



St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church
Heliopolis, Egypt



**Commentary on
the Book of Acts**



*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One and Only God,
Amen.*

An exegetical study of the Holy Bible
"commentaries on the New Testament"

The Acts of the Apostles

*published by priests and servants of
St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church
Heliopolis, Egypt*

*Translated by George Ishack, Ottawa, Canada, 2024
All biblical quotations are taken from the New King James version of the Holy Bible*



*His Holiness Pope Tawadros II
118th Pope of Alexandria
and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark*

Introduction to the "Acts of the Apostles"

1. The author:

The author is St. Luke the Evangelist - he was too humble to mention his name often. Unlike other books of the Holy Bible, this one does not end with "Amen." The Synaxarion gives an account of the Church's subsequent history.

Having accompanied St. Paul throughout his evangelical trips, St. Luke gives an accurate account of what he had witnessed; his profession as a physician is reflected in his detailed narrative of miracles.

2. The time and place:

The earliest possible date for the "Acts" is around 62 A.D. during St. Paul's imprisonment in Rome. St. Luke authored it after the gospel attributed to him. It covered the thirty-year period from Christ's ascension up till St. Paul's first imprisonment in Rome.

3. Objectives:

- a- A clear record of the service of Sts. Paul and Peter.
- b- A guide for understanding circumstances surrounding the epistles.
- c- A record of early Christians' lifestyle, for us to follow.
- d- An account of the mighty Holy Spirit's work in fulfilling Christ's promises and in establishing the Church.
- e- An exposé of God's plan for Gentiles' acceptance into Christianity.
- f- Manifestation of the Son's Divinity, as indicated in Stephen's revelation and the miracles wrought in Christ's name.
- g- Clarifying the Son's Divinity and His salvational work.
- h- Manifestation of the Holy Spirit's Divinity as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira.
- g- Accentuating the work of the Holy Spirit, through His fruits and gifts, throughout the Church's life.

4. Sections:

a- Chapter 1:

The apostles in Jerusalem during the period from Ascension to Pentecost:

Choosing Matthias - Church worship.

b- Chapters 2 - 7:

Debut of evangelizing - up till Stephen's martyrdom:

Gifts of the Spirit - growth of the Church - the apostles' threat - death of Ananias and Sapphira - the apostles' imprisonment - choosing the seven deacons - Stephen's stoning.

c- Chapters 8 - 12:

Church's persecution in Jerusalem - birth of Gentiles' Churches:

Saul's conversion - conversion of Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch - founding of the Church in Caesarea - James' martyrdom - Peter's imprisonment - Herod's perdition.

d- Chapters 13 - 15:

Saul's and Barnabas' evangelizing prior to their disagreement:

The story of Elymas the sorcerer - the Church of Antioch - healing of the paralytic of Lystra - Paul's stoning - the first Council of Jerusalem.

e- Chapters 16 - 20:

St. Paul's missionary journeys in Europe:

Lydia and the Philippian jailer - Thessalonica - Athens - Corinth - Ephesus - Demetrius the Ephesian Diana worshipper and silversmith - raising Eutychus from the dead - bidding farewell to the elders of Ephesus.

f- Chapters 21 - 28:

Paul's trials:

Paul's journey to Jerusalem - his arrest and dispatch to Rome for trial - Paul's trials before Felix, Festus and Agrippa - Paul's shipwreck off the island of Malta, arrival to Rome, and evangelizing there for two years.

NOTE:

A map of St. Paul's missionary journeys is appended at the end of this write-up.



*"Interpretation of the holy Bible - the New Testament"
taken from the series: "Patristic expositions and meditations"*

An exegetical study of
the Acts of the Apostles

Chapter 1

Christ's ascension - Matthias is appointed

1. From Christ's resurrection up till His ascension - verses 1 - 8:

"The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:1 - 8)

Verse 1:

"Theophilus" is originally a Greek name meaning "love of God" or "friend of God." The ***"former account"*** refers to the gospel according to St. Luke.

St. Luke's gospel incorporates the Lord's important deeds and teachings concerning mankind's salvation. It should be noted that deeds are more difficult than words. Thus, our Lord's difficult deed was fulfillment of redemption. Luke's initial narrative addressed Christ's life on earth. In his Book of the Acts, Luke describes Christ's deeds, through His apostles, following His ascension.

Verse 2:

The Book of Acts resumes the Lord's deeds and teachings following His ascension, forty days after His holy resurrection, and after having instructed His disciples to evangelized.

Since teaching should be demonstrated and applied through deeds (verse 1) it is incumbent on us to ensure the Holy Spirit's calling to serve - through prayers and submission to the Church's guidance.

Thus, we see the link between the gospel and the "Acts:" the gospel presents the Lord's deeds and mission on earth, while the Acts narrate the continuation of His work through His disciples and apostles, through the Holy Spirit, following His ascension.

It should be noted that the Synaxarion - hence lives and deeds of the day's saints - is read in Church after the Acts, thus indicating that the word of God grows and multiplies in His holy Church.

The Acts also provides a link between the gospel and the epistles: the gospels present the life of Christ, the Acts narrate the apostles' evangelizing, and the epistles describe the application of those teachings throughout our lifestyle.

Verse 3:

Our Lord Christ proved His resurrection through His apparitions to His disciples and other believers; and by touching them, and eating, discussing and breaking bread with them (He broke bread with the Emmaus disciples in the same fashion He had broken bread at the Last Supper). Christ also wrought miracles such as the great catch of fish from Lake Tiberias. The disciples thus ascertained that He was indeed their Teacher, Jesus Christ, with Whom they had lived for more than three years on earth, and Who had spoken to them about the kingdom of heaven in His children's hearts, within the fold of the Church. The disciples had therefore received from Christ the various aspects associated with the Faith, the Church, and rites of worship. The disciples were/are responsible for leading Church services.

Verse 4:

During Christ's presence with them, most likely towards the end of the forty-day period, He instructed them to return to, and stay in, Jerusalem, since they had fled therefrom after the crucifixion. He also instructed them to await the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them, according to the Father's promise and prophets' prophecies; He had also mentioned this to them a number of times earlier.

Verse 5:

Christ informed them that they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit a few days hence - about ten days - when the Holy Spirit would descend upon them. This is a clear indication that the disciples were baptized ahead of all other believers.

Verse 6:

This meeting followed the one mentioned in verse 4 - it was the day of Christ's ascension. The disciples, akin to other Jews, thought that Christ's reign was terrestrial. When He died, they were disillusioned - but their hopes were revived after His resurrection. After His promise of the Holy Spirit's descent, ***"they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"***"

Verse 7:

As opposed to answering their question about their erroneous belief concerning His reign, Christ left this to the Holy Spirit Who, upon His descent, would guide them, through His power, to Christ's spiritual reign. Christ also instructed them not to ask about the timing of the second coming since, if it were too near they would be terrified, and if it were too far, they would be complacent. They had to be spiritually prepared to serve God.

Verse 8:

Christ assured them that the Holy Spirit's descent would entail significant power throughout their service and spiritual lives. Consequently, they bore witness for eight years in Jerusalem, up till the martyrdom of James the apostle at the hands of king Herod, followed by evangelizing in Judaea, and in Samaria (the southern and central parts of the Jewish region respectively).

It would seem that, during His ministry on earth, Christ had forbidden them from evangelizing in those regions, due to their weakness when confronted by Jewish obstinate resistance. Subsequently, He told them to evangelize throughout the whole world.

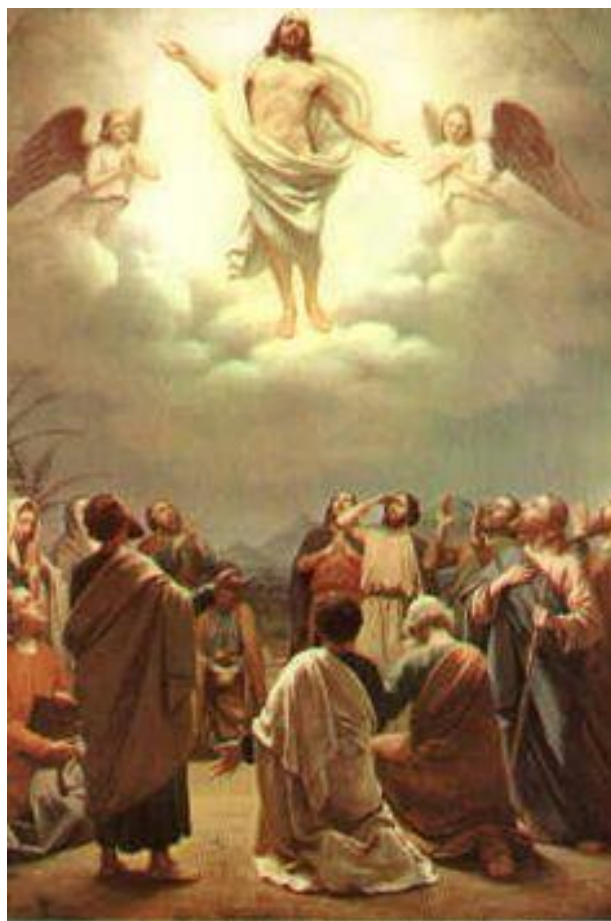
+ *Having been anointed with the holy chrism, do your deeds and words, under all circumstances, reflect the work of the Holy Spirit indwelling you??*

Consistently seek God's support, regardless of prevailing adverse circumstances - the Holy Spirit will sustain you.

2. Christ's ascension - the disciples' return to the upper room - verses 9 - 14:

"Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why

do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey. And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers." (Acts 1:9 - 14)



Christ's ascension

Verse 9:

The Lord ascended in the flesh, in broad daylight, before the disciples' eyes - thus reassuring them of His ascension. He disappeared since "**a cloud received Him out of their sight.**" This was further confirmation that He had ascended into heaven - and that He was not simply "lost" - thus proclaiming that His kingdom is heavenly, and that He went to prepare for us a place, so that we may raise our hearts, and prepare ourselves, daily, for heaven.

On several occasions, the "cloud" referred to Divine presence - hence, the cloud when Moses received the commandments, the cloud which covered the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, the cloud when God spoke to people, the cloud at Christ's transfiguration....

Verse 10:

The disciples continued to look towards heaven, with mixed feelings: they were either sad at being separated from Him, or they anticipated His imminent return in glory. ***And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel...*** Their white apparel reflected heaven's purity, their sudden appearance confirmed that they were indeed angels not humans, and they appeared as two men so as not to scare the disciples.

Verse 11:

The angels seemed to rebuke the disciples, since their eyes and hearts continued to consider Christ in His earthly outlook as they had been used to seeing Him during His ministry. As yet they had not transcended to the level of "faith" as opposed to "physical perception." Christ had instructed them to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit's descent upon them, whereupon Christ would indwell them and work more substantively through the Holy Spirit.

The angels told the disciples that Christ would return on Judgment Day; it is thus incumbent on us to be prepared for His coming, and to rejoice at His return on that Day.

Verse 12:

Following Christ's ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem. The distance from Mount Olivet to Jerusalem is generally agreed to be about 2000 paces, or ***"a Sabbath's day journey."*** That was the distance which Jewish teachers permitted on a Sabbath, to allow a worshipper to walk from his tent to the tabernacle, without violating the Sabbath law.

Verses 13 & 14:

The eleven disciples steadfastly continued their prayers, in spiritual unity, in the upper room of St. Mark's house. This is the fourth time a list is given of the disciples' names - minus that of Judas (having hung himself earlier). The women accompanying the disciples were those who had followed Christ, and whose names were mentioned in the gospels - hence, St. Mary, Christ's mother, who had lived in St. John's care since the crucifixion, plus Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome Zebedee's wife and others.

"His brothers" - those were Christ's cousins who had believed on Him and who had followed Him along with the disciples.

"With one accord" - Being fearful of the Jews, they needed God's support and the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ had promised.

+ It would indeed be very pleasing to God if we prayed with one mind and one spirit in our homes and churches - then, the Lord will help His Church and His people.

Expunge from your heart all evil against others - not only when presenting yourself for communion during Divine liturgy, but also while praying in your chamber; then you can be of one mind with other believers - members of Christ's body.

Strive to be empathetic towards those around you, and to pray for God's help to all.

3. Matthias is elected - verses 15 - 26:

"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, "Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry." (Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out. And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem; so that field is called in their own language, Akel Dama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the book of Psalms: 'Let his dwelling place be desolate, And let no one live in it'; and, 'Let another take his office.' "Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles." (Acts 1:15 - 26)

Verse 15:

The number of "**disciples**" had increased to 120 - they were all believers, followers of Christ, some of whom were most likely among the 70 apostles. This does not mean that those were the sole believers - rather they were the closest to Christ's disciples, apostles, and holy mother. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus could have been among them.

They were praying, as they awaited the Holy Spirit's descent upon them. Likely, being the eldest and most enthusiastic, Peter stood up and spoke to them.

Verses 16 & 17:

Peter told them, "**Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David [Psalm 41:9, "Even My own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against Me"] concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus...**" Judas was among the twelve, being groomed to evangelize over the entire world.

Verses 18 & 19:

Since Luke was addressing Greeks who had no knowledge of the Jerusalem events, he added a piece of information, namely, the price for which Judas sold Christ was the same price the priests paid to buy the field - thus, he is considered to have been the purchaser.

"The wages of iniquity" - This refers to the price paid for the innocent, oppressed, Christ.

St. Luke furthermore gives details of Judas' suicide: **"....falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out."** Thus, he died a terrible death, reflecting the enormity of his sin.

It may be speculated that **"all his entrails gushed out"** is analogous to the full revelation of the sins he had harboured in his heart, while feigning to be a follower of Christ.

This story was well-known to all Jerusalem's Jews, which is a confirmation that those words were Luke's not Peter's - since Peter did not need to reiterate well-known information.

"Their own language" - This refers to the language prevailing among the Jews at that time - likely Hebrew or Aramaic.

"Field of Blood" - This refers to the fact that it was the price of Christ's blood.

Verse 20:

The fate of Judas the traitor seems to have been foretold by David in Psalms 69 and 109, hence: **"Let their dwelling place be desolate; let no one live in their tents"** (Psalm 69:25) also, **"Let his days be few, and let another take his office."** (Psalm 109:8)

The Church decries Judas' treachery during Passover Week by repeating the words **"Let their dwelling place be desolate"** and by having a reversed procession (the procession proceeds clockwise as opposed to the normal counter-clockwise) on Covenant Thursday.

Verses 21 & 22:

Peter found it necessary to choose Judas' replacement from those closest to Christ - hence, those who were discipled at His hands during His ministry on earth.

"Went in and out..." - This means that they were close to Christ and had been discipled at His hands.

"The baptism of John..." - This refers to those who had witnessed Christ's ministry on earth, from His baptism at John's hands, up till His ascension.

"...one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."

Proclaiming Christ's redemption on the Cross, and its manifestation through the power of His resurrection, was the underpinning for evangelizing. Therefore, a distinguishing feature of an apostle was his having seen Christ and witnessed His resurrection. Christ appeared to St. Paul and proclaimed His resurrection to him.

Verse 23:

The disciples **"proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias** [the latter means "gift of God.]"

Those two were righteous, distinguished, followers of Christ. Apparently the disciples had difficulty choosing one over the other.

Verses 24 & 25:

The disciples prayed to the omniscient God, entreating Him to choose Judas' replacement from the two they had proposed.

"Ministry and apostleship" - This is the void which Judas had created.

"To his own place" - This refers to Hades, Judas' destination.

Verse 26:

They cast lots, and God chose Matthias to evangelize in Christ's name.

+ Let us seek God's guidance consistently, prior to any important project, through sincere prayers and supplications. God alone knows what is best for us, and what everyone's heart harbours - He will protect and guide us to the best path, even though it may not agree with our expectations.



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Chapter 2

***Descent of the Holy Spirit - birth and life of the early
Church***

1. Descent of the Holy Spirit - verses 1 - 13:

"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?" Others mocking said, "They are full of new wine." (Acts 2:1 - 13)

Verse 1:

Pentecost was one of three major Jewish feasts, the others being the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles. In those feasts all males were required to be present in Jerusalem at the temple. Pentecost, fifty days after the second day of Passover, was labelled the "Festival of Weeks" or "Festival of Reaping." It was always on a Sunday, during which each Jew offered his harvest's firstfruits. The one-hundred-and-twenty assembled in the upper room were praying, on that day, with one accord.



Descent of the Holy Spirit

Verse 2:

"...suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting..."

The sound came **"from heaven"** - unlike the description given in John 3:8, **"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from...."** That sound alerted all present to what was happening in the upper room.

Verse 3:

"Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them..." - This refers to what God would grant them in terms of fiery tongues throughout their ministry, since fire symbolizes purification and power.

Verse 4:

When the tongues of fire had settled on each one, they were all filled with the work of the Holy Spirit, and they spoke with languages they had not known previously, according to the Divine promise: **"And these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues...."** (Mark 16:17)

Thus, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and founding of the Church, were manifested through three miracles: the sound of the wind, the tongues of fire, and speaking different languages.

Verse 5:

Devout Jews from various parts of the world were present in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

Verses 6 - 8:

"This sound" - This refers to the sound of the wind. The news had spread and a large multitude had assembled around the house.

It would seem that the disciples had mixed with the crowds, and each one was speaking in a language different from what the Jerusalemite Jews knew. Thus, crowds gathered around them, and expressed amazement at those uneducated Galileans who were speaking in, and had suddenly mastered, languages quite unfamiliar to them.

Verses 9 - 11:

St. Luke accentuated the miracle's greatness by listing the names of all the regions from whence various groups of the multitude had originated, each of which had a specific language. Regions from Asia, Europe and Africa were mentioned.

Hence, Parthians, Medes and Elamites originated in a region close to Iran. Mesopotamia is a region in Iraq. Judea was the southern region of the Jewish realm from whence came most of the multitude - their dialect differed from Galilean. Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia were regions close to today's Turkey. Egypt is today's Egypt - in those days, Coptic was the spoken language. Libya is today's Libya, and Cyrene was a city therein. Visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, included Jews living away from Judea, or Gentile converts to Judaism - the latter were labelled "proselytes." Cretans were dwellers of Crete, and Arabs were those living in the Arabian peninsula.

"The wonderful works of God..." - Those on whom the Holy Spirit descended spoke about Christ, and His redemption, resurrection and salvation, to the whole world.

Verse 12:

The phenomenon of different languages amazed the audience - they wondered whether it was a Divine miracle, or due to some other cause??

Verse 13:

At this point, the original Jews who did not speak those foreign languages, started mocking the disciples, and saying, **"They are full of new wine."**

+ Neither belittle the words or deeds of others, nor hasten to judge them. Seek the good elements and, if you found yourself in error, do apologize. Your heart would thus welcome all, you will maintain your inner peace, and you will have developed your discerning qualities, painlessly.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE:

It is worth noting that, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, the disciples spoke in Hebrew, but **“every man heard them speak in his own language,”** and *“each person received the one proclamation in his own dialect...comprehending the meaning of what was said by words familiar to him.”* Thus, the Holy Spirit “translated” Saint Peter’s words in the hearts of each listener into his own respective language. St. Gregory of Nyssa exclaimed, *“we must realize that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our own words as we have learned from the narration of Acts.”*

2. The sermon of Peter the Apostle - verses 14 - 36:

“But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the Lord Shall be saved.’ “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know-- Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. For David says concerning Him: ‘I foresaw the Lord always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.’ “Men and brethren, let me

speaking freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." ' "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:14 - 36)

Verses 14 & 15:

Behold Peter, completely transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit - from fear to courage! He stood with the eleven, demanding the attention of his mixed audience: Jews and foreigners alike.

Peter spoke in Aramaic, the language in which Jews were proficient. He explained that the disciples and other believers could not have possibly been drunk, since no Jew, however wicked he may be, could consume alcohol before the third hour, which is the first hour of prayer for Jews (see Isaiah 5:7).

Verse 16:

Peter pointed out that such an incident constituted a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (see Joel 2:28 - 32).

Verse 17:

"I will pour out My Spirit" - This means that the Holy Spirit's gifts will be poured abundantly.

"All flesh" - This encompasses all believers - Jews and Gentiles.

"Shall prophesy" - They will speak of Christ's redemption and kingdom, and preparation for His kingdom.

"Visions" - This refers to spiritual portrayals that a person would see while fully awake.

Thus, in the last days, at the Messiah's second coming, the Holy Spirit will be poured on mankind, young and old - such as Sts. Stephen and Paul, or St. Joseph.

Verse 18:

"Menservants and....maidservants" - This is in reference to the lowest social levels - whether poor, illiterate, or in servitude.

The Holy Spirit descends on all believers, regardless of their social status. Prophecy, as proof of His descent, is not limited to foretelling the future, rather, its wider intent is teaching and preaching about forthcoming events, namely, the kingdom of heaven.

Verses 19 & 20:

"Blood" - This refers to multiple loss of lives, as was the case during the age of persecutions.

"Fire" - Huge fires, as was the case when Nero burned Rome and blamed the Christians.

"Vapour of smoke" - This is the result of the fires.

"The sun shall be turned into darkness..." - A sure sign of the Lord's coming is when the sun loses its light completely.

"And the moon into blood" - This frightful change of the moon's colour will also precede the Lord's second coming.

Some of these signs have occurred, and continue to occur, partially, until completion at the Lord's coming.

One could speculate that those signs may be reflected in the spiritual sense - hence, heresies challenging Christ's Divinity - the Sun of righteousness - thus distorting the Church's image, the moon, through the smokescreen of heresies.

The work of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the beautiful promises given in Acts 17:18, rather, His work also includes warnings; hence, natural perturbations, trials and persecutions, leading people to repentance - such as Jerusalem's destruction in 70 A.D. Those disturbances would be a prelude to more significant ones, materializing prior to the Lord's coming.

Verse 21:

God promised salvation to all repentants, believers on Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike, with no racial discrimination. They would acquire the kingdom of heaven and be spared all the earlier warnings.

Clearly, this verse builds on, and is an integral part of, previous verses; it cannot and must not be considered in isolation, as followers of the "universality of salvation" principle, claim. They believe that salvation is assured for all who call on the name of God, bypassing belief on Christ, or life within the Church's fold. Thus, they bypass all biblical verses calling for baptism, communion and other spiritual rites such as fasting and prayer.

Verses 22 - 24:

"Whom God raised up..." - This refers to Divinity being united with Christ's humanity. Christ, in the weak, human, form perceived by all, needed power to raise Him - hence, Divine power united with His humanity. This confirms/confirmed the inseparability of Christ from the Old Testament God, Whom the Jews knew - He is the One Who raised Him, since He and the Father are One. That was to avoid the Jews' falling prey to the heresy of two gods: one for each of the Old and New Testaments.

Peter clarified to them that many pieces of evidence existed, drawn from Christ's life, emphasizing that God wrought miracles among them, through Christ's hand. Nevertheless, they had Him arrested and delivered to the Romans to be crucified.

In fact, Christ's arrest and crucifixion constituted a fulfillment of God's will and plan, for mankind's redemption, through Christ's death on the Cross.

Although it was Pilate who had issued the order for Christ's crucifixion, it was due to the Jews' incitement and insistence. However, God raised Him from the dead, and Christ triumphed over all the preceding suffering - since He was more powerful than death, and it was impossible for death to subjugate Him. That was the first time the disciples preached Christ's resurrection. Peter was transformed from the weakness of denial, fifty days earlier, to the courage of proclamation and preaching through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 25 - 28:

"He is at my right hand..." - This refers to Christ's power and confidence. He had no fear of death, since He was able to rise again.

"....my heart rejoiced....will rest in hope...." - This emphasizes that joy never left Christ during His Passion, since His hope was directed towards His resurrection.

".... You will not leave my soul in Hades..." - Hades is the "waiting place" for evil-doers.

"...Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption...." - It is impossible for the body of the all-holy Christ to decay like all the other buried human bodies.

".... the ways of life..." - This is the path from death to resurrection, relying on the power of Divinity united with His humanity.

".... You will make me full of joy in Your presence." - This is the joy of mankind's resurrection through His resurrection, then His ascension to glory; through Him, believers are enabled to enter the heavenly glories due to His redemption.

St. Peter reiterated David's prophecy (Psalm 16) which David had meant to indicate what Christ would say in His tomb, with His Divinity united with His humanity - death would not perturb Him, since Divinity supported humanity, and resurrection would reinstate His glory and joy for having fulfilled salvation.

Verse 29:

"...the patriarch David...." - This is because his seed included all the fathers up till Christ's birth. Peter emphasized the ease with which David's death can be proved, given the presence of his tomb in Jerusalem.

Verse 30:

"...according to the flesh..." - This refers to Christ's humanity. Of course, He had a Divine nature united with His humanity. This confirms that what David had said was not about himself - rather, it was about Christ; that was when he learned from Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 7:12 & 16), and what was declared in Psalm 89:3 & 35 - 37, namely, Christ would be born of his seed according to the flesh - hence, Christ was born of David's seed.

Verses 31 & 32:

This reiterates what David said in Psalm 16 concerning Christ's resurrection, the triumph over hades of His spirit united with His Divinity, and the preservation of His body, united with His Divinity, from decay, until the return of His spirit to resurrect His body as the apostles testified.

Verse 33:

Christ was publicly glorified - and He ascended; He sent the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, Whom He had promised the disciples, on that day, in the miraculous form of tongues of fire, the sound of wind and speaking in different languages.

Verses 34 & 35:

All those sayings, attributed to David, do not apply to David himself, rather to Christ; hence, David did not ascend, rather, he relayed, through his prophecy, the discussion between Father and Son, which confirms equality between them in essence and glory. This is because He said **"Sit at My right hand,"** which means that, after fulfilling redemption, Christ would return to His glory - which we believe is equal to the Father's.

Verses 35 & 36:

This is the fulfillment of redemption's goal - namely, binding Satan in the lake of brimstone and fire (1 Corinthians 15:24 - 28); in this way, Christ's enemies - Satan - and death, are subjugated forever beneath His feet. Everyone must know and believe that our Lord Christ is the Lord and Saviour.

+ *The Holy Spirit, Who transformed Peter from weakness to power and witnessing for Christ, is capable of raising you from your weakness, regardless of your sins, to lead a pure lifestyle. Submit to Him through repentance, seeking His help, and partaking of the holy communion - this will strengthen all your steps.*

3. Belief and baptism of the multitude - verses 37 - 41:

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." (Acts 2:37 - 41)

Verse 37:

Peter's audience was significantly affected by his sermon, and they asked for guidance as to what they should do. They declared their repentance and their readiness to follow the Spirit's instructions given through the apostles.

Verse 38:

Peter responded by instructing them to repent, change their ways, believe on Christ the sole Saviour, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and acknowledge the sacrament of baptism - then, their sins would be forgiven and the Holy Spirit would indwell them.

It should be noted that baptism is a prerequisite for acceptance into Christianity; baptism leads to forgiveness of sins and renewal of man's nature.

Verse 39:

"...all who are afar off..." - this refers to the Gentiles - this is a proclamation that salvation is offered to both Jews and Gentiles.

"...as many as the Lord our God will call." - This would be through evangelists and servants. St. Peter declared that the promise of eternal life is offered to all who repent, believe and are baptized; this offer is available to Jews and their children, who could also be baptized. That is why the Church baptizes children.

Verse 40:

St. Peter must have delivered another sermon not given in this chapter; hence, ***"with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."***

Verse 41:

They accepted Peter's instructions joyfully. They repented, believed and were baptized. Thus, the Church was born on Pentecost, and the grain of wheat (Christ), that died and resurrected, bore much fruit - hence, three thousand souls.

+ *As soon as your heart becomes affected by the words of God, transform them into repentance and a godly lifestyle - hence, selfless love towards those around you, and submission to the fathers and to those providing godly counselling. You will then know how to lead a pure and righteous life.*

4. Early Church life - verses 42 - 47:

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42 - 47)

Verse 42:

This verse shows the new converts' steadfastness in the Lord; they assiduously maintained and practised four distinguishing tenets:

- a- heeding the apostles' teachings,
- b- leading a life of fellowship - hence, having a "love feast" which expresses unity,
- c- breaking bread - hence, communing from the body and blood of the Lord, and
- d- communal worship - hence, celebrating the Divine liturgy.

Verse 43:

The fear of God spread within believers' souls. In turn, this distanced them from sin, and led them through a pure lifestyle. Simultaneously, the power and enthusiasm of the Church community scared the Jews and pagans. God also supported them with miracles, to edify their faith, and to draw many others to Christ.

Verse 44:

Believers used to assemble with love and unity of heart. In turn, this led them not only to pray together, but also to consider that whatever they owned belonged to, and should be given to, the Church and, thus, should be distributed to all - since they were all members of the body of Christ.

Verse 45:

Many believers sold their belongings, and divided the proceeds according to everyone's needs. That was especially pertinent, given that many of the Jews who had resided in Jerusalem, to celebrate Pentecost, had come from various parts of the world with no means for prolonged sustenance.

Verse 46:

Worship in the temple was in Solomon's porch beside the gate called "Beautiful." That was the old part of the temple, since Solomon's days, which had not suffered destruction during captivity. Unity of spirit was maintained. Furthermore, they prayed and celebrated the Eucharist in their homes, rejoicing in the Lord in Whom they had believed and Who had granted them simplicity of heart.

Verse 47:

Believers were characterized by joyful thanksgiving and praise to God. The Jews loved them for their purity and compassion for the poor. This, in turn, helped in the Holy Spirit's attracting many to the Faith - daily.

+ *Do you have a sense of belonging to the Church, alongside the rest of believers? Are you a regular attendee of Divine liturgies and spiritual meetings?*

Do you seek to satisfy others' needs, and do you feel that all your belongings are God's and the Church's?

If you have answered "yes" to the above, then God will keep your life pure, and will grant you grace in the eyes of others.



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Chapter 3

Paralytic of the temple's gate "Beautiful"

1. The miracle - verses 1 - 10:

"Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, "Look at us." So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them--walking, leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God. Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." (Acts 3:1 - 10)

Verse 1:

Jewish law requires Jews to pray thrice a day: the morning prayer ("Shacharit" introduced by Abraham - hence the third hour or about 9 a.m.), the afternoon prayer ("Mincha" introduced by Isaac - hence the sixth hour or about 12 noon) and the evening prayer ("Maariv" introduced by Jacob - hence the ninth hour or about 3 p.m.) The early Church used to pray at the same prescribed times in Solomon's porch, in the temple, but (naturally) without participating in the sacrifices. At around the fourth century the Church's seven canonical Hours were instituted.

Peter and John were together since the beginning: when Christ called them, at the transfiguration, at the raising of Jairus' daughter, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and by Lake Tiberias.

The ninth hour is also the hour when Christ gave up His spirit and fulfilled our redemption.

Verse 2:

According to Acts 4:22, the lame man was over forty years old when this miracle was performed. He had been **"lame from his mother's womb....,"** he was routinely carried, and **"laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple."** The prevailing custom for beggars was to ask alms of worshippers at the entrance of places of worship.

No further description of this Beautiful gate is given in the Biblical narrative. Josephus says that the temple had "nine gates which were covered with gold and silver; but there was one gate which was without the temple, and was of Corinthian brass and greatly excelled those which were only covered with gold or silver. The other gates were of the same size, but the Corinthian gate which opened on the east, over against the gate of the holy house itself, was much larger. This last most likely was the gate which is called Beautiful, because it evidently was the most costly."

Verse 3:

The lame man, who had no prior knowledge of Peter and John, asked them for alms - as he asked all other worshippers entering the temple. He had no expectation of being cured.

Verses 4 & 5:

Peter told the man, **"Look at us."** So the man **"gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them."**

Verse 6:

Peter and John had no money to offer him. Rather than granting His children money, Christ gave them priceless spiritual gifts. Thus, Peter told the man, **"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk."**

It should be noted that, whereas Christ performed miracles through His direct command, Peter performed the miracle in the name of Christ.

+ *Not having money does not mean that you cannot give. St. John Chrysostom said, "Almsgiving above all else requires money, but even this shines with a brighter luster when the alms are given from our poverty. The widow who paid in the two mites was poorer than any human, but she outdid them all." Thus, almsgiving could be deeds - not just money.*

Verses 7 & 8:

"And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up..." - This reflects God's help, the apostles' tenderness, and the power of supporting the needy.

"...immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength..." - Thus, the man obeyed the apostles.

The miracle was instantaneous and the man, utterly amazed at being cured, praised God and accompanied the apostles to worship in the temple.

Verses 9 & 10:

The miracle was witnessed by all. **"Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him."**

Thus, Isaiah's prophecy concerning New Testament miracles was fulfilled: **"Then the lame shall leap like a deer."** (Isaiah 35:6)

+ **"The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."** (Proverbs 18:10) **Therefore, we have both protection and power by repeating the Lord's name throughout our prayers: my Lord Jesus Christ help me. He will grant us blessings and salvation, and He will protect us against Satan's wiles, and grant us might to traverse hardships."**

2. Evangelism - verses 11 - 26:

"Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, Whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, Whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of

refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, Who was preached to you before, Whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities." (Acts 3:11 - 26)

Verse 11:

"...the porch which is called Solomon's..." - That was a large area by the temple's rear, eastern, wall, containing 162 columns.

"....the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John..." - He was grateful to them and remained in their company as they all entered the temple. Upon hearing the news, the multitude followed. The man's presence with the apostles accentuated the miracle and Christ's power.

Verse 12:

St. Peter seized the opportunity of the multitude assembled to witness the miracle; he responded to the cause of their amazement emphasizing that he and John did not heal the man - rather he was healed through the power of Christ.

+ *If you did something worthy of people's praise, do thank God, and deflect all praise to Him, so that hearts may turn to Him, and you fade in the background.*

Verse 13:

"The God of our fathers...." - Peter accentuated that it was the same God of the Old Testament, Who was well-known to the Jews. Jesus Christ was/is His Son - He was neither a prophet nor a regular human being. He proclaimed Christ's Divinity, redemption, and the need to believe on His salvation.

"Glorified His Servant..." - He was glorified through His resurrection and ascension.

"Whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate..." - This refers to the Jews' insistence on rejecting Christ, despite Pilate's admission of his belief in Christ's innocence, and despite the Jews having witnessed Christ's teachings proclaiming His Divinity.

Peter then informed them that **"the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers"** - hence the fathers of his audience - had healed the lame man in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, thus glorifying Him. That was the same Jesus Christ Whom they had rejected, and Whose release by Pilate - who was determined to let Him go - they had refused.

Verse 14:

Pilate's proposal to release Christ on the occasion of the Passover, was met by the Jews clamouring **"...for a murderer [Barabbas] to be granted to"** them.

Verse 15:

The Jews had insisted on the release of a murderer - Barabbas - and demanded the death of the Source of life. However, the Father raised Him from the dead; the apostles witnessed Him after His resurrection, ate with Him, and lived with Him for forty days.

"Whom God raised from the dead" - This is a proclamation of Christ's Divinity and His being the Source of life; they chose the murderer - Barabbas.

This accentuates the position of Christ's resurrection in evangelism: there is no Christianity without resurrection. Also clear is the apostles' selflessness, and their sole quest being Christ's glory.

Verse 16:

"....through faith in His name...." - This refers to the apostles' faith as well as that of the lame man who had been healed.

"This perfect soundness...." - This refers to the man's perfect ability to walk and leap like everybody else.

St. Peter declares that faith was the fundamental basis for the miracle. He was thus exhorting the audience to believe on Christ the Saviour, capable of healing all our ailments and solving all our hardships.

Verse 17:

Peter excused them gently, since they had no knowledge of Who Christ was/is - along with their leaders, they had demanded His crucifixion. An evangelist takes care not to disillusion his audience, in order to facilitate for them the path to repentance.

Verse 18:

What they did fulfilled God's will with respect to mankind's salvation, which Old Testament prophets had foretold, especially Isaiah: "***But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities....***" (Isaiah 53:5) Thus, the beneficent Father transformed the Jews' wickedness into salvation and goodness.

Verse 19:

They were thus required, and so are we, to repent, to turn away from the path of wickedness, to confess the Faith and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and for blotting out their/our sin debt. Spiritual relief and deliverance from Satan will thus come from God - the Jews had imagined that Christ's advent would bring them material relief, hence, deliverance from the Romans.

Verse 20:

"He may send Jesus Christ..." - The intent is either Christ's incarnation to grant us salvation in the New Testament and we live through faith in Him, or, Christ's second coming to take His children and glorify them with Him in heaven.

"Who was preached to you before..." - This means that the Old Testament prophets had foretold His advent for mankind's salvation.

Verse 21:

"Whom heaven must receive..." - The Jews had believed that Christ would remain forever on earth - hence, that He would never die. Thus, they were amazed when He said that He would die (see John 12:34). Therefore, Peter clarified that Christ would indeed remain alive forever, but in heaven not on earth.

"....until the times of restoration of all things..." - This refers to the spread of evangelism throughout the four corners of the world, and the conversion of many. This does not mean that all souls would be accepted, rather, those whom God predestined, and were prepared for salvation.

Christ ascended to the Father - He is in heaven till the end of time, when the world will turn to the knowledge of, and belief on, Christ; ***"For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet."*** (1 Corinthians 15:25) His second coming will follow as prophets had foretold.

Verse 22:

St. Peter referred to Moses' prophecy: ***"I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His***

mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him."
(Deuteronomy 18:18) The following similarities were drawn between Christ and Moses:

- a- The act of prophesying.
- b- Moses introduced the Old Testament law while Christ brought the New Testament charter.
- c- Moses delivered his people from Pharaoh's bondage, while Christ saved us from Satan.
- d- Christ's atoning intercession for His people is analogous to Moses' intercessions to save his people from God's wrath when they rebelled against Him several times.

Moses told them that it was necessary to heed Christ's message and believe on Him, since they believed they were Moses' children - consequently, they should believe on the foretold Christ, rather than resist and despise Him, as they had said to the man who was born blind (see John 9:28 & 29).

Verse 23:

Whoever ignores Christ is deprived of membership in Christ's new congregation, hence, the Church, and would have no inheritance in the kingdom of heaven - hence, they would perish. Punishment for disbelief was accentuated, in order to motivate them to repent.

Verse 24:

Peter supported his exhortation by invoking Samuel, the Jews' first prophet after Moses; he founded the school of prophets and, along with all subsequent prophets up till John the Baptist, he prophesied the Lord's advent. Their prophecies included the Holy Spirit's descent and the performing of miracles.

Verse 25:

"You are sons of the prophets..." - This means that, since they followed the prophets, they should believe their prophecies concerning Christ.

"Your seed" - This refers to Christ as St. Paul explained in Galatians 3:16. Peter exhorted them, since they were the product of the covenant which God had made with Abraham, namely, that Christ would come through his seed for the salvation of mankind.

Verse 26:

Christ came to the Jews first, so they had priority over the Gentiles in accepting the Faith, which would have given them the spiritual blessings conducive to a life of repentance. This sermon bears the following similarities to Peter's Pentecost's discourse:

1. Proof that Jesus of Nazareth was the awaited Messiah.
2. Accentuating the Jews' sin by rejecting Christ.
3. A call to repentance, to acquire God's mercy, and belief on Christ.

+ We are all liable to sin. But we are distinguished from others by repentance, the return to God, and changing direction.

Let us not systematically reject others' advice - rather, let us heed the holy Bible's and the Church's guidance; these are personal messages calling us to repentance, and delivering us from straying.

Let us repent daily, renewing our lives, restoring our spiritual zeal, and leading us to confession. We will thus lead a lifestyle of repentance and we will acquire salvation.



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Chapter 4

the apostles' trial - the power of prayer - early Church's life

1. **Arrest and imprisonment of the two apostles - verses 1 - 4:**
"Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." (Acts 4:1 - 4)

Verses 1 & 2:

"The priests" - They had the authority to grant or deny permission, for teaching in the temple, to whoever they wished. Having heard the news of the apostles evangelizing in Solomon's Porch, they hastened to the temple accompanied by the temple's captain and, likely, Jewish troops.

"The Sadducees" - They did not believe in the resurrection and, consequently, they considered that what the apostles were teaching about Christ's resurrection was a direct attack on their beliefs - thus, they were the apostles' most significant opponents. They had tried to conceal Christ's resurrection by bribing the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb.

Verse 3:

The apostles were arrested, and placed ***"in custody until the next day, for it was already evening."*** Likely, they awaited the Sanhedrin Council to convene.

Verse 4:

The priests' and Sadducees' adversarial stance neither deterred the apostles, nor impeded the multitude's positive response to the apostles' evangelization - hence, many believed, and ***"the number of the men came to be about five thousand."***

+ *Be not perturbed by evil-doers' resistance, rather, adhere to your principles and Christ's commandments. Their mockery and objections, however strong these may be, will only test and edify your faith. Trust God's blessings in your personal life, and rest assured that, in due course, your words and conduct will yield positive effects on others.*

2. Trial of Peter and John - verses 5 - 22:

"And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed." (Acts 4:5 - 22)

Verse 5:

The Sanhedrin Council consisted of three groups: the priests, the elders (tribal leaders) and the teachers (the scribes - the learned group). That council met the following day for the apostles' trial.

Verse 6:

"Annas" - He was the ex-high priest, appointed by the Romans.

"Caiaphas" - He was the actual high priest.

"John, and Alexander" - They were members of the high priest's family.

"the family of the high priest" - Five earlier high priests were members of his family. For this reason, the family had special status and significant representation on the council.

They all gathered in order to resist evangelizing the risen Christ, since that would expose their wickedness in Christ's sentencing for crucifixion.

Verse 7:

"And when they had set them in the midst [in order to intimidate or scare them, into discontinuing their preaching], **they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?"**" Although they knew the answer perfectly well, they wanted the apostles to say something that would warrant their punishment, since Christ's name was considered a type of blasphemy or sorcery.

Verse 8:

This fulfills the Lord's promise mentioned in Matthew 10:19 & 20, namely, when a Christian is on trial in defence of his Faith, the Holy Spirit would speak through his lips.

Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, and courageously spoke to the heart of the issue - this would make up for his denying the Lord during Christ's trial before the high priest. He addressed the Council with due respect.

Verses 9 & 10:

"...a good deed done to a helpless man..." - Normally, people go on trial for wrongdoings. In order to accentuate the Council's wickedness, Peter pointed out, in the cured man's presence, that they were on trial for doing a good deed to a helpless man.

They, as well as all the other Jews, should know (should have known) that the name of the Lord Jesus, Christ, the Messiah, Who hailed from Nazareth as the inscription on the Cross said, Whose Father raised from the dead, thus foiling their plans, was indeed the One Who cured the lame man. Peter, on behalf of himself as well as John's, emphasized three fundamental points exhorting his audience to believe:

1. Jesus of Nazareth is Christ.
2. Their sin was their delivering Him for crucifixion.
3. The name of Christ healed the lame man standing before them.

Verse 11:

"....the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone'...." - The chief cornerstone is that stone binding two perpendicular walls - it could also be the highest stone in a building's roof, bearing the entire roof's pressure. The intent is that salvation to mankind is through Christ, and through Christ alone.

"....builders..." - They were members of the "Council of Seventy," responsible for the Jews' spiritual edification; they should have been the first to believe on Christ, in order to lead the people down the correct path of Faith.

Peter completed evangelizing them. It should be noted that he defended neither himself nor John - rather, he preached the Lord, clarifying their error, as mentioned in Psalm 118:22, with respect to their despising, and rejecting belief on, Christ. God, on the other hand, set Christ as the cornerstone for the issue of fulfillment of salvation.

Verse 12:

Christ, and Christ alone, is the Saviour. He was the sole Anointed by God, to fulfill salvation. Christ is the sole atoning Mediator for the forgiveness of His people's sins and for their redemption.

Verse 13:

They were amazed at Peter's powerful evangelical message. We can infer from the phrase **"the boldness of Peter and John"** that John was also fully supportive of what Peter had said. It should also be pointed out that both apostles **"were uneducated and untrained men."** Put differently, they had not been inculcated by any of the Jewish teachers. The priests thus concluded that, since Peter and John had accompanied Christ, He was the source of their knowledge and eloquence.

Verse 14:

"And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it." Rather, the judges became accused of having resisted Christ.

Verses 15 & 16:

"But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men?" Instead of asking themselves what their course of action should be to secure their salvation, they focused their evil intent on what they should do to the apostles, given that news of the miracles had spread throughout Jerusalem.

+ Persistence in sin dulls a person's conscience. Analogously, they wanted to subject the apostles to the same oppressive approach that Christ had experienced. They were more keen on defending their personal pride, as opposed to the truth. Do not persevere in resistance or in justifying yourself, once your error has been exposed. rather, return to God, and pray that He reveal to you the right path. Follow the example of Saul, who obeyed and became the great St. Paul the Apostle.

Verse 17:

The council members decided to **"severely threaten"** the apostles, such that **"from now on they speak to no man in this name."**

Verse 18:

"And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus."

Verses 19 & 20:

The apostles responded saying, **"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."**

The following points should be highlighted:

1. The council's evil intentions were displeasing to God.
2. The apostles insisted on obeying God, and adhering to the truth, regardless of any opposition or consequences.

Verses 21 & 22:

Therefore, for fear of people's reprisals, the council released the apostles without any punishment. Equally compelling, was the presence before them of the man, praising God, who had been miraculously cured after forty years of infirmity.

+ God's truth is clear before us. However, our pride hinders us from acknowledging our sins and accepting God's salvational work for us. It is incumbent on us not to lose the opportunity as did those council members, who attempted to quell evangelism, rather than respond positively to it.

3. The apostles' prayer - verses 23 - 31:

"And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.' "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through

the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." (Acts 4:23 - 31)

Verse 23:

The apostles, ***".....being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them."***

Verse 24 - 28:

The apostles and their companions, being in great need of the Lord's help, ***"....raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.'"***

[Psalm 2:1 & 2 says: ***"Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed [His Christ]...."***]

That is precisely what the Jewish leaders did, by rejecting Christ and His apostles. Furthermore, this accentuates God's might, versus the weakness of this world's leaders, such as Herod, Pilate and others.

Our omnipotent Creator is capable of protecting His children. In the Coptic Orthodox Divine Liturgy we say, ***"You are Creator of heaven and earth and all that is therein."***

Thus, it is clear that prayer is the greatest solution for man's weakness and man's hardships.

Since God is the omnipotent Creator, our hearts should never be perturbed regardless of threats by evil-doers. That prayer was also a prayer of thanksgiving for God's grace and protection for His apostles.

Verses 29:

They did not ask the Lord to protect them - rather, to strengthen them towards success of their bold evangelism. This underscores their faith in Christ the Saviour, and their desire to spread the Faith, seeking strength to glorify God.

Verse 30:

The apostles also asked God, "***that with all boldness they may speak Your [God's] word, by stretching out Your [God's] hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your [God's] holy Servant Jesus.***"

Verse 31:

At that point, God sent them a tangible sign that their prayer was accepted, namely, "***the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.***" Put differently, the Holy Spirit imparted to them the power and zeal to continue their evangelical work.

The Holy Spirit's initial indwelling a person does not recur; however, being "filled with the Holy Spirit" renews a person's vigour to serve God, and may be repeated several times in a lifetime, depending on the person's purity and zeal to serve God.

+ *Resort to God, through prayer, for all your needs and, rest assured, He will respond. Thank God for His gifts - ask for more for the glorification of His name. He will shower you with bounties, since He loves His children, and He will help you to glorify His name in all aspects of your life.*

3. Early Church's life - verses 32 - 37:

"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:32 - 37)

Verse 32:

Here, the evangelist refers to believers as "***the multitude of those who believed***" since their numbers had increased significantly - more than the five thousand mentioned earlier. They were all united through the Holy Spirit's guidance. None of them believed "***that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.***"

Verses 33 & 34:

The Spirit worked through the apostles to preach Christ's resurrection, the fundamental tenet for belief on Christ the Saviour. The significant grace which descended upon everyone gave the apostles' evangelism unimaginable effect in their audience's hearts. They were all united in pure love, not differentiating between rich or poor. The rich sold their possessions in order to satisfy the needs of the poor.

Verse 35:

Placing money at the apostles' feet was tantamount to believers' detachment from worldly wealth, since their hearts were preoccupied with a spiritual lifestyle - material needs ranked as second priority. The importance of a righteous, godly lifestyle far exceeded that of wealth. Money was merely a tool **"distributed to each as anyone had need."**

Verses 36 & 37:

"And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."

+ *May you be sensitized to the needs of those around you....and may you know perfectly well that all your belongings are Christ's...God has entrusted you with those belongings in order for you to satisfy the needs of the needy. You are a member of the body of Christ - which is the Church. Do not be apathetic.*



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Chapter 5

the Church's growth - the apostles' trials

1. Ananias and Sapphira - verses 1 - 11:

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things." (Acts 5:1 - 11)

Verse 1:

This is an example of a trial that plagued the Church from within - unlike persecutions of the Jewish leaders which attacked the Church from without. Behold Ananias, whose name means "gift of the Lord," and his wife (whose name "Sapphira" means "beautiful" or "precious") who **"sold a possession"** as others did, to satisfy the Church's needs.

Verse 2:

However, they decided to hold back part of the proceeds, while claiming to the apostles that they were offering all they had. They agreed on that course of action, seeking the appearance, to all, of their generosity.

The sin of hypocrisy and boastfulness led them to lie, although they could have simply stated, truthfully, that they were donating a portion of their money. That lie implied that they stole from God the amount that they had pretended to have given to the Church.

Verse 3:

Peter told Ananias that Satan had filled his heart with the desire to be ostentatious; this implies that Ananias' pride impeded his resistance of Satanic thoughts. This emphasizes the fact that the Holy Spirit is a Person of the holy Trinity - not merely a Divine power, as Macedonian heretics claimed (refuted in 360 A.D. at Constantinople).

Verse 4:

"...you conceived this thing in your heart..." - This means that Ananias' action/lie was premeditated.

Peter told him that, rather than lying to God, he had the right to disposition his money in any way he chose.

+ *It should be noted that any sin towards men is directed, first and foremost, against God, as the Psalmist said: "**Against You, You only, have I sinned....**" (Psalm 51:4) You should never ignore God's presence - rather, for His sake, shun sinful acts to avoid angering Him. Remind yourself that He is always before you, watching your deeds, words and thoughts. After falling into sin, hasten to repent, to incur His forgiveness and avoid punishment.*

Verse 5:

Ananias' dropping dead was God's instantaneous punishment - this instilled fear in all believers' hearts. That was necessary in the early Church, to motivate believers to shun sin and scrutinize their lives. This also imparted awe to the apostles, namely, their ability to reveal the unknown - hence, the Holy Spirit enabled Peter to know what Ananias and Sapphira had done and concealed.

+ *If you were plagued with laziness and complacency, then let your recollection of God's judgment motivate you to fear God and shun sin. Love alone is insufficient for your salvation - rather, fearing God and rejecting sin which leads to perdition. For this reason, the Church's canonical hours remind you, in the Compline, that you will stand before the Just Judge, prompting you to tremble at the multitude of your sins. This will lead you to repentance, your soul's salvation, and the enjoyment of God's infinite love while fellowshiping with Him.*

Verse 6:

When Ananias ***"breathed his last,".... "the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him."***

Verse 7:

Three hours later, during the meeting, Sapphira walked in, not knowing what had happened to her husband. She thought that their lie had "succeeded" and everything was fine according to their plan.

Verse 8:

The money was still at the apostle's feet; so Peter tested her and asked, ***"Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?"*** Thus, he gave her a chance to repent and confess the truth. Regrettably, she insisted on the lie that her husband had said.

+ *Do not break God's commandments in order to compliment others. Do not lie in order to appease others. Do not accept or participate in sinful acts, vile speech or gossip. You are responsible for each and every word uttered through your lips. May you always obey God rather than men.*

Verse 9:

"....test the Spirit of the Lord..." - This means that, Ananias' and Sapphira's doubting the ability of the apostles to expose their lie, is tantamount to the Holy Spirit's inability. St. Peter declared that, since both husband and wife agreed to lie, they should incur the same punishment.

Verse 10:

Sapphira dropped dead, and ***"....the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband."***

Verse 11:

Fear fell upon all present, both believers and Jerusalemite Jews. It should be noted that, in the Book of Acts, the term ***"church"*** is being used here for the first time.

2. The apostles' miracles - verses 12 - 16:

"And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed." (Acts 5:12 - 16)

Verse 12:

The apostles wrought several miracles publicly, thus confirming the authenticity of their message. All believers prayed **"with one accord in Solomon's Porch."**

Verse 13:

Others, who had not believed, respected believers and the apostles, and **"esteemed them highly"** because of their purity and God's power working through them.

Verse 14:

The number of believers increased steadily - although the exact number is not given (as was the case after Peter's sermon). The biblical text mentions **"multitudes of both men and women"** thus highlighting the importance of women.

Verse 15:

Large numbers of both rich (on **"couches"**) and poor (on **"beds"**) were healed merely by having Peter's shadow fall upon them. God desired to demonstrate the power of His Holy Spirit working through the apostles.

Verse 16:

"Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed." We note the stark contrast between the apostles' inability to cast out demons (see Matthew 17:19), and their ability now, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to heal and cast out demons merely by having their shadow passing over the afflicted person.

+ *The Holy Spirit indwelling you calls on you to be adored with virtues and service for those around you. Respond positively, and do not ignore, His calling. Then, and only then, will you become a light for the world surrounding you, and all will witness the power and grace of God acting through you, as was the case with the apostles.*

3. The apostles' trial - verses 17 - 32:

"Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to

have them brought. But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:17 - 32)



The apostles taught in the temple

Verses 17 & 18:

"Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison." That was the result of Satan inciting them against the apostles, especially as they were preaching Christ's resurrection which is against the Sadducees' doctrine. Needless to say, the apostles raised their voices in prayer while imprisoned.

Verses 19 & 20:

"The temple" - Most likely this refers to Solomon's Porch, the most popular and frequented part.

"The words of this life" - This refers to the life-giving words of evangelism and preaching Christ, through which we traverse our sojourn in this world and proceed to eternity.

..."at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out..." - But the doors were reclosed, and the angel instructed them to **"Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life."** The intent of releasing them was not to facilitate their escape, rather, to continue their evangelizing service, and preaching eternity.

+ Thus, we see that completing his service, is more important for a Christian than his personal safety - because he knows that evangelizing is the sole purpose of existence on earth. Proclaim the truth at all times, even if opponents abuse or mock you - rest assured that Divine power will support you. Make sure you seek God's guidance prior to speaking.

Verse 21:

The apostles **"entered the temple early in the morning and taught."** They preached Christ and the resurrection, unmindful of the difficult night they had experienced in jail. The love in their hearts overcame their physical hardship.

At the same time, **"the high priest and those with him [the Sadducees] came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel"** in order to punish the apostles, and find a way to prevent their "problematic" evangelizing. Being unaware of the apostles' presence in the temple, they **"sent to the prison to have them brought."**

Verses 22 & 23:

"But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!""

This confirms that what had transpired was indeed the work of an angel, rather than any human. The prison guards, through Divine power, remained throughout the night in a deep sleep, unaware that the apostles had left.

Verse 24:

The priests and guards were perplexed and unable to explain what had happened.

Verse 25:

They were even more perturbed upon finding the apostles standing in the temple, teaching the multitude, demonstrating their insistence on evangelizing, while rejecting the priests' instructions.

Verse 26:

"Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they [the captain and the officers] should be stoned."

Verses 27 & 28:

Having been brought before the council, ***"the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!"***

The following should be noted:

1. He did not ask about the miracle of their exiting the prison, since he rejected the Faith.
2. Reflecting his intense resentment of Christ, he did not mention Him by name - rather, he referred to Him as ***"this Man."*** Furthermore, the apostles' preaching the resurrected Christ accentuates the priests' error in having Him crucified - he had completely forgotten that they had said clearly, ***"His blood be on us and on our children."*** (Matthew 27:25)

Verse 29:

Peter and all the apostles declared, ***"We ought to obey God [Christ's teaching and the angel's instructions] rather than men [even a council as prominent as the Sanhedrin Council]."***

Verse 30:

Peter and the apostles continued saying, ***"The God of our fathers [in Whom all the Jews believed] raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree."***

Verse 31:

Through His Divine omnipotence, **"God has exalted [Christ] to His right hand to be Prince and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel [initially to Israel, then to all nations] and forgiveness of sins..."**

Verse 32:

The apostles concluded by saying, **".....we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."**

+ Witnessing for Christ is the focal point for believers at all times. Be loving and do good to all, even to the unkind and those who reject the word of God. If you do good to a loving brother, you should be even more loving to the ingrate and obstinate, since he has a greater need for love than others - never give up hope for others' salvation.

3. The apostles' punishment - verses 33 - 42:

"When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God." And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." (Acts 5:33 - 42)

Verse 33:

The priests were so angry, that they plotted to kill all the apostles and put an end to that situation.

the apostles were

Verse 34:

"The law" - This refers to the Torah or Moses' Pentateuch.

"Commanded" - Gamaliel was an authoritative Jewish leader in the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel I (flourished 1st century AD) was one of a select group of Palestinian masters of the Jewish Oral Law, and a teacher twice mentioned in the New Testament. According to tradition—but not historic fact—Gamaliel succeeded his father, Simon, and his grandfather, the renowned sage Hillel (to whose school of thought he belonged), as president of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court. Gamaliel also mentored Saul (St. Paul).

Verse 35:

Gamaliel warned the council members to ***"keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it--lest you even be found to fight against God."***

Verse 36:

Gamaliel then gave examples of deceivers, such as "Theudas;" ***"For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing."***

Hence, Gamaliel warned the Jewish leaders against harming the apostles, since, if they were deceivers, God would punish them, as was the case with Theudas.

Verse 37:

Gamaliel gave another example, hence, ***"Judas of Galilee,"*** who ***"rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed."***

"Census" - That was the second census ordered by the Roman emperor, since the days of Christ's birth. The intent was to determine the amount of taxes to be collected from the empire's subjects.

The Romans had quelled the uprising, and murdered Judas and many of his followers - the rest were dispersed in several countries.

Gamaliel's intent, again, was to convince the council members to release the apostles, lest they should incur God's punishment, as was the case with Theudas and Judas.

Verses 38 & 39:

"...this plan or this work...." - This refers to evangelizing, Christ's resurrection and all the miracles.

Gamaliel argued that if the apostles' preaching and all their miracles were **"of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God,"** then council members **"cannot overthrow it--lest [council members] even be found to fight against God."**

Verse 40:

"And they agreed with him" - God's work was powerful, and Gamaliel's discourse convinced the council - although it could be argued that evil-doers should have been punished by the same measure they harboured for the apostles; however, they were silenced, and they heeded him, through God's grace.

It can be seen that God used Gamaliel's wisdom to save the apostles from execution. The high priest, though, vented his anger by having them flogged (39 stripes according to Roman custom), after repeating his instruction to them, hence, **"that they should not speak in the name of Jesus."** The apostles were subsequently released.

Verse 41:

Contrary to the council's expectations, the apostles **"departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."** They considered their flogging to constitute fellowshiping in Christ's suffering, and preparation for the heavenly glories.

Verse 42:

The apostles **"daily in the temple, and in every house....did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."**

The apostles have set an examples for us, believers, to sense the spiritual message's pricelessness, motivating us to fulfill it, as a higher priority than our personal safety. Furthermore, they demonstrated to us that our service should not be restricted to church-goers - rather, we should seek the stray and the sick, in their homes, and seize every opportunity to serve Christ. Divine liturgy and other religious rites were celebrated in believers' homes, since churches had not been built yet.

+ Whenever you experience hardships promulgated by your adherence to God's commandments, or precipitated by your service, accept them for His love's sake. Christ gave up His life for your sake; thus, the least you could do is endure everything for His sake. You should even consider those hardships to be an honour and a blessing, since you would be sharing bearing the Cross with your Saviour.



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Chapter 6

the seven deacons

1. Selecting the deacons - verses 1 - 8:

"Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:1 - 8)



St. Stephen

Verse 1:

"...multiplying..." - The number of disciples at that point was undetermined - it must have been greater than the last figure St. Luke gave in Ch.4:4, hence, five thousand...

"...the disciples..." - That was the label attached to all Christians at that time, since they followed the teachings of Christ and the apostles. They led a communal life, and learned from Christ's apostles.

"....their widows were neglected..." - Due to the large numbers, and the apostles' limited time, some attendees inadvertently failed to receive the allotted portion.

"...daily distribution..." - This indicates that donation distribution was a daily practise.

About six years after the Church had been established, a problem emerged, namely, complaints by the Jews in diaspora (most likely Greek-speaking since the Babylonian captivity) who seemed to feel slighted, or discriminated-against, versus the Jerusalemite, Hebrew-speaking, Jews.

Verse 2:

"...the multitude of the disciples..." - This refers to the Church's congregation in general.

"...not desirable..." - This means "not pleasing to God."

"...the word of God..." - This refers to preaching and teaching.

"...serve tables..." - This refers to the distribution of food and other needed commodities.

Our fathers the apostles conducted themselves ideally: they neither denied, nor defended - rather, they sought to solve the problem, clarifying that first and foremost their service consisted of evangelizing, according to Christ's commandment; hence, their attention could not be diverted towards distributing at the tables.

Verse 3:

"....seek out from among you...." - The apostles' approach was democratic, thus imparting to the multitude feelings of freedom and responsibility, by asking them to participate in the Church's overall organization. That would also implicitly avoid any rebellions.

"...seven..." - This revered number, adequate for the service, symbolizes the Holy Spirit's work, hence, the seven sacraments.

"....full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom...." - Their conduct is a clear reflection of the Holy Spirit's influence in their lives.

"...whom we may appoint..." - This was done through prayers and the "laying-on" of the apostles' hands.

"...this business..." - This refers to distribution, to the needy, at their tables.

The apostles asked the congregation to choose seven devout, pious, men who would be responsible for serving the tables. The Church - hence, the apostles - would anoint and consecrate them for service. Such a decision was at once wise, democratic and spiritual.

Verse 4:

The apostles would dedicate themselves **"continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."**

Verse 5:

"...the saying pleased the whole multitude..." - The congregation agreed with the apostles' counsel, to choose seven devout men who would take charge of distribution.

Accordingly, seven were chosen, and the first was Stephen.

Stephen: He was the first Christian martyr (see Ch. 7:60). He was pious, and **"a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit."**

Philip: He evangelized in Samaria and he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch (see Ch.8:26 -39). He evangelized in Caesarea, and he had four daughters who prophesied.

Nicolas: He was **"a proselyte from Antioch"** who later introduced the doctrine of the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2:15.

Verse 6:

Ordainment was performed by "laying on" of hands, which the Church adopted, as an ancient tradition, for transferring the priesthood's authority. That is a clear indication of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, when ordaining deacons. This practice has continued in the Coptic Orthodox Church, when ordaining deacons, priests and bishops - