chapter presents us with the history of the church on earth, mentioning the exact number at this place in history has a meaning related to the revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Isn't one of the great discoveries of the revival that all believers belong together, wherever they are? Through the study of the Word by those who submit themselves to it, the Holy Spirit again presents as a living truth the one body for the hearts of those believers.

### **Acts 27:38-41 | The Ship Perishes**

*38 When they had eaten enough, they [began] to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea. 39 When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. 40 And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. 41 But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow*

*stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern [began] to be broken up by the force [of the waves].*

Then comes the moment when the sailors have eaten enough. It is typical that at that moment they throw the wheat overboard. This is reflected in the history of the church. After a period of great desire for God's Word a period of complacency follows. It can be compared to the two periods we find in Revelation 3 in the messages to the church in Philadelphia and to the church in Laodicea.

Philadelphia shows us the period of the revival. Laodicea shows us the period that follows the revival. In Philadelphia there is warm love for the Lord expressed in love for His Word (Rev 3:8,10). In Laodicea there is complacency, through which that love has cooled down to lukewarmness and moderation (Rev 3:15-17). Indifference to the food of God's Word has come. It has been thrown overboard. The good of faith has been thrown away. That is what those who are shipwrecked as far as faith is concerned do. The truths of the Christian faith are no longer appreciated.

In earlier years Christendom had always expanded, but now there is a decline of Christendom in the countries where it first progressed. Now Christendom is gaining field in the poor parts of the world. In the Western Christian, wealthy countries, the great apostasy is emerging.

When the Word of God is no longer food, also the recognition of the land disappears by the time it becomes day. The anchors are cast off. Christian hope – of which the anchor is a picture (Heb 6:18) – is given up. From the pulpits it is preached that with death it is over and out.

Attempts are still being made to head the ship for the beach to moor it gently, but they fail because of a reef. The ship gets stuck on the reef and breaks in two. One part remains stuck immovable, the other part is completely smashed apart in planks and wreckage.

We also see this picture in the end time. The one part of the ship that remains whole represents the ecumenism where one wants to be a unity at any price. The other part is the fragmentation into countless sects, where one separates oneself at all costs from everything that does not correspond to one's own ideas (Jude 1:17-19).

## Acts 27:42-44 | All Are Brought Safely to Land

*42 The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none [of them] would swim away and escape; 43 but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, 44 and the rest [should follow], some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.*

Just before the end there is a great threat that not all of them will be saved. If everything seems to end well as far as the salvation of those on board is concerned, it all threatens to end badly after all. For the soldiers take up the plan to kill the prisoners. They foresee that they will all escape once they are on land. It will cost them their lives, because with their lives they guarantee the lives of the prisoners.

Then we see that God, in His providence, also uses the centurion to keep the soldiers from their plan. The centurion orders the swimmers to be the first to jump overboard. The others can then use the planks and wreckage of the ship to get ashore.

God sometimes requires that in a spiritual sense we swim or cling to a piece of floating wood. This shows in circumstances that we no longer have ground under our feet. In any case, all come to land safely. The end goal is reached by all who have traveled with Paul.

Thus, all God's children, all members of the church, will arrive once in the heavenly Fatherland. Everything on which man has relied for a safe and secure journey will then no longer be there. What remains is only the grace of God to boast in, for only through grace all His own have safely reached the final destination.

## Acts 28

### **Acts 28:1-2 | Reception on Malta**

*1 When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. 2 The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.*

After all of them arrived safely ashore, it became clear to them that they were on the island of Malta. “The natives”, i.e. the original population, prove to the drowning people “extraordinary kindness”. If we consider that it was a custom to seize everything that was washed ashore and kill the people, then here too we see the grace of God that He brought them to these people.

The treatment Paul receives here from pagans is a great contrast to the treatment he received from his Jewish brothers according to the flesh. It is the contrast between the Jewish leaders and the Roman rulers.

It seems as if nothing has happened, because we will see that Paul continues his work of witnessing on this island. God has given him new territory for this by the shipwreck.

### **Acts 28:3-6 | Paul Bitten by a Viper**

*3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. 4 When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they [began] saying to one another, “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.” 5 However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and [began] to say that he was a god.*

Before Paul witnesses, something happens that will greatly strengthen the witness to be given. The drowning people are invited by the natives to a

fire to dry and warm themselves there. They are soaking and it also starts to rain, so that there is not much of a chance for them to dry. For such a large party a big fire and therefore a lot of wood is needed. For that, wood has to be gathered. Paul helps with this. He doesn't feel too important to help gathering sticks. A communal activity gives warmth to all. The humblest work has that effect. Doing something for the Lord keeps your love for Him and the fellow believers warm and prevents you from getting cold spiritually.

