



Acts
of the Holy Spirit
through the Apostles

This is the word of the Lord ...

*“It is not by might, nor by power
but by My Spirit” says the Lord of Hosts*

(Zechariah 4:6)

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INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts in the Bible is usually called “The Acts of the Apostles” but it is probably better called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles” because it shows the history of the early Christian Church and the way in which God’s Spirit worked through the early Christians, establishing the Church and causing it to spread rapidly through the Jewish and Gentile worlds.

In our desire to see God build and extend His Church here today, it is well worthwhile studying Acts to see some of the principles on which the early Church was based – some of which we have wandered away from! All of us long to see revival in our land. We long to see the Church purified, more united, growing rapidly and impacting the nation. We talk a lot about “power” and “authority” but see a lot less than we talk about!

Jesus said, ***“I will build My Church and the gates of hades (death) will not prevail against it!”*** (Matthew 16:18). Whatever happens in the world, one thing which is absolutely certain is that the Church will never die; it will never end. It will be the glorious Bride of Christ, “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

These Bible studies will look at some of the key principles on which the early Church was established and which we would do well to follow.

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In the following studies, unless otherwise stated,
all references are to the book of Acts.

1

The Beginning!

1:1 The human author of the book of Acts was Luke. He first wrote Luke's Gospel and then followed it with the book of Acts. The book of Acts was written to "Theophilus". This may have been an individual person, but the name means "Lover of God", so in the broader sense it is addressed to all those who love God – including you and me!

Jesus' final words to His disciples: The Great Commission

1:4-5, 8 Jesus told His followers to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise of God's power in their lives [the baptism of the Spirit], then they would be witnesses to Him. In Luke's Gospel these words are found in Luke 24:49 where Jesus said, "Wait in Jerusalem until you have been clothed with power from on High". Jesus had previously given the Great Commission:

- "Go and make disciples in all the nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).
- "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation ..." (Mark 16:15-20).

Now Jesus was emphasising the importance of waiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon them before they began evangelising and making disciples. The power of the Holy Spirit was given to make them bold and effective in their witness. Preaching the Gospel and making disciples are not things which are to be done in the flesh – we first need to be filled with the Spirit.

In obedience, after Jesus' resurrection the disciples and about 110 others went to an upper room in a house in Jerusalem and waited for the fulfilment of Jesus' promise: "You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth" (1:8).

1:14 The disciples continued steadfastly, with one mind (that is, in unity) as they sought God in prayer. Psalm 133 is a beautiful psalm which emphasises God's pleasure and blessing where Christians dwell together in unity. Satan will do all he can to attack unity and set Christians against one another. We must watch out for this and strongly resist any attempt to separate and cause division amongst God's people. This unity is also further brought out in Acts 2:1, 44.

The Day of Pentecost

2:4 When the day of Pentecost came, God came in answer to the prayers of His people as they waited on Him for the fulfilment of His promise. The Spirit came, and with

miraculous signs of wind, fire and the gift of tongues, God filled the waiting people with His Spirit and endued them with power from on High. This is the key to all effective ministry – the overflow from a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. We need to “constantly be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18) because the world, the flesh and the devil will do everything they can to prevent it.

2:2-6, 43 Miraculous signs followed. These were not things which ordinary people could do. They testified to the reality and power of God. If everything we do can be explained in ordinary human terms, then where is the evidence of the presence, reality, and power of God? We need to pray that God will continue to “confirm His Word with signs following” (Mark 16:20) – lives transformed, people healed, saved, delivered, filled with the Spirit, etc. There is too much “powerless preaching”. If there is no power, then either we are not preaching the truth of God’s Word or we are not exercising faith for the Holy Spirit to be released in our lives and the lives of others.

Opposition!

2:13 It didn’t take long for opposition to arise! Wherever God’s people are effective for Him; wherever His Word is preached with faith, authority, power and conviction; wherever there is divine boldness to follow the Lord’s leading, there will always be opposition. The enemy hates Christians who are on fire for God! He opposed men and women of God in Old Testament times. He opposed Jesus over and over again during His time on earth. He opposed Spirit-filled Christians in the early Church days, and just as surely, he will oppose every effective (and even not-so-effective!) Christian today. Watch out for his attacks, be prepared for them, and be victorious over them in Jesus’ Name! Christians need to stand strong together and oppose every work of Satan against the Church and against individuals. To a certain extent the more effective we are for God, the more the enemy will oppose us. And the enemy is not always spiritual – we will be opposed by people who do not like the Gospel, as well.

One of the main reasons we do not face greater opposition in our country today is that we are not as bold and effective as the early Christians were. Are we prepared to be jailed for our faith in Jesus Christ? Are we willing to lay down our lives for Him? Or do we compromise in order to “keep the peace” and not offend people? (See Revelation 12:11).

Peter’s message

2:14-40 Under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Peter preached a powerful message which cut his hearers to the heart. He was not ashamed or afraid to speak the truth, uncomfortable though it was. As a result, about 3000 people were converted that day. In some parts of the world today, Spirit-filled men and women preach the Gospel fearlessly and honestly, not holding back on the whole truth and counsel of God, and thousands are responding. But there is a cost – opposition, sometimes threats, physical attacks, imprisonment and even death. But in spite of this, they carry on. For example, the Church in China is estimated to have grown from about 5 million to 50 million during the time of strong communist persecution under Mao Tse-Tung.

2:16-36 Peter, in his message, pointed out the way in which Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, indicating that He truly was the promised Messiah, Who we reject at our peril. **“Who is Jesus?”** This is the greatest question which we must all answer – and answer not just with our lips but believe with our hearts and live out in our lives. The Bible says that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, our Lord and Saviour! We need to confess this, believe it with all our hearts and live out this confession in our daily lives.

Keys: To sum up this far, here are some of the keys:

- A willingness to obey the Great Commission – sharing our faith and making disciples.
- Waiting on God for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit into our lives, so that our witness, teaching and discipling results from an over-flowing, Spirit-filled life – not in our own strength, but in the power of God.
- Unity amongst believers (especially united prayer and sharing).
- God confirms His Word with miraculous signs and wonders.
- The Gospel is preached fearlessly, with great power and authority, bringing many to Christ, but bringing opposition from those who refuse to accept Him.

QUESTIONS

1. What is “the Great Commission”?
2. What did Jesus tell His disciples to wait for, before they went out and preached the Gospel? Is this important? Why or why not?
3. Why is unity so important? Why does the devil do all he can to destroy Christian unity?
4. How can we make sure we are “constantly filled with the Holy Spirit”? (Ephesians 5:18)
5. Why is a demonstration of the power of God so important as we witness to unbelievers?
6. Why does opposition so frequently accompany the powerful preaching of the Word of God?

2

The Early Church

In the last study we saw that Jesus, before He ascended into Heaven, commissioned His followers to go into all the world, preach the Gospel (Good News) and make disciples in all nations. This is often referred to as the “Great Commission”. He also told them that *before* they did that, they were wait in Jerusalem until they had received power from on High – they were first to be baptised in the Holy Spirit so that God’s powerful anointing was on their lives, enabling them to fulfill the Great Commission. We, likewise, need to be willing to

share the Gospel, sharing our faith with others and leading them on towards Christian maturity. But we, also, need to be constantly filled with God's Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

We also saw that as the early Christians united in prayer and seeking God, and then sharing the Gospel, God worked amongst them with powerful signs and wonders, confirming the words they spoke. The Christians preached fearlessly, under divine anointing and with divine authority and power, leading many people to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Signs and wonders

2:16-21 Peter, in his message on the day of Pentecost, built on the prophetic words of Joel (Joel 2:28-32) and from the Psalms (Psalms 16:8-11; 110:1). He took words which the people already believed, and powerfully demonstrated that what God was doing was in fulfilment of His prophetic Word. Joel's prophecy spoke of visions, dreams, signs and wonders, and God was beginning to fulfill this word of what would happen "in the last days". Two thousand years later we are still in "the last days" – though they are so much closer than in Peter's time! We still need the powerful preaching of God's Word, we still need to be endowed with power from on High, we still need God to confirm His Word with signs following – people being miraculously saved, healed, delivered, filled with the Holy Spirit; we still need prophecy, dreams, visions, signs and wonders which God chooses to send (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

What shall we do to be saved?

2:37-40 Signs and wonders are not, of course, an end in themselves. They confirmed the Word, but the powerful, anointed preaching of Peter caused people to be convicted of their sin and call out "What should we do?" Peter very simply said:

- Repent – turn away from your sin and ask God's forgiveness.
- Be baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ – this is the outward symbol to the world of having turned from our old way of life to become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Every one of us needs to ask:

1. Have I repented of all sin and asked God's forgiveness?
2. Have I been baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ?
3. Have I received the gift of the Holy Spirit?

If not, **now** is the time to do so! Our eternal salvation depends on it (and so does our present life in this world!)

2:41 Peter testified, answered all their objections and questions, and exhorted them to listen to God and obey. As a result, 3000 people believed and were baptised that day! What joy there must have been in Heaven and on earth as 3000 people chose to become followers of Jesus Christ! (Luke 15:7, 10).

2:42 And so that day the Church became established. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 5:23), He is the Chief Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20) and He is also the

Foundation on which the Church is built (1 Corinthians 3:11). No wonder the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church! (Matthew 16:18).

Four major elements of the early Church

Four elements of the early Church are listed in this verse (2:42). The people devoted themselves to:

- The apostle's teaching (the Word of God).
- Fellowship – mutual sharing, love and care.
- Breaking Bread – the Lord's Supper (communion).
- Prayers (worship, confession, thanksgiving, intercession, etc.)

In essence, when the wider Body of Christ meets together regularly, it is for these purposes: we teach and share God's Word and what He has said to us through it; we fellowship together; we break bread together; we pray and worship together.

2:43 As a result, Godly fear fell on all the people – believers and unbelievers alike – because people not only heard the words preached, they also saw powerful demonstrations as God confirmed what had been said. This was not merely men's ideas and arguments; **God** confirmed them!

Practical acts of love

2:44-45 One very practical expression of the genuineness of people's conversion was their profound love for one another, shown in practical ways of sharing what they had with each other. Instead of selfish isolationism, everyone wanting things for themselves, they gladly and generously shared with everyone in need. What a transformation this would bring about in our communities if we did the same!

2:46-47 The picture we have here is of a loving, caring, spiritual, joyful Church where people loved to meet with the Lord, worship Him and share together. Consequently, they found favour with all the people and God added to the Church day by day all those who were being saved! Is this a picture of our Church today?

Perhaps we only share with other believers! Do we have a genuine, practical love for the poor, the lonely, the rejected people in our society, or are we too concerned about our own needs? If we feel that our church is stagnant, not going anywhere, lacking direction and enthusiasm, then one very likely cause is that it has become introverted – people are selfishly looking only to their own needs (what they want, what fulfills and satisfies them) and they have lost their vision and concern for the community around them.

If church is "boring" it is because it has lost its Commission: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel, making disciples ..." and this is not just in overt preaching at people, but ministering as Jesus did. Jesus had a holistic view of people's needs: He not only told them how to live as true believers, but He also forgave the sinners, healed the sick, delivered the demon-possessed, fed the hungry – He ministered to body, soul and spirit, and so must we, the Church!

QUESTIONS

1. How important are “signs and wonders”? Does it matter if they are rarely seen?
2. What must a person do to be saved?
3. How do we know if we have “received the gift of the Holy Spirit”?
4. What were four major elements of the New Testament Church?
5. Godly “fear came upon everyone” (2:43). What do you think this means? Is this true of the Church today?
6. Faith **and** works! Jesus, and the early Church, were both spiritual and practical – and kept these in balance. To what extent have some churches majored on the spiritual, or on the practical, and not kept a balance between the two? Should our practical ministry only be to Christians, or to non-Christians as well?

3

The Power of Prayer

3:1 One of the keys to the power in the early Church was they not only believed God, they also sought Him often and regularly in prayer.

- Prayer led to Pentecost (1:14).
- Prayer led to Matthias replacing Judas as the twelfth disciple (1:24-26).
- Deacons, apostles and elders were all set apart with prayer (6:6; 13:3; 14:23).
- Stephen prayed as he was stoned to death (7:59-60).
- Cornelius and Peter both heard from God as they prayed (10:2-3, 9-11).
- Prayer led to Peter, Paul and Silas being miraculously released from prison (12:5, 12; 16:25).
- Prayer led to Paul and Barnabas being appointed as apostles (13:2).
- **Prayer and fasting were essential parts of New Testament Church life (2:42; 6:4)**

It was in the course of going to the Temple to pray that Peter and John saw an amazing miracle happen, which eventually led to another 5000 people being saved (4:4). Never underestimate the power of prayer, or the need for prayer! Sometimes it may seem very “ordinary” – just “another prayer time” – but believe God for miracles to happen as a result!

3:2-10 “In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ...” Oh, the power of that Name! Peter and John believed in His Name and, led by the Holy Spirit, used His Name and His power to command healing to a lame man. As a result of this miracle, God was praised (v. 8) and people were “filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened” (v. 10).

3:11-26 Miracles have a habit of gathering a crowd! Peter again used this opportunity to share the Gospel with the people who gathered together, amazed by what had happened. Just as the miracles on the day of Pentecost gathered people together and made them open to the Word of God, so this miracle gathered a crowd of people and Peter used the opportunity to preach about Jesus. This time he used their knowledge of Jewish history to point to Jesus the Messiah whom they had rejected and handed over to Pilate to be crucified. Then he said, *“Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out; so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that He may send the Messiah appointed for you – that is, Jesus! – Who must remain in Heaven until the time of the restoration of all things, which God announced long ago through His holy prophets”* (v. 19-21).

Faith

3:16 “By faith in Jesus’ Name, His Name itself has made this man strong ... and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health”. Faith in Jesus and the power of His Name, is essential if we are to experience miracles of healing, deliverance, etc.

Peter again used fulfilled prophecy as he boldly and powerfully declared the Word and ways of God to the people. His preaching led to conviction as he showed how the Jews had rejected the Messiah and how they needed to repent.

Such preaching, however, led to opposition as we shall see in the next study!

Keys: To sum up this far, here are some more of the keys:

- God was at work, confirming the words that were preached with signs following. People knew what they heard was true and that it was God’s word to them because of the miracles which God did. It was a time of powerful demonstration of the presence of God.
- People were convicted of their sin. Peter did not water-down his message or make it nice and acceptable to the people – he told it like it was: sin is sin and needs to be repented of. People need to make a choice to turn from sin and turn to God. They either accept this message or they reject it to their peril.
- Christians gathered together for teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayers.
- The Church grew in amazing ways as thousands turned to the Lord; the Lord adding daily to the Church those who were being saved.

- Faith, boldness, and powerfully convicting preaching, were keys to seeing people saved.

QUESTIONS

1. How important is prayer and fasting (a) in your life? (b) in the life of your church? and (c) in the life of the Church as a whole? How important should it be?
2. What is the significance of the fact that when Peter preached to Jews (2:14-36 and 3:12-26) he used the Old Testament Scriptures as the basis for his message?
3. What are some of the things which happened in the book of Acts as a result of prayer?
4. **Prayer, in the Name of Jesus, prayed in faith** brought forth some amazing results. Why are each of these three things so important?
5. What follows repentance and turning to God? (3:19)
6. Why should the miraculous healing of a cripple bring forth opposition?

4

Opposition!

4:1-2 Peter and John were bold and fearless as they preached Christ, His death and resurrection, and that we too can be resurrected from the dead if we believe in Him. They made no apologies; they were not politically correct; they made no compromises – they preached the Gospel in all its Truth, with all its claims and all its demands. They knew how the priests and Sadducees would react, but they carried on speaking. People either accepted or rejected what Peter and John said, but they were in no doubt concerning what they were saying.

4:3 Inevitably the scribes and Sadducees could stand it no longer and they arrested and imprisoned Peter and John. Whenever the Gospel is preached fearlessly, in the power of the Spirit, there will be opposition. It may be opposition from people; it may be demonic. But the Gospel must be preached, nevertheless. Opposition and arrest did not stop them preaching the truth (v. 8-12).

4:4 As a result of their preaching, about 5000 people believed and were added to the Church. The choice is ours: we either believe in and receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, or we reject Him. We need to know the truth; it is up to us whether or not we accept it and live it.

4:7 The problem was, there was an indisputable miracle which had occurred. In the Name of Jesus a crippled man had been miraculously healed. Even the rulers, elders,

scribes and High Priest could not explain it or deny it. All they could do was ask “By what power or by what name did you do this?” What a question! Just the question Peter was waiting for!

4:8 Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter again preached about Jesus with power and authority. He concluded by making a statement (v. 12) which today many people would feel was offensive and politically incorrect: **“There is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name under Heaven given amongst men by which we must be saved*”**. It’s Jesus or no-one! God has only one begotten Son – the Lord Jesus Christ. No one else ever lived a perfect life. No one else ever died for the sins of the world. Every religion fails at this point: they cannot offer a sinless Saviour who died for our sins. At best, they can only offer “paradise” if we live “good enough” lives – probably, possibly, maybe!

***“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus!
What can give me peace within? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus!”***

4:13 Verse 13 is also a key verse: “When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed ...” How could they do this? But “... they realised that they were followers of Jesus!” That was the key! Not their education or their eloquence – simply that they knew Jesus, followed Jesus, had been with Jesus. Jesus was the only explanation for their boldness and the miracle which had occurred.

Peter and John had preached the Name and uniqueness of Jesus (v. 10-12); God had worked with them, confirming their words with an undeniable miracle (v. 14, 16) – what could their opponents do?

4:16-18 Because they refused to believe, the only thing they could do was to order Peter and John not to speak any more, to anyone, in the Name of Jesus. Foolishly they thought this would work, but did it? No!

4:19-20 Peter and John answered: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard”. Whenever man’s laws conflict with God’s laws, we must obey God rather than man. God is supreme in authority, and all human authority is derived from Him. This is why ***no-one*** can command what God forbids, or forbid what God commands. **Jesus** commanded His followers to go into all the world, preach the Gospel and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20). He has never cancelled this command. Therefore we preach the Gospel no matter what anyone says. This is risky; it may be unpopular, costly and dangerous, but this is what Jesus has told us to do. Peter and John simply refused to be quiet!

4:21-22 Realising that Peter and John were not going to stop, they threatened them, but couldn’t do much else because everyone was praising God for the miracle which had happened to this man who was over 40 years old.

4:23-30 After such an ordeal, Peter and John returned to their friends and shared what had happened. The Christians realised how serious the threats were (after all, Peter and

John had already been arrested and imprisoned) so they lifted this all to the Lord in prayer. Undaunted, they prayed for even more faith, more miracles and more glory to go to God's Son. They asked for even greater boldness, more healings, signs and wonders!

4:31 God answered their prayer with an experience similar to what happened on the day of Pentecost: the place was shaken, they were all again filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness, just as they had prayed. It was as though God said "You're on the right track. Don't give up. I'm still with you. Here's My answer: Be filled again, constantly, with the fulness of My Spirit and go forth in My Name and preach My Word boldly, whatever the cost!" Paul, in Ephesians 5:18 says to all of us, "Be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit" (the verb "be filled" is in the continuous tense – now and always!) Are we praying that we might be constantly filled with God's Spirit, experiencing God's miracle-working power so that we can preach His Word boldly? We should be!

Unity – practical unity – in the early Church

4:32-37 There was a tremendous sense of unity between the early Christians, and this was another key to the power and success of the early Church. The unity was such that they shared things in common – no-one was needy because those who had more, sold their possessions and shared with those who had less. The people were "of one heart and soul" and this showed in practical ways, not just spiritually.

As a result, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and great grace was upon them all (v. 33). "Great power ... and great grace" – two things we really need! We need the power of the Holy Spirit. We also need the grace of God to live lives which glorify His Name!

QUESTIONS

1. How can we be bold, like Peter and John? (2 Timothy 1:7)
2. Why is it so important that we are constantly filled with the Holy Spirit?
3. What should we do if we are ordered to do something which is contrary to God's Word or God's will?
4. What did the early Church do after Peter and John had been threatened? (4:23-30). What happened as a result? (4:31)
5. What is the overall theme of (a) Psalm 133 and (b) John 17?
6. What does Christian unity mean in **practical terms**?

5

The unity is tested!

5:1-11 The Church was on a spiritual “high” (in spite of threats). There was unity, growth, powerful testimony and miracles. Into this the enemy sowed the seeds of discord, not from without but from within. If the enemy cannot stop the Church by outside persecution, he will often try to destroy the work of God from within. In this context we see the significance of the sins of Ananias and Sapphira. On the surface it seems as though God’s judgement on them, simply for telling a lie, was very harsh. But what they did had the potential to destroy the unity, and hence the blessing, of the whole Church. If they lied and got away with it, so could others. United, the Church stood; divided it would fall (see Psalm 133).

God, through a word of knowledge, revealed to Peter what was happening, and Peter exposed their sin. Previously the people had experienced the miracle of healing; this time they saw the miracle of supernatural revelation, judgement and death.

The result of all this was that “Great fear seized the whole Church and all who heard of these things.” Not surprising, perhaps!

The Bible says that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10) and that “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13). How the Church today needs this fear of the Lord! How **we** need the fear of the Lord!

God continues to work in miraculous ways

5:12 God worked amongst the apostles in some amazing ways: “Many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles”. Jesus had earlier prophesied that the preaching of His Word would be confirmed by signs and wonders (Mark 16:15-20) and it was so.

5:13 The presence of God was so real and so powerful that people had a choice: they either were converted and became part of the Christian Church, following Jesus, or they did not dare join them. Sin was not tolerated (5:1-11) so people had to make up their minds – you either repent, turn from sin and become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, or you refuse to repent and turn your back on following Him. In the latter case, people acknowledged the power of God and held the Christians in high esteem because of what they saw happening, but it was “not for them”! Today, we in the Western world live in an age where the Church and world have become so intermingled and, on the whole, the power of God is so rarely seen in public that it is hard to tell Christians from non-Christians! Not so in the early Church: you were either a repentant, born-again follower of Christ or you kept at a safe distance from the Church!

Revival and miracles

5:14 On the day of Pentecost 3000 people were saved (2:41). Later the Lord added to the Church day-by-day “those who were being saved” (2:47). Still later, 5000 were added to the Church (4:4). Now we read that “more than ever, believers were added to the Lord – great numbers of both men and women”.

5:15-16 But not only were people being saved, the miracles also multiplied! Peter’s shadow, falling on sick people who had been brought out into the streets, was sufficient to bring healing to them! The sick were healed; those people who were tormented by unclean spirits were delivered. Amazing grace! Amazing days! “... they were all cured”!

Jealousy and persecution

5:17-18 Jealousy is a wicked thing. The high priest and the Sadducees were filled with jealousy. They could see what God was doing but He wasn’t doing it through them! Rather than rejoice in the healings, the deliverances, the power and presence of God, they were filled with jealousy. How tragic! Consequently, they arrested the apostles and put them in prison. At least that should keep them quiet!

5:19-21 But God again confirmed whose side He was on. During the night an angel of God opened the prison doors and set them free. Did they flee to their homes or their friends’ houses for protection? No! They went back to the temple and “went on with their teaching”. Nothing could stop them because **God** had said, “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this way of life”. So they preached Christ fearlessly!

5:26 The high priest and Sadducees arrested the apostles again, but this time without violence, because they were afraid of the people. The “common” people gladly accepted what God was doing, while the “religious leaders” resisted God because of their jealousy, blindness and hardness of heart.

5:27-32 The high priest reprimanded them for their disobedience but Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men”. In other words, whenever there is any conflict between obedience to the Lord and obedience to human authority, **we must obey God rather than men**. This may be costly – so far the apostles had been arrested and imprisoned twice. Peter not only said this, but he went on to show his hearers how they had been responsible for the death of Jesus – Jesus, Whom God raised from the dead and exalted to His right hand as Ruler and Saviour of Israel. If only they would repent and receive His forgiveness! Indeed, they too could receive the Holy Spirit if only they would obey God (v. 32).

5:33-39 This was too much for the Jewish leaders. They were so angry they wanted to put them to death, but God intervened through Gamaliel, a wise Pharisee and Council member. “If this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them, in fact you might even find yourself fighting against God!”

Human plans and undertakings eventually die and pass away, but what is born of God lives on because it has God’s life within it. For 2000 years the Church has suffered persecution

in many different ways and in many different countries – yet it continues to be strong and healthy and growing today! It cannot pass away because its foundation is Christ, the everlasting Rock (Matthew 16:18). Four thousand years ago God, through Abraham, birthed what eventually became the people of Israel, and they also will never pass away, in spite of huge persecution, because of God’s eternal promises (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17, etc.)

5:40 But the disciples’ boldness was not without cost. In spite of what Gamaliel had said, they beat the disciples and ordered them not to speak in Jesus’ Name again. Revival is wonderful. Seeing God’s miracles is wonderful. Multitudes being converted is even more wonderful. Having favour with the people is great, but it is not without cost!

5:41-42 How did they respond to this? Did they limp their way home and share the Gospel in secret, only to trusted friends? No, true to their word, they continued to obey God rather than man. God had given them a command (5:20) and they were going to be obedient! “As they left the Council, they **rejoiced** that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of Jesus’ Name! And every day, in the temple and at home, they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah (Christ)”

So we see in this passage, both great blessing and great persecution; great faith, great miracles, great signs, great healings and salvation, but also great cost. Are we willing to pay the price? Or is it easier to be quiet and just live our own private Christian life, disturbing no-one?

QUESTIONS

1. Why was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira so serious?
2. What is meant by “the fear of the Lord”? How do we live in the fear of the Lord?
3. Why do we not see more miracles in the Church today?
4. The early Church does not appear to have had a problem with “nominal Christians”. Christians were out-and-out for God, and people did not dare join the Church unless they were prepared to be totally committed. Why was this? What can we do today in the Church to get wholehearted commitment from those who call themselves Christians?
5. Why is jealousy such an insidious sin in the Church?
6. In what ways might Christians today need to “obey God rather than men”?
7. How can Christians **rejoice** when they suffer for their faith?

6

Murmuring!

6:1 Murmuring and disunity! Surely there weren't problems in the early Church! Yes, there were! Wherever people gather together there will inevitably be differences of opinion because we are all different. In this case, favouritism of the Jewish believers was the problem. But the issue is not so much that there was a problem, but how was the problem handled?

6:2-4 The disciples dealt with this situation very wisely. Obviously Gentile (Greek or Hellenist) believers should be treated the same as Jewish believers, because we are all one in Christ. But the disciples did not have the time to organise the distribution of food – that was not what God had called them to. Their God-given ministry was to seek God in prayer and to teach the Word of God. So they set aside seven men who would serve (deacon) those Christians who were in need. These “deacons” would serve in a physical capacity, while the disciples would serve in a spiritual capacity (**both** are necessary, and one is not superior to the other!)

The appointment of deacons

6:3, 5 Notice the qualifications required to serve tables: they had to be of good standing, full of the Spirit, filled with wisdom and faith! To be a disciple and serve in any capacity, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The command to be constantly filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) is for all Christians, whatever our task, not just those who serve in some major way. And to serve Christ and His Church well requires divine wisdom and the exercise of faith, because we do not serve in a worldly way like non-Christians!

6:6 When people were set apart in the early Church, whether as deacons, elders or apostles, they were set apart with the laying on of hands and prayer (13:3). They were committed to the Lord and His service, God's blessing, wisdom and power was prayed for, and they were commended to the people for their prayer and support.

6:7 Consequently, “the Word of God grew”, people were saved, including Jewish priests. People saw the Word of God in action! They saw the love, sharing and blessing which was imparted to believers, and many more people joined them.

Stephen – a deacon, and more!

6:8 Stephen was one of these seven deacons, but he didn't just stop at serving tables! He is described not only as being full of the Spirit, wisdom and faith (v. 5) but also as being full of grace and power. Note: grace **and** power. Power and authority can easily lead to pride, arrogance, domineering and authoritarianism, that is why God's **grace** is so essential, to balance the power! As a result, Stephen did great signs and wonders amongst the people, and that makes it even harder to be humble without God's grace and wisdom!

6:9-10 When the Church is lying down, quiet and ineffective, the devil doesn't mind too much, but when the Church is growing and God's power and majesty are being demonstrated in ways which begin to break down the kingdom of darkness, Satan doesn't like it. Opposition is certain to arise! But such was God's grace and wisdom in Stephen's life that he silenced the opposition.

6:11-15 Eventually, however, lies and opposition, together with false accusations led to Stephen's arrest. But the Spirit of God so filled Stephen that "his face was like the face of an angel"! That must have been an incredible sight, and it only shows how blind and prejudiced people can be when, confronted by someone so full of the Spirit, it stirred them to even greater rage and eventually to Stephen's murder! Spiritual blindness, prejudice and hate are such terrible things, especially when done in the name of religion!

7:1-50 In his defence Stephen first identified with the Jewish people. He used Jewish history to show he was fully Jewish and orthodox in all his belief in the Old Testament Scriptures, just as his hearers were.

7:51-53 But then he boldly exposed their sin and rebellion, in rejecting their Messiah, His betrayal and murder. He was absolutely clear that Jesus was the Messiah and the Jewish people as a whole had rejected Him and had Him put to death. This (His rejection, and failure to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah) must be repented of. Stephen did not hide the truth from them.

7:54 His hearers were convicted of their sin, but instead of repenting their hearts only hardened further. Like Pharaoh in the days of Moses, who hardened his heart more and more, in spite of the miracles Moses did, so these men became more and more angry as they got more and more convicted.

7:55-60 Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked into Heaven and saw Jesus at God's right hand – the Son of God, with His Father. Then, while forgiving his murderers, he was stoned to death. In these ways his death was similar to that of Jesus: he was unjustly put to death, he looked to the Lord as he died, he forgave those who persecuted him. A truly remarkable man, chosen first of all to wait on tables! No matter how humble, how mundane, how secular our service in the Kingdom may seem to be, let us all make sure that we are of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom and faith, so that God's grace and power in our lives may make us a living testimony to the Lord our God.

QUESTIONS

1. What is "murmuring"? Why does it need to be dealt with in the Church?
2. What qualifications were needed in order to serve (deacon) in the early Church?
3. Why is it important that a deacon be "of good standing" (good reputation or honest report) in the Church and community?
4. What was done to officially appoint people as deacons, apostles or elders? (6:6; 13:3; 14:23)
5. Why do grace and power need to be balanced in a person's life (especially in a leader's life)?
6. Why does religion often breed spiritual blindness, prejudice and hate? What are some examples from history when this has occurred?

7

Fierce persecution serves to spread the Gospel

8:1-8 Fierce persecution broke out against the Church in Jerusalem and the believers were scattered. However the persecution did not stop them witnessing and preaching, nor did it stop the signs and wonders – it simply spread them further! In fact, healing and deliverance led to great joy in Samaria!

8:12-17 New believers were baptised in water and prayed for, for the baptism of the Spirit. In Matthew 3:11 John the Baptist said that he baptised people in water for repentance, and Jesus would baptize people in the Holy Spirit and fire.

Note that “fire” in the Bible is *never* used to mean zeal or fervour – it speaks of a purging or purifying work, and may well come through opposition and persecution. Beware of praying for fire, unless you really mean it; it is not fun! “Send the fire, Lord!” is a dangerous prayer to pray unless you really want God to deal with your life and with self – all you have and all you are.

So we see the early Church preached what is called the “Four Square Gospel”: salvation, healing, deliverance, and baptism with the Holy Spirit.

8:18-20 Simon, seeing this, thought he could buy God’s gifts with money, so he could use them for his own selfish purposes. He soon found out how wrong he was! God’s gifts are given sovereignly by God to those whom He chooses (1 Corinthians 12:11); they are gifts which we may ask for, but nevertheless they are gifts. They are for God’s glory, not ours. They are received by faith, not by money or position. Humility, right motives, a genuine desire to serve and to glorify God are essential pre-requisites, along with faith.

8:25 As a result, many villages in Samaria [the West Bank of Israel today] were evangelised (Oh that they still were today!)

Philip – a deacon turned evangelist

8:26-40 The Word of God spread in some amazing ways. As a result of an angelic visitation, where Philip heard (and obeyed!) the voice of an angel, and the Holy Spirit, the Gospel was preached to an Ethiopian and the Gospel was spread to Ethiopia! Using the book of Isaiah, Philip showed the Ethiopian the Scriptures concerning the Messiah, His life, purpose and death, and led the man to Jesus! (How many of us could lead someone to Christ using the book of Isaiah?)

The man believed and was baptised, and then Philip was snatched away by the Holy Spirit and “transported” to Azotus, from where he continued to preach the Good News in all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Philip was another one of the seven deacons who was

filled with the Spirit, faith and wisdom! So the ministry of being a deacon is not just limited to serving tables! Oh, for more deacons like Philip and Stephen!

What happened to the Ethiopian? He went on his way rejoicing – back to Ethiopia, with the book of Isaiah in his hands, the Word of God in his heart and salvation, there to preach the Word, and see the Church established in Ethiopia. Ethiopian believers today trace their spiritual history back to this man – a eunuch in the flesh, but a mighty fruitful man in the Spirit!

Satan oversteps his mark

9:1-2 The more dynamic and powerful the Church becomes, the more Satan hates what it is doing to his kingdom and the more he opposes God's people. A strong proclamation of the Word of God and the ways of God is also offensive to the flesh – it convicts people of their sin, and most people object to that! Pride also gets in the way of us hearing and obeying what God says. So Saul sets out to arrest "the disciples of the Lord", even though he would have considered himself "a disciple of the Lord"! Religion, blind tradition and pride have an awful way of persecuting those who truly love and serve the Lord in all humility and truth.

Saul, the enemy of the Church, becomes Paul, the great apostle!

9:3-9 But God sovereignly over-rules! Perhaps the Church was fervently praying for Saul's conversion, as they had been taught to "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28), and that was certainly the case with Saul! Saul had a divine encounter, and one that he could not easily shake off because for three days he was without sight. Besides, he had heard the voice of God in a very clear and unmistakable way, and was prepared to be obedient – he travelled on to Damascus, fasting both food and drink, for three days.

9:10-16 Simultaneously God was also speaking to Ananias in a very clear, specific, prophetic way. He told Ananias exactly what he was to do and what was going to happen. Although at first he argued with the Lord, knowing full well what Saul was doing, at least he obeyed. Both Saul and Ananias saw visions and heard God speak (v. 10, 12). Moreover, both of them not only heard God, they spoke to God and God replied!

9:15 Saul was a "chosen vessel" – a person God had chosen to bring His Name before kings, Israel and Gentiles. This was the birth of the unique ministry of a unique man; a man who wrote more of the New Testament than any one else. But a man who was to suffer greatly in doing so. There is a very real cost to being fully obedient to all that God tells us, but the glory of God far outweighs the cost!

9:17-19 Ananias laid hands on Saul and Saul's blindness was immediately healed, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and then baptised in water. What a transformation! God knows our hearts. He knew Saul's heart, and though blinded by zealousness for Judaism, he did seem to think that he was doing God's will in persecuting the Christians. So God showed him the error of his old ways and he responded!

9:20-22 What a contrast between verses 1-2 and verses 20-22! People couldn't believe the change as they heard Saul, the Christian persecutor, proclaiming that "Jesus is the Son of God" – could this be the same man? Yes, the power of God to touch and transform lives knows no bounds, praise God! Paul even confounded the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

It is uncertain who wrote the book to the Hebrews, but it may well be that Paul wrote it during his time in the Arabian desert (Galatians 1:11-24), soon after he became a Christian, as his "thesis", proving that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, our great High Priest, who fulfilled all the Old Testament Law and sacrifice, and ushered in the New Testament Age of the Holy Spirit and grace.

9:23-25 Again, this was too much for the enemies of the Church, and some Jews plotted to kill Saul, but God made known the plot and his friends helped him to escape.

9:26-30 Naturally, many Christians were suspicious of Saul. Had he really been converted, or was this all a trick? Barnabas (whose name means "Encourager") took him to the apostles to verify his story and when they accepted him he was free to move in and out amongst the Christians, speaking boldly in the Name of Jesus. He spoke and argued with the Greeks (Gentiles), but this time they tried to kill him! Jews were after him; Gentiles were after him, so the believers sent him off to Tarsus, the town where he was born.

9:31 At last the Church throughout Judea and Galilee ("Israel" today) and Samaria (roughly, the "West Bank" today) had peace and was built up. The people lived in the fear of the Lord, in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and grew in numbers. Oh, for such a Church today – built up (edified), living in the fear of God, knowing the powerful presence of the Comforter, and multiplying! How we need to pray for this!

God's ministry through Peter

9:32-43 Now back to Peter. Peter's miraculous ministry continued: a paralysed man, who had been bed-ridden for 8 years was healed in Jesus' Name, and "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him [healed] and turned to the Lord!" The purpose of miraculous healing is not to praise men as great healers but to glorify God and bring others to the Lord! On to Joppa where a dead woman was raised from the dead – "this became known throughout Joppa [not surprisingly!] and many believed in the Lord".

QUESTIONS

1. Why is persecution often the fuel which spreads the fires of revival?
2. What is meant by: (a) baptism in water for repentance; (b) baptism in the Holy Spirit; and (c) baptism with fire? (Matthew 3:11)
3. What is meant by the term "the four-square Gospel"? Are we preaching all four of these aspects of the Gospel today?
4. What are the right motives for asking for the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

5. What are some verses in the book of Isaiah which you could use to share the Gospel, as Philip did (8:27-35)?
6. Why did Saul hate the early Church and Christians? What should be our response to hatred like this?

8

The Gospel goes to the Gentiles

10:1-8 Jesus had prophesied (1:8) that the disciples would be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (New Zealand!) Paul had preached to the Jews and faced opposition (9:23); he had preached to the Greeks (Gentiles) and faced opposition (9:29). Peter had testified to the Jews (2:14), and was now to be “introduced” to the Gentiles. God graciously spoke both to Cornelius and to Peter. Cornelius lived in Caesarea and was a centurion of the Italian Cohort (not much in common with a Jewish fisherman here!) But Cornelius was described as “a devout man, who feared God, gave generously and prayed constantly to God” (v. 2, 31) – an ideal man for God to use! God spoke to him through a vision and told him to send his servants to Peter, asking him to come to Caesarea. Cornelius obeyed.

10:9-23 The next day God spoke to Peter through a vision. Knowing that Peter, a Jew, did not have much in common with Gentiles, God prepared Peter by showing him in the vision that he was not to call “unclean” what God called “clean”. God did this three times to make sure Peter got this message in his mind. Then, when Cornelius’ servants came and gave him his message, Peter returned with them to Caesarea.

10:24-33 Through this, Peter realised that those people (Gentiles) who he had regarded as people not to be associated with, and with whom he would not even eat, are not to be regarded as profane or unclean, for God can cleanse any sinner, Jew or Gentile!

10:34-43 Hearing what Cornelius had to say convinced him that God wanted him to share the Gospel with Gentiles too. He shared “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power; how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him”.

10:44-48 While Peter was saying “that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His Name”, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word, and they spoke in tongues and glorified God. The Jews with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles, but realising that God had done this, Peter baptised them in the Name of Jesus Christ. Prejudices vanish when God is present in powerful ways, and we see His Spirit at work in the lives of others too.

Jewish believers and Gentile believers

11:1-3 Up until this point in time the early Church had been going well and, apart from some criticism about the neglect of Greek widows (6:1), all the opposition had come from outside the Church. Now came the issue of Peter associating with, and even eating with, Gentiles! (even though they had heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God). The potential for the early Church to be divided between Jewish and Gentile factions (denominations!), arose.

11:4-17 Very wisely, Peter simply shared his testimony concerning what had happened. He shared:

- the vision he had seen
- the voice he heard, speaking from Heaven
- what the Lord had shown him
- what the Holy Spirit had said to him
- how all of this had been confirmed by an angelic visitation to other people
- how the Holy Spirit fell upon the people when he shared the Gospel
- the prophetic words of Jesus
- how reasonable and sensible it was to baptise people who believed and received the Holy Spirit just as they had (“who was I, that I could hinder God?”)

11:18 “When they heard this they were silenced; and then they praised God, saying, ‘God has given even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life’.” And so the Jewish believers received the Gentile believers into the Church.

11:19-24 As a result of the persecution which arose at the time of the stoning of Stephen, believers were scattered to many parts of the world, and the Gospel spread to the Jews, Greeks and other Gentiles, so that a great many people were saved. Stephen’s life was “a seed sown into the ground” from which came a great harvest (John 12:24).

11:25-26 Barnabas linked Paul with the believers in Antioch, and it was there that they were, for the first time, called “**Christians**” – Christ’s ones; followers or disciples of Christ, the Messiah.

11:27-30 A prophet named Agabus prophesied that there would be a severe famine. As a result, the people acted on the prophetic word (which came to pass, as all true prophecy will), and they sent help to the elders of the Church in Judea. This was a true, specific, prophetic word which the people believed and acted upon, bringing blessing to those in need, as a result.

Persecution continues

12:1-5 Persecution of the church did not stop. King Herod dealt violently with some of the believers, including killing James, the brother of John. When he saw that this pleased the Jews he arrested Peter, put him in prison, and evidently intended to kill him too, after the Passover. But “the church prayed fervently to God for him!” Today, in a number of places in

the world, Christians face severe persecution, imprisonment and death, and we too need to pray fervently for them.

12:6-17 Once again God acted in a miraculous way. Through an angelic visitation Peter's chains fell off and he was led out of a locked, guarded prison! God is not limited to natural means in order to answer the fervent prayers of the church!

One of the wonderful things which is brought out in verses 12-16 is that, in spite of the weakness of our faith sometimes, God still hears our prayers and answers! Here was the Church praying for Peter in prison, and when he knocked on the door, they thought it could only be his angel! They were actually amazed that their fervent prayers had been answered!

12:18-25 Herod was furious that his plans had been thwarted; so furious that he had Peter's guards put to death. However, God only allows the wicked to rule for a time, and Herod's time soon came. Ultimately it was Herod's pride that led to his end. After Herod put on his royal robes and gave a great oration, the people kept shouting "The voice of a god and not of a mortal" but he was struck down and died because he had not given the glory to God. "But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents".

QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the characteristics of Cornelius that may have led God to choose him? (10:2)
2. What part did both prayer and visions play in bringing Cornelius and Peter together?
3. Could Acts 10:38 apply to **us** as well as to Jesus?
4. How did God overcome Peter's prejudice against Gentiles (people who were not Jews)?
5. How did Peter defend his actions to the Jewish Christians after he had baptised Gentiles, thus admitting them into the ("Jewish") Church?
6. What is a "Christian"?
7. Is God limited by our "little faith"? (12:12-16)

9

Sending forth apostles

13:1-5 This passage shows the way in which the apostles were sent forth. While five prophets and teachers were **worshipping the Lord and fasting**, the Holy Spirit (through a prophetic word) said "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have

called them". After further **prayer and fasting**, they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off ... "being sent out by the Holy Spirit". This is the ministry of the true apostle. An apostle is a person who is called forth by God and sent forth by the Church into the mission-field. The word "apostle" comes from the Greek (*apostolos*) and is the equivalent of the Latin word (*missio*) from which we get the word "missionary" – a person who is **sent forth on a mission** (in this case, to preach the Gospel, lead people to Christ and establish the Church in places where there was no Church). "They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews".

Tested by a false prophet

13:6-12 Once again the enemy tried to hinder them from preaching the Gospel. The true prophets of God confronted a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus (which means "son of Jesus"!) A proconsul named Sergius Paulus summoned Barnabas and Paul and wanted to hear the word of God, but this false prophet, who was also a magician, opposed them and tried to turn Sergius away from the Christian faith. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul looked intently at the magician and exposed the wickedness of his heart. Then Paul prophesied that the man would be blind for a time, not even being able to see the sun! Immediately this happened. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at what he had heard about the Lord, and as he saw the power of God demonstrated.

Preaching the Gospel in a synagogue in Antioch

13:13-43 Paul and Barnabas went into a synagogue in Antioch on the Sabbath day, and after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, they were asked if they had anything to say. What an opportunity! Paul took the Old Testament Word of God and expounded to them, from the Law and the Prophets, about the Lord Jesus Christ. He spoke about John the Baptist, the coming of Christ, His rejection by the Jews, His death, burial and resurrection. Paul took what the Jews knew and believed, and preached Christ to them through it. "Through this Man (Jesus) forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. By this Jesus, everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the Law of Moses. Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said, does not happen to you!" Many people believed as a result, and Paul and Barnabas were urged to speak more about these things on the next Sabbath.

13:44-52 The next Sabbath, almost the whole city turned up to hear. But the Jews were jealous of Paul, contradicted what he said and even blasphemed! Paul and Barnabas took this to be an indication from God that they were to turn towards the Gentiles now, and share the Gospel with them. "When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region". Thus, too, Acts 1:8 became fulfilled: "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth".

The Jews continued to oppose Paul and Barnabas, stirring up devout women of high standing, and leading men in the city, to oppose them and eventually force them out of the region. Just as Jesus had said (Matthew 10:14) they shook the dust off their feet in protest

against this opposition and rejection, and they moved on to Iconium. But “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit”.

14:1-7 The same thing happened in Iconium. Paul and Barnabas preached in the Jewish synagogue and spoke so powerfully that many Jews and Greeks became believers. Again the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against Paul and Barnabas. But God confirmed His word once more with signs and wonders. As always, some people sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. The truth of God’s Word will always divide those who receive it, from those who reject it – it is a sharp, two-edged sword, bringing life to believers but death to unbelievers.

Some of the Jews and Gentiles, with their rulers, attempted to mistreat and stone Paul and Barnabas, so they fled to another region where they continued proclaiming the Good News.

Paul and Barnabas were not men-pleasers. They powerfully proclaimed the whole counsel of God, fearlessly. In spite of opposition and persecution, they continued. They knew nothing of “political correctness” – they spoke the truth as God anointed them, and God confirmed His Word in powerful ways, and saved all those who came to faith.

Healing the cripple

14:8-20 In Lystra, the enemy came at them in a different way. Paul saw a man who had been crippled from birth, who listened as Paul spoke. Without even calling a prayer meeting, Paul saw (in the Spirit) that he had the faith to be healed, so he simply said, “Stand upright on your feet” and the crippled man sprang up and began to walk! No gimmicks, no long prayers, no hype, no question about it – a man born crippled was instantly, miraculously healed in front of everyone!

At this, some people were so amazed that they thought Paul and Barnabas were “gods” come down in human form. They called Paul “Hermes”, and Barnabas they called “Zeus”. The priest of Zeus brought oxen and garlands and wanted to worship them and make sacrifices to them! (How different from the unbelieving Jews who wanted to stone them!) Paul and Barnabas could have ridden high on this popularity, but they didn’t. They turned the opportunity around again to preach the Good News.

So fickle is human nature that when Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there, they turned the hearts of the crowds who were going to worship them, so that, instead, they stoned Paul and dragged his body out of the city, thinking that he was dead. When the disciples surrounded him (in prayer?) he got up, went back into the city, and then moved on the next day to Derbe where they made many disciples.

14:21-28 Paul and Barnabas had true pastors’ hearts. In spite of opposition, rejection, physical violence, etc., against them, they returned to Antioch, back through the cities of Lystra and Iconium. Their purpose? They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them in the faith, saying, “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God”. Perhaps we Christians today live such an easy Christian life by comparison because we lack the boldness of those early disciples.

In each church, after **prayer and fasting**, they appointed elders to lead the churches and entrusted them to the Lord in Whom they had come to believe.

14:24-28 Paul and Barnabas had been sent forth from Antioch into the ministry. They now returned, their work completed. They called the church in Antioch together and related all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith for the Gentiles. It had cost them much: humiliation, violent attacks, rejection – but for the joy that was set before them, they endured the hardship, like their Master before them (Hebrews 12:2-3) and could recount the wonderful things which God had done, by His Spirit, through them! These truly were “Acts of the Holy Spirit through the apostles”!

QUESTIONS

1. What is an “apostle”? Who are apostles today?
2. How can we discern false prophets today?
3. In what way is the Word of God like a sharp, two-edged sword?
4. Is there a place for “political (or religious) correctness” when we preach the Gospel? Why or why not?
5. Paul and Barnabas faced both rejection and persecution, as well as fame and popularity. How should we, as Christians, react to rejection and opposition, and to fame and popularity? (Many well-known Bible teachers, evangelists and people with gifts of healing face both opposition and popularity today!)
6. Do you think it is true that most Christians today live an easy Christian lifestyle because we lack the boldness and faith of the early disciples?

10

Dealing with contentious issues

15:1-21 Once again the early Church faced the possibility of division, this time over the keeping of the Old Testament law on circumcision, in spite of the fact that uncircumcised Gentiles had been converted! They had been saved (v. 3), filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 8), their hearts were cleansed by faith (v. 9), and God had done signs and wonders among them (v. 12) – why, then, did they still need to be circumcised? “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as the Gentiles will” (v. 11). James confirmed this by quoting from Amos 9:11-12.

James concluded that circumcision was not necessary for the Gentiles, but that they should abstain from things polluted by idols, from fornication, and from drinking blood (a pagan

ritual). Agreement was reached, which stopped the Church from being divided over this issue of the Law.

15:22-35 “The apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole Church” (v. 22) sent word to the Gentile believers, telling them, “... it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (v. 28) – that they abstain from idolatry, drinking blood and from fornication (sexual immorality). What unity! A potentially divisive issue was resolved, and the unity of the Church was maintained – without a split! There is a Godly way to approach potentially divisive issues – seek the face of God, study His Word, be subject to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and work through the issue in true Christian love.

The Gentiles rejoiced at the news and were greatly encouraged and strengthened by the words of Judas and Silas – this is the good fruit which results from doing what is “good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v. 28)

15:36-41 Now the next contentious issue arose! Paul did not want to take Mark with him, because Mark had earlier deserted them and had not continued to accompany them in the work. Obviously Paul felt unsure of Mark’s commitment and did not want to risk taking him with them. Barnabas (whose name means “Encourager”, 4:36) wanted to give Mark another chance. Sadly, the disagreement became so strong that they parted company – Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas with him through Syria and Cilicia. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of seeking God’s will by prayer and fasting on this occasion! While the outcome was good for all, the issue does not seem to have been resolved in a very spiritual way. If they had waited on God in prayer, perhaps the Holy Spirit would have said for Paul to take Silas, and for Barnabas to take Mark, but without the sharp contention between them! (“... there was sharp feeling, so as to separate them from each other”, v. 39).

Timothy

16:1-5 Timothy had a Jewish mother who was a believer, but his father was a Greek (Gentile), so Timothy had not been circumcised. Paul had him circumcised (even though it was not necessary for salvation) in order not to offend the Jews. This might seem like a compromise, in view of what had been decided earlier (15:22-29), though Timothy was partly of Jewish descent through his mother. In spite of this inconsistency, Paul and Timothy “delivered to the Jews the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem”! (v. 4). However, “... the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (v. 5), which is the most important thing.

The leading of God’s Spirit

16:6-10 We are not told how or why the Holy Spirit forbade Paul and Timothy from speaking the Word in Asia Minor, nor how He stopped them from going into Bithynia, but we do know that God spoke to Paul in a vision and called them to Macedonia. God leads in a variety of ways – ways which are not necessarily our ways or ideas (Isaiah 55:8-9). Sometimes He closes doors, and we wonder why. Other times He opens doors and leads us through (Revelation 3:7-8). The important thing is that we seek His direction and will,

and we are obedient when He shows it to us! In the meantime we trust Him to lead us always (Isaiah 30:21).

16:11-15 God honours those who faithfully pray and worship Him! Lydia, and other women, had gathered by the river to pray, and the Lord led Paul to them in order to show them the way of salvation. Lydia's faithful prayers and worship had been heard and God opened her heart to the Gospel so that she and all her household were saved and baptised. She then prevailed on Paul and Timothy to stay at her home, presumably so that they could learn more about the Way.

Great victories – but there is a price to be paid!

16:16-40 The book of Acts contains a real mixture of victories, blessings and miracles, and also strong opposition and persecution. "All who live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution", Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:12).

At one prayer meeting a woman and her family were saved and baptised, but on the way to the next prayer meeting "all hell was let loose"! The enemy's attack was subtle! A slave girl, possessed by a spirit of divination, brought her owners a lot of money by her fortune-telling. She followed Paul and cried out "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation" (v.17). What was wrong with that? Good, free publicity? – or was it?

The first problem was that a demon was trying to associate itself with the message Paul was preaching. People knew this girl was a fortune-teller, possessed by magical powers. But Paul was no fortune-teller and did not use demonic powers! This attempted association of the false with the true could not continue! Secondly, she said they preached "a way of salvation" not "**the** [only] way of salvation"! Paul's message was that Jesus is the unique way of salvation: "I am **the Way, the Truth and the Life**. No-one comes to the Father except through Me", Jesus said (John 14:6). The third problem was that here was a young woman, bound by an evil spirit, leading people into deception and idolatry – someone for whom Jesus died. Paul rebuked the spirit and said, "I order you, in the Name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her", and she was set free!

But her owners were furious that she had been delivered because they realised that her magical powers had been taken away and they would lose their source of income. The people rose up against Paul and Silas (with no sympathy for the girl who had been set free!), had them beaten, flogged and locked in stocks in a jail.

"About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (v. 25). What faith! What courage! How many of us complain to God about far less than what they suffered – yet they "counted it all joy" to suffer for their Lord and Saviour (James 1:2-4). Again, God brought about a miraculous escape from prison (cf. Acts 12:1-11). Even when Paul and Silas had the opportunity to flee from the prison, they used a God-given opportunity to lead the jailer and his family to the Lord. "**What must I do to be saved?**" he asked. They answered, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**" (v. 30-31).

There was no sense of panic or hurry. When the magistrates and police realised that Paul and Silas were now free, Paul asked for an apology because they, as Roman citizens, had been illegally punished and imprisoned without trial. After receiving the apology, they simply went to Lydia's home and only departed after they had seen and encouraged their Christian brothers and sisters there! God was in control from start to finish – all they needed to do was to trust Him!

QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do Christians today still need to keep God's Law?
2. How was the issue of Gentiles keeping the Jewish Law (especially circumcision) resolved?
3. What is the Godly approach to potentially divisive issues?
4. Why did the issue of whether or not Mark went with Paul and Barnabas, become so contentious? How might this have been avoided?
5. How could Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God after being beaten and locked in stocks in a prison? Could we?
6. Paul and Silas appear to have complete confidence that God would work out **His** purposes in and through them. They didn't fear, panic, worry, complain, etc. How can **we** have such confidence in God?

11

A faith that could not be extinguished!

17:1-15 After all that had already happened to them, you might have thought Paul and Silas would be ready to "retire"! No, they moved on to Thessalonica and for three Sabbaths Paul debated the Scriptures with the Jews, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer, die and rise from the dead, and saying "This is the Messiah – Jesus, Who I am proclaiming to you" (v. 3). Some people (Jews, devout Greeks and a number of leading women) believed and joined Paul and Silas, but others did not. The choice is always ours. Those who did not believe set the city in an uproar, and eventually Paul and Silas set off to Berea, where ... they did exactly the same! They went to the Jewish synagogue and shared about Jesus the Messiah. These Jews were more receptive, and searched the Scriptures every day to verify the things Paul was teaching. Many Jews, and quite a few Greek women and men of high standing, believed. But again, some Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up trouble, inciting the crowds against the apostles. Paul went on to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea for a while.

Choose today who you will serve

17:16-34 Athens was a very idolatrous city. Paul preached both to the Jews in the synagogue and also in the market-places. Some of the intellectuals (philosophers) debated with him, but it seems that they were more interested in debate and intellectual arguments than lives which could be changed by faith in Christ. Paul observed that they even had an idol “to an unknown god” (in case there was a god who they did not know, who might be offended by the fact that they had not made an idol of him!) So Paul said, “Let me tell you about the God Who you do not know: the God Who made the world and everything in it; Who is the Lord of Heaven and Earth; Who does not live in shrines made by human hands ...” (v. 22-25). He brought revelation as to Who God is, the need for repentance, and the coming judgement. Many people scoffed, some put off making a decision, but a few believed.

The decision is ours. Paul proclaimed the truth – people had to make the choice. If we are willing to repent and turn to Jesus in faith, we will be saved. If we scoff, refuse to believe, procrastinate and do nothing, then at the day of judgement we will be left without excuse. **“Choose today who you will serve ... As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!”** (Joshua 24:15).

A faith that never gives up

18:1-17 Paul never gave up! He moved on to Corinth, and every Sabbath he would go to the synagogue and try to convince both Jews and Greeks concerning Jesus the Messiah and Saviour (v. 4). Paul was occupied with proclaiming the Word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah is Jesus (v. 5).

How often does this happen here in our country today? How many Christians really share their faith – that Jesus, the Christ (Messiah) is the world’s Lord and Saviour?

When Paul was strongly opposed and reviled, he shook the dust off his feet (as Jesus said in Matthew 10:11-15), declaring that the people’s blood was now on their own heads and he was innocent of their blood, because they knew the truth but had rejected it (see Ezekiel 33:1-9, especially v. 9).

Paul, having faithfully preached the Gospel to the Jews wherever he went, and often having been opposed, now turns to the Gentiles (v. 6). However Paul still had the joy of staying with a man whose home was next door to the synagogue and who was a worshipper of God. He also saw Crispus, the official of the synagogue, and all his household, plus many other Corinthians, become believers and be baptised (v. 8)! Perhaps Paul was ready to quit Corinth, but God wasn’t finished yet!

Again, God spoke to Paul in a vision one night, encouraging him with the words, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are My people.” (v. 9-10). So Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months, teaching the Word of God (v. 11).

Once again the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, accusing Paul of persuading people to worship God in ways which were contrary to their Law, but the charge was dismissed. Paul was unharmed (see v. 10, “no one will lay a hand on you to harm you”) even though Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, was beaten.

18:18-23 Finally, Paul said farewell to the Corinthian believers and, with Priscilla and Aquila, sailed to Syria, Ephesus and Caesarea, and then went on to Jerusalem, Antioch, Galatia and Phrygia “strengthening all the disciples” (v. 23). So we see Paul’s ministry to both Jews and Gentiles – to the Jews, showing them from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Messiah; to the Gentiles he was an evangelist, sharing the Gospel with them. He preached salvation to those who were unsaved, and strengthened those who were. What a ministry!

18:24-28 Now Apollos comes on the scene. Apollos was a Jew who was both eloquent and well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He had been taught the ways of God and spoke enthusiastically and taught accurately the things of Jesus, but only up to the baptism of John. It appears that while he was enthusiastic and scholarly in what he knew, his knowledge was limited. So after Priscilla and Aquila heard him preach in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the things of God more accurately to him. Enthusiasm and eloquence are wonderful, but we need to know the whole truth, not just part of it. Apollos received what they taught him, and now, armed with a much greater revelation of Jesus, he “greatly helped those who, through grace, had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the [Old Testament] Scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus” (v. 27-28).

Believers who were not Spirit-filled

19:1-7 When Paul came to Ephesus he apparently discerned that something was unusual amongst the believers there. He asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they became believers. They replied that they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit! So Paul questioned them about their baptism and found that they had been baptised into John’s baptism – that is, a baptism of repentance (Matthew 3:1-12). Paul explained that John’s ministry was to point people to Jesus, the One Who was to come after him, and Jesus would baptise people with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11-12). Because these believers had not been baptised in the Name of the Lord Jesus, Paul baptised them again, laid his hands on them, they were baptised in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues and prophesied (v. 5-6). [Romans 6:1-14 speaks further about the baptism of Jesus, as distinct from the baptism of John].

Paul’s faithfulness to God, and God’s faithfulness to Paul

19:8-10 Paul never gave up! For three months he spoke out boldly in the synagogue, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. When some people stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of what he had to say, he simply moved to the lecture hall of Tyrannus and continued for two more years! “All the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the Word of the Lord” (v. 10).

Christians are called to share the Gospel and do what they can to convince people of the Truth. Some will believe, receive it, and be born again. Others will reject it, opposing both the message and the messenger. We can never force a person to believe or become a Christian, and that is not what we are called to do. We are called to faithfully share the Gospel; the choice is up to the individual whether they believe and are saved, or reject it and are lost. It is always encouraging when people receive the Truth, believe and are saved; but all we are called to do is to faithfully stand up for the Truth and share it with others (even if they turn against us). None of us have ever suffered anything like Paul suffered for his faith, his courage and boldness – but he saw great results too!

19:11-20 Because of Paul's obedience, in spite of the cost, God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Even Paul's handkerchiefs, when they touched sick people, brought healing and deliverance! Some Jewish exorcists, seeing the power of God to deliver people from demon-possession, tried to set people free from evil spirits by invoking the Name of "Jesus, Whom Paul proclaims"! But they had no authority because they had no relationship with the "Jesus, Whom Paul proclaims"! The evil spirits just dismissed them by saying "We know Jesus and we know Paul [and recognise their authority] but who are you?" Worse than that, the demon-possessed man turned on them and attacked them. If we are going to get involved in the ministry of deliverance and prayer against demonic powers, we had better make sure we are in a right relationship with Jesus and that we have His authority and anointing to do so.

"When this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck" – they saw the power of God confirming Paul's words, and the lack of power of Jewish exorcists – "and the Name of the Lord Jesus was praised" (v. 17). Many people became believers, confessing their sins of dabbling in witchcraft and the occult, burning their books of magic and other artifacts, and "so the Word of the Lord grew **mightily** and **prevailed**"! That's what we want to see!

Revival or riots? Both!

19:23-41 As usual, the enemy was not pleased! Because people were turning from idolatry to Christ, the silversmiths who made their living by selling idols were not happy. They feared that the temple of their "great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty which brought all Asia and the world to worship her." This so-called "great goddess" could not defend her own position, because she had no power, and if people turned to Jesus she would lose her "power" and her glory. So be it!

A riot broke out, there was confusion and there was a danger of violence, which, fortunately, was defused by the Town Clerk who appealed for calm.

QUESTIONS

1. What is some of the evidence that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament?

2. Paul used the Old Testament to bring revelation concerning Who Jesus is (the Messiah) to the Jews in the synagogues. What approach did he use when speaking to the Gentiles (e.g., in Athens)?
3. What is the most important decision each of us has to make in life?
4. How did God encourage Paul? (18:9-10)
5. Why was it necessary for Priscilla and Aquila to speak to Apollos? What was the result?
6. What was “John’s baptism”? (19:3). Why was it incomplete? What else did the believers in Ephesus need to know and experience?
7. What was the problem with the Jewish exorcists? What were the ultimate results of their efforts to exorcise a demon-possessed man?

12

Towards Jerusalem

20:1-12 Paul now felt it better to leave Ephesus, so he said farewell to the disciples there and left for Macedonia. Later, in Troas, on the first day of the week, he met with some believers to break bread. Because he was planning to leave again the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. A young man who had been listening to him, fell asleep (fell asleep during one of Paul’s sermons?!) and fell out the window, three stories to the ground. He was picked up, dead, but when Paul took him up in his arms, he came back to life again! Paul went back upstairs again, broke bread and then continue to speak until dawn – probably to a very alert audience! “Meanwhile, they took the boy away alive and were not a little comforted”! (v. 12)

20:13-38 Paul continued on his journey towards Jerusalem, hoping to arrive there for the day of Pentecost. From Miletus he sent a message to the elders in Ephesus, asking them to meet with him. When they arrived he shared his heart with them, knowing that this would be the last time he saw them. His message (v. 18-38) shows his tremendous love for the Church, its leaders and people; the price he had paid for the Gospel to be shared and for believers to be discipled. “The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus – to testify to the Good News of God’s grace” (v. 23-24). What an amazing statement! Knowing that his life was in danger, the only thing that mattered was that he finished the work that God had given him to do. Could we say that? His final words to them were “It is more blessed to give than to receive” – and Paul gave all that he had, to receive what the world could never take from him, the crown of life!

When he finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping; they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially that they would not see him again in this world. And so Paul continue on ... to Jerusalem, for Pentecost.

Warnings!

21:1-14 Paul continued his journey and on the way he was warned about going to Jerusalem (v. 4). He came to the home of Philip the evangelist (one of the seven original deacons in the church – Acts 6:5) who had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (v. 9). While there, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea and, in a dramatic way, prophesied how Paul would be taken captive: “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’.” The people therefore begged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem, but Paul had previously been told by the Lord what would happen to him (20:22-25; 21:4). Knowing the will of God, with great bravery and determination he said, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am not only ready to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the Name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13). When he would not be persuaded against going to Jerusalem, and realising this was God’s will for him, the people ceased trying to change his mind and said, “May the will of the Lord be done”. It is easy to reason in the natural and to try to persuade people to take the easy option, but if this is not God’s will, then we must obey God rather than human reasoning; and this was what Paul was determined to do. And so he proceeded on his journey ... to Jerusalem.

Jewish Christians and the Law of Moses

21:17-26 Once again the issue of Jewish Christians keeping the Mosaic law came up. Should Jewish believers still follow Mosaic customs, or are they now free to follow the teachings of Christ and forsake those parts of the law (especially the customs and traditions of the Jews) which are no longer applicable and which Gentile Christians did not need to follow?

The same sort of issue arises when people of different cultures today become Christians – which parts of their culture do they need to forsake because they are ungodly, and which parts can be retained because they are not offensive to God? The answer is not always easy! Paul, who knew that he was no longer under the Jewish law because of the freedom he had in Christ, was nevertheless prepared to go along with Jewish customs (which he didn’t have to keep), in order not to offend other Jewish believers. In matters of idolatry and immorality there was no question as to what God required (v. 25) but some other issues are arbitrary – we might not have to observe the customs, but we may choose to do so out of respect for others.

21:27-40 Paul chose to be all things to all men, that by all means he might win some. This does not mean that he compromised his faith – far from it. But in unimportant issues he was prepared to follow Jewish customs or Gentile customs in order to share the Gospel in every way possible. Nevertheless, confusion reigned again as some Jews opposed him and tried to kill him. He was falsely accused; even his accusers weren’t sure what the issue really was, and the tribune who arrested him and put him in chains thought he was someone else! Paul’s wisdom is again seen as he spoke to the tribune in Greek (the tribune thought he was

an Egyptian) and to the Jews in Hebrew – again being “all things to all men” in order that he might serve the Lord.

22:1-30 Paul then shared his testimony in Hebrew. He first of all associated himself with the Jewish people and what they believed, as he shared his Jewish upbringing (v. 3-5). He shared how he was a strict Jew, even to the point of persecuting the early Church. Then he shared his conversion and how God had called him to share the Gospel with the Gentiles. At this the Jews became very angry, and the tribune had Paul bound and was going to give him a flogging when Paul used his Roman citizenship to prevent him being whipped without a trial. The tribune became very interested in why the Jews wanted to get rid of Paul and so he asked him, the next day, to meet with the chief priests and all the council.

23:1-5 As Paul began to speak, Ananias, the High Priest, ordered him to be struck on the mouth. Paul reacted somewhat angrily, not knowing that he was speaking to the High Priest, but when he realised who he was, he acknowledged that he should not speak evil against a ruler of God's people.

23:6-11 Paul realised that part of the crowd listening to him were Sadducees (who did not believe in angels, or the spirit, or the resurrection from the dead) and part were Pharisees, who did. So he spoke about his great hope of the resurrection from the dead! This started an argument between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, from which Paul was whisked away by the tribune so that he would not be torn in pieces over the controversy. That night, the Lord spoke to Paul saying, “Take courage, for as you have testified about Me at Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness to Me at Rome” (v. 11. See also 19:21).

Plans to kill Paul

23:12-35 Meanwhile, some Jews made an oath that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul (a foolish oath because they did not succeed in killing him!) However Paul's nephew heard of their plot to ambush him and told the tribune. The tribune organised a small army (200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen) to take Paul by night to Caesarea, to be tried before Felix, the Governor. Sadly, it appears that the tribune never really heard why Paul had caused so much controversy, or really appreciated, let alone received, Paul's message.

24:1-27 Some days later, Ananias the High Priest and some other Jews came to Caesarea and laid their case against Paul, before Felix. Paul refuted their arguments, saying that he had not spoken against the Jewish law, but only that he was a follower of “the Way” (an early term for being a follower of Jesus, the Way) and that he believed in the resurrection of the dead. Felix had some knowledge about the Way (v. 22) so he dismissed the crowd and said he would make a decision later.

Some days later, Felix and his wife (who was Jewish) sent for Paul and heard him speak about his faith in Christ, but again Felix dismissed him, without making a decision. He hoped that Paul would bribe him, and spoke to Paul often about his faith, but after two years Felix was succeeded by Festus, and Felix failed to make any decision, except to leave Paul in prison in order to please the Jews.

QUESTIONS

1. Sometimes Paul appeared to be a hard man. In his final message to the Ephesian elders, what indicates Paul's great pastoral heart and love for the Church? (20:18-38)
2. What was one of Paul's supreme goals towards the end of his life? (20:24). What were some other goals in his life? (Philippians 3:10)
3. Why did Paul not listen to the warnings he was given? (20:4, 10-14). What does this tell us about human reasoning and the will of God?
4. When people of different cultures come to Christ, which parts of their culture must they forsake and which parts can they keep? When you came to Christ, which parts of your culture (lifestyle) had to change?
5. When does being "all things to all men" become compromise, and when is it the right thing to do?
6. What does 23:1-5 teach us about our attitude to people in authority, even if they are wrong in some things and are not believers?

13

Incredible faith, boldness and testimony

25:1-27 The Jews in Jerusalem tried to persuade Festus to have Paul brought back to Jerusalem, planning again to kill him on the way. But Festus refused, saying that he was going down to Caesarea and he would hear their case there.

In Caesarea, the Jews brought many serious charges against Paul, but they couldn't prove any of them. Paul denied any offence against the Jewish law, the Temple, or against Caesar (v. 8). Paul said he was not trying to escape death if he had done anything worthy of death. He appealed to Caesar – an appeal to which he had the right as a Roman citizen and one which would take him to Rome, where he longed to go. Festus agreed to his appeal.

But before he went to Rome, Festus introduced Paul to king Agrippa and his wife Bernice, because Festus was at a loss as to what charges he should bring against Paul when he sent him to Rome. Paul welcomed the opportunity to share his testimony with Agrippa, which he did at some length (26:2-29).

The essence of the Gospel

26:18-20 These verses sum up, perhaps better than any others, Paul's total dedication to the call of God on his life, no matter what it might cost: "Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem, and ... Judea and to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and perform deeds worthy of their repentance". This, in a nutshell, is the essence of the Gospel – of what it means to be a Christian: **repent, turn to God, and live a life which is worthy of your repentance!**

Agrippa said to Paul “In a short time do you think you can make me a Christian?” To which Paul replied, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become like I am – except for these chains!” (v. 28-29).

But to no avail – Festus, Agrippa and Bernice left without making a decision (though, in fact, their decision was to do nothing). Paul had appealed to Caesar; to Caesar he would go.

Miracles on the journey to Rome

27:1-44 So Paul, under guard, set sail for Italy. Paul sensed in his spirit that “the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives”, but the centurion listened to the captain and the owner of the ship, not to Paul. The ship was struck by a storm and was in danger of sinking. This time Paul prophesied that there would be no loss of life, but only of the ship, because an angel had spoken to him the night before and said, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. God has granted you all who sail with you”. “So take heart ... for **I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told**”, Paul said. Finally, they listened to Paul, and, of course, it all worked out exactly as Paul had foretold by the Spirit! When the boat ran aground, the soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners because they would escape, but the centurion, wanting to spare Paul’s life, stopped them. “And so it was that all escaped to land”, just as God had revealed to Paul.

28:1-31 They had landed on the island of Malta, and even there the miracles continued! While putting some sticks on a fire they had built, a snake came out of the sticks and fasted itself on Paul’s hand. On seeing this, the natives said, “This man is probably a murderer, and since he has escaped from death at sea, justice has not allowed him to live”. But Paul shook the snake into the fire and when his hand did not swell up, nor did he die, the natives changed their minds and decided he must be a god!

The father of Publius, the chief of the island, lay sick with a fever and dysentery, but when Paul visited him, laid hands on him and prayed, he was healed. On hearing this, the rest of the people on the island who were sick came and were also healed!

When they finally came to Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with only a soldier to guard him. Paul never gave up! After three days he gathered the leaders of the Jews together and shared what had happened to him. They had heard of no charges against him, though they knew that “the Way” was spoken against everywhere. Large numbers gathered to hear Paul’s testimony and he “expounded the matter to them from morning to evening, testifying to the Kingdom of God, and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets” (v. 23). Some believed, while others did not. Paul then finished with one prophetic statement, “The Holy Spirit was right when He said to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet, ‘Go to this people and say, ‘You shall indeed hear but never understand; you shall see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull and their ears are heavy of hearing, and they have closed their eyes, lest they should perceive with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand in their heart, and turn for Me to heal them.’ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (v. 25-28). And so, “until the full number of the Gentiles has come

in” the Gospel has gone out into all the world, until that day when it shall return to Israel from whence it came, and so all Israel (Jew and Gentile) will be saved” (Romans 11:25-26).

The “Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles” ends with these words of testimony to Paul – the apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher; one who was faithful right to the end: “Paul welcomed all who came to him, preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered” (v.30-31). What a man of God!

Epilogue

Near the end of his life on earth, Paul wrote these words to Timothy:

“The time for my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith. From now on there is reserved for me [in Heaven] the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day [the day of Judgement], and not only to me, but also to all those who long for His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

As far as we know, Paul was tried for his faith in Rome and sentenced to death. He was beheaded in or near Rome, about 68 AD.

But “being dead, he still lives” – through his writings in the New Testament (the eternal Word of God); his remarkable testimony; his faith, and his example to believers of all ages, throughout history and throughout the world.

Truly this Book of Acts demonstrates the **“Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles”**.

**May God grant the Body of Christ today to continue to see these
“Acts of the Holy Spirit”!**

QUESTIONS

1. Why did some people want to kill Paul? (26:21). What had he done wrong? What did they think he had done wrong?
2. Paul must, at times, have felt fearful. What can we do to overcome our fears?
3. Paul used every opportunity to share his faith and preach the Gospel. What are some of the opportunities we are missing? What can and should we be doing about this?
4. What is the essence of the Gospel? (26:18, 20). Why was the Christian faith called “the Way”? (24:14)
5. Chapter 27 contrasts a man of the Spirit (Paul) with men of the flesh. How did God use the man of the Spirit to save everyone on board the ship?
6. Even under armed guard Paul still shared the Gospel. What was the “secret” of his incredible faith, boldness, and testimony?

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Summary and Conclusion

Acts of the Holy Spirit

“They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it” Mark 16:20

Before we leave the book of Acts there are a number of very important principles which we need to make sure are implemented in our own Christian lives, and the life of the Church as a whole, if we are to see a moving of the Holy Spirit like they experienced in the early Church. We live in a high-tech age (and there is nothing inherently wrong with that) but with all the “high-tech” we must not be “low-Spirit”! “High-tech meetings” are no substitute for prayer, holiness, waiting on God, commitment, discipleship, knowing and obeying God’s Word, and a real relationship with Jesus Christ. Some of the major keys to the success of the early Church are:

The Power of the Holy Spirit

Jesus said to His disciples: “You are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you, but stay in Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on High” (Luke 24:48-49). The disciples were not to leave Jerusalem on their mission of sharing the Gospel worldwide until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit, promised in Joel 2:28-29. Just before He ascended into Heaven, Jesus said: “You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It is **crucial** to the life and health of the Church that all Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit – not just some time in the past – but as a present reality, **now!** Ephesians 5:18 is written in the continuous tense: “Be [constantly, continuously] filled with the Holy Spirit”. There are a number of occasions in the book of Acts where people are baptised in the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit. This overcomes carnality, mere human wisdom, some methods and ways of thinking, and places us in a position where we are open to hear and fulfill the will of God for our lives. It is **so** easy to fall back into the ways of the world!

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The gifts of the Holy Spirit were very evident in the early Church: faith, miracles, prophecy, the gift of tongues, wisdom, healing, raising the dead, knowledge, discernment of spirits, the power to break demonic strongholds, and others (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). We need to pray and ask God for these gifts to follow the preaching of His Word. They testify to the reality and power of God’s Word, confirming it and verifying it to an often skeptical world. The supernatural and the miraculous (“God confirming His Word with signs following”) occur over and over again in the early Church.

Fearlessness, faith, and boldness

The early Christians demonstrated a remarkable fearlessness even in the face of persecution, imprisonment and death. They knew the Truth and proclaimed the Truth, whatever the cost. Being “politically correct” was not in their vocabulary. If the world didn’t like it, but God said, “Do it”, they did it anyway! They faced persecution, even martyrdom, glad that they had been obedient to the Lord “even unto death.”

Sharing the Gospel

Evangelism, at every opportunity, was at the heart of the early Church. Whether to crowds or to individuals, whether to people who were interested, carelessly indifferent, or outrightly antagonistic, they shared the Gospel. Many believed and were saved; some did nothing; others attacked them. But they still shared the Gospel anyway!

Practical ministry

Lest we think that the early Church was so “Heavenly minded that it was no earthly use”, we see the Christians ministered to the practical, physical needs of people as well – to the poor, to widows and orphans, to the sick, to the Christians in Judea during a famine, to the saving of the lives of all on board a boat which was sinking. Theirs was a Heavenly calling but with a profoundly practical ministry to the body and soul, as well as to the spirit!

As we seek God for revival in our nation, in our day and age, let us never forget that these things are written to be an example to us – today!

QUESTIONS

1. “High-tech meetings” are no substitute for what?
2. Is it reasonable for us to expect that similar things should happen in the Church today, as those which happened in the New Testament Church? Why or why not?
3. What are some of the major reasons why the Church today is not experiencing some of the acts of the Holy Spirit which we could be seeing?
4. Why is it possible to be filled with the Holy Spirit at one time and yet so easily fall back into the ways of the world? How can we prevent this from happening?
5. Should we still expect God to confirm His Word with signs following? Why or why not?
6. To what extent do you feel that the following Scriptures were applied in the lives of Peter, Stephen, Paul and Judas Iscariot: Luke 9:23; John 12:24; Mark 10:29-30. To what extent are we applying these verses to **our** lives today?

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