Paul gathers a "a bundle of sticks", a lot of branches, not just a few. When he has laid the wood on the fire and wants to warm himself, a viper comes out because of the heat and fastens itself on his hand. The viper represents the devil. The devil doesn't like it when believers care about each other. He does not like the heat of brotherly love and will try to disturb it. Just as heat awakens vipers, so love among the brothers awakens the devil as it were. When believers are cold or sleeping, the devil also keeps himself sleeping.

When the natives see the beast hanging from Paul's hand, they are immediately ready with a theory that makes no sense, or it must be that it reveals their idolatrous way of thinking. Such judgment can also occur with Christians. Christians, too, can be ready with an explanation if something bad happens to someone.

Paul's reaction is the reaction of faith (Mk 16:18; Lk 10:19). He shakes off the beast into the fire. That must also be our reaction if the devil wants to catch us. We must, in faith, put him in the place where he will be forever: the fire (Rev 20:10). The natives have given their opinion about the viper who had fastened itself on Paul's hand. They also have their opinion about its consequences: it is one of two things: either swell up or suddenly drop dead. Neither happens.

From a spiritual point of view the following application can be made. The hand speaks of activity, of being busy. If we are engaged in a work for the Lord, the devil can fasten himself on it. If we do not act resolutely and point out the devil's rightful place to him, we will swell up, which means becoming proud of what we are doing for the Lord. Or we will suddenly fall down dead, in other words, we no longer show any life for God. That is

why we should not give the devil an opportunity (Eph 4:27), i.e. we should not give him the opportunity to do his damaging work with us.

If the expected consequences do not happen, the natives change their minds. We have here a new proof of how easily people change their opinions, as we have seen before in Lystra, but there the other way around (Acts 14:11-19). Such reasoning involves people who only judge by appearances. God has His own plan with this event. He uses this event to indicate that in the midst of all the prisoners, this man is His servant.

### Acts 28:7-10 | Healings on Malta

*7 Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. 8 And it happened that the father of Publius was lying [in bed] afflicted with [recurrent] fever and dysentery; and Paul went in [to see] him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9 After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. 10 They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied [us] with all we needed.*

The kindness of the islanders is so great that even “the leading man [this is an official title] of the island” receives Paul and his companions kindly for three days. Then comes the opportunity for a compensation. Publius’ father has become seriously ill. Without any appeal to him, Paul goes to him. Once there, he prays first. In this way he makes it clear that it is not he, but God who can give the healing. Then he lays his hands on him and he heals him. When that is done, it is the turn of the rest of the people on the island who have diseases. They come to him and are cured.

For a long time we have not heard of signs. Here we hear about it again. Signs are always a support for the Word that the apostles speak. Also here it is a sign that is done by an apostle (2Cor 12:12). Signs have a function at the beginning of a period. Paul is here on fallow ground where the gospel has never been heard. Because it is a new beginning for this island, signs have been done here as well. Signs are never an aim in themselves, but always connect to the proclamation of the Word (Heb 2:4). Paul also proclaimed that, of course. It is so obvious that Luke does not even mention it.

It is clear that the islanders are extremely thankful that they have heard and accepted the gospel and that they have been cured of diseases. The honors with which they venerate Paul and those with him for this have nothing to do with paying divine honors that Paul would certainly have rejected immediately.

Peter calls us in his first letter in a general sense to honor all people (1Pet 2:17) and Paul says that we should honor those who deserve honor (Rom 13:7). It is about the other person's appreciation of who he is as a creature of God and if he has done something that deserves honor, we should not withhold our appreciation from the other person. That is what the islanders have done.

When the company leaves the island, they all get what they need to continue the journey. In doing so, the islanders help them forward in a manner worthy of God (cf. 3Jn 1:5-8).

### **Acts 28:11-16 | Arrival at Rome**

*11 At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. 12 After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. 13 From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. 14 There we found [some] brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. 15 And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. 16 When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.*

It is now the end of January / beginning of February when they board another Alexandrian ship (Acts 27:6) to continue their journey to Rome. The ship has, as Luke notes, "the Twin Brothers for its figurehead". With these are meant the 'sons of Zeus'. They were regarded as protectors of the sailors and were therefore worshiped in many port cities. By mentioning the figurehead of this ship, where Paul is on board, we are made aware that the proclamation of the gospel of which Paul is the representative, is a spiritual battle. This battle is still in full swing (Phil 1:27-28).

The first port visited is Syracuse on the Italian island of Sicily. They stay there for three days, possibly to unload cargo or to wait for a favorable wind. From Syracuse they cross over to Rhegium on the mainland of Italy. Because they have to go north and there is a southern wind, the rest of the sea voyage goes very well. After two days they come to Puteoli, the port of Naples.

In Puteoli Paul and his companions went looking for “brethren” and they found them. “Brethren” is at that time the general name for the believers. The brethren ask Paul and his companions to stay for seven days. Seven days always means including a Sunday (Acts 20:6-7; 21:4). Then they go further over land on their way to Rome.

While Paul was in Puteoli for seven days, the message accelerated ahead to Rome. From there the brothers came to meet him. When Paul sees them, he thanks God and takes courage. He has never seen those brothers before, but the fact that they are brothers, who greet him warmly and embrace him, is a great gift and could only have been worked by God.

From Luke’s account of Paul’s meeting with the various groups of brethren, it seems that Paul was depressed. He is a man with a nature like ours. On an earlier occasion of despondency, the Lord Himself came to him to encourage him (Acts 23:11). Here the Lord does it through the brethren.

The love of the brethren encourages and animates Paul again. He experiences what he wrote earlier in his letter to “all who are beloved of God in Rome, called [as] saints” (Rom 1:7,12). A group of brethren meet him about sixty-five kilometers from Rome. He embraces them in the Market of Appius. Another group, who may have left Rome a little later, meets him about fifty kilometers and he embraces them in Three Inns. Thus the Lord has a double encouragement for Paul on the final part of the journey to Rome.

Then Paul finally arrives at the former heart of the world. What must have been on his mind when he entered the city he had wanted to visit for so long (Rom 1:10; 15:23). As mentioned before, he arrived there in a different way than he would have imagined. The fact that he would come there as a prisoner would not have arisen in his mind. But that is how God determined it and what a blessing came out of that imprisonment! Just think of

the letters he wrote during this imprisonment and which we now have in the Bible.

Furthermore, Paul, as a prisoner, was given an opportunity that others in Rome did not get, namely, to bring the gospel to the court of the emperor, which was also an encouragement for others (Phil 1:12-14). At the same time, his imprisonment put the trueness of the faith of many to the test. There are those who were ashamed of his captivity and forgot him in Rome, while someone like Onesiphorus was not ashamed, but visited him in Rome (2Tim 1:16-17). That may have been during his second imprisonment, but the principle remains the same. Paul was a prisoner.

During this first imprisonment Paul was given permission to stay by himself, being constantly chained and guarded by a soldier. In comparison with staying in a prison, this form of imprisonment can be called mild.

### **Acts 28:17-22 | First Discussion With the Jews**

*17 After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he [began] saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. 19 But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. 20 For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel." 21 They said to him, "We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere."*

The mild regime of his imprisonment is also reflected in the possibility that he is free to receive anyone or even invite anyone he likes. Already after three days he invites the leading men of the Jews to come to him. When he has no opportunity to go to the synagogue, it is in this way possible for him to act in Rome according to the principle 'first the Jew and then the Greek'. When the leading men of the Jews have come to him, the first thing

he does is to defend his person. He first explains why he came to Rome, because that he is here as a prisoner requires clarification and explanation. He briefly summarizes for them what happened. It is remarkable that he doesn't tell them anything about the cause and the attempts of murder. There is not a word of accusation against his Jewish brothers on his lips, no matter how much evil they have done to him. This is truly selfless love. As for his treatment by the Romans, he also highlights them in a favorable way. Of them he only mentions that they had wanted to let him go because they had found nothing in him that death deserved (Acts 23:29; 25:25; 26:32). Paul puts the Romans in a favorable light. These Jews live among them and know them.

Without any value judgment Paul tells how the Jews contradicted his release by the Romans and how he was forced to appeal to the emperor. He is not here to accuse his brethren, but to let justice take its course. He wanted them to know that and that's why he has let them come.

He also let them know that he is not an apostate Jew, but that he shares in the hope of all Jews. "The hope of Israel" refers to the fulfillment of the promises to the fathers, a hope that is inseparable from the Messiah. In this way, at the end of the book, it is not only stated that Christendom is the new testimony, but also that God does not lose sight of His people. Paul does not denounce his people as the cause of his chain, but points to the hope of Israel, the Messiah, as the cause of his chain.

When Paul is finished, the Roman Jews say they know nothing about him. No letters have been written about him from Judea to them, nor have any of their brethren come to them to say anything evil about him. Therefore they cannot pass judgment. They offer him the chance to explain his thoughts to them. At the same time, they indicate that what they have heard of Christendom gives them the impression that it is a contrary movement that does not do Judaism any good. The Pharisees did not give the Lord Jesus such an opportunity to justify Himself, although Nicodemus had urged them to do so (Jn 7:51).

These Jews do want to listen, but also show that they are critical of it. The attitude of these Jews is worthy of imitation. It is important that we only pass judgment on someone's views that do not correspond with our own,

after the person in question has been given the opportunity to justify himself.

### **Acts 28:23-28 | Second Discussion With the Jews**

*23 When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. 24 Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. 25 And when they did not agree with one another, they [began] leaving after Paul had spoken one [parting] word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, 26 saying,*

*'GO TO THIS PEOPLE AND SAY,  
"YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;  
AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE;  
27 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,  
AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,  
AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES;  
OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT SEE WITH THEIR EYES,  
AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,  
AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,  
AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.'"*

*28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen."*

After the acquaintance meeting, an appointment is made to go deeper into the matter. On that occasion even more people come to Paul in his lodging. He explains to them what the kingdom of God is and declares its importance. This is the sixth time in this book that reference is made to the kingdom. Speaking about and living in the kingdom means speaking about and living under the reign of the Lord Jesus. That kingdom will be established in glory when the Lord Jesus comes to reign on earth.

Now that He has been rejected, the kingdom of God is not visible, yet it is there. For it is everywhere where people confess the Lord Jesus as Lord and show that in the power of the Holy Spirit in the practice of every day in their lives (Rom 14:17). If every believer in his life would realize more

of what it is to be a subject in the kingdom, the truth of the church would be better put into practice. Many divisions in the church would then not have taken place.

Paul 'is explaining', which means making its meaning known, and 'testifying', which means that he speaks insistently about the fact that it must also be lived according to it. He does that all day long. There was no one watching the clock. It must have been breathtaking to hear him speak about the Lord Jesus from the law of Moses and from the prophets. He put his whole heart into it because he was so eager to persuade them concerning "Jesus". If they would acknowledge in Him the Messiah sent from God, they would be saved and that was what he was all about. Here we see that intensive Bible study with explanation is also a possibility to win people for Christ.

The reactions are not lacking. As always, the preaching of the Word brings a division among the hearers. Some are persuaded, but others do not believe. They go away discussing after Paul has quoted a serious word of Isaiah (Isa 6:9-10). Isaiah spoke this word to the unbelieving people as a whole, and Paul now applies it to the unbelieving Jews he spoke to. The Lord Jesus also used this word for the purpose of the people in His days (Mt 13:14-16).

The great question whether the people will still come to faith is clearly answered by this quotation. It seems a hard word, but it is fully applicable to them because of their rejection. It is the final and definitive judgment of the hardening observed by Paul. They have closed their hearts so that they cannot absorb the Word of God. They are of "those who shrink back to destruction" (Heb 10:39).

This observation of their hardening leads Paul to the last words we have of him in this book. Those words contain the point we have been led to in this book that because of the rejection of salvation by the Jews, the door of salvation has opened to the nations (Acts 13:46; 18:6; Rom 11:25-32). To them the Word will not go in vain. They will also hear. Although not all nations have accepted the gospel, over the centuries many of the nations have heard and accepted it (1Tim 3:16).

## Acts 28:29-31 | Paul Continues to Preach, Unhindered

29 *[Early mss do not contain this verse]* 30 *And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.*

The duration of this imprisonment of Paul, which he is allowed to spend “in his own rented quarters”, is fixed by Luke at “two full years”. It seems that he was released after that time because his prosecutors did not appear. In order for a trial to happen, both the accused and the plaintiffs had to appear in court (Acts 23:35; 25:16). It is therefore not justified that Paul was not released after having been detained for two years (Acts 24:27). If the plaintiffs do not appear, Roman law prescribes that the accused must be released. The Jews will have found the journey to Rome too great an undertaking. They may have been satisfied that Paul was captured and put on transport to Rome.

The fact that Paul was released after two years, without appearing before the emperor, need not contradict the statement that he had to go to Rome precisely for this purpose. As far as the text makes clear, it is not necessary that his appearance before the emperor takes place during this imprisonment. A second imprisonment will follow and then he will appear before the emperor.

Paul had an unknown number of unknown people visiting him during this first imprisonment. These may have been brethren, Jews and also pagans (1Cor 10:32). Among them is also a runaway slave named Onesimus, of whom we know that he was converted by the service of Paul (Phlm 1:10). He gave to this Onesimus the letter to Philemon which he wrote during his imprisonment on the occasion of the conversion of Onesimus. During these two years he also wrote the letter to the Ephesians, the letter to the Philippians and the letter to the Colossians.

To all who come to him, he preaches the kingdom of God, in which the Lord Jesus Christ is involved. The book starts with the preaching of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), and here, where it is mentioned for the seventh and last time, the book ends with it. Paul preaches the Lord of that

kingdom in the city of the emperor, the great lord of the earth. He does so “unhindered”, the last word of the book of Acts.

The book ends with an open ending because the acts of the Spirit, Who is not bound, have not ended. The history of the church goes on in the life of each member. Thus the Word has reached the far corners of the Roman empire. Christendom has turned from a Jewish sect into a world religion. From Jerusalem the gospel has gone out to the end of the earth and will also go out to the end of the present dispensation. We may make our contribution to passing on that message, that there is another King than the rulers of the world: the glorified Lord in heaven. Until He returns, we wish for daybreak.

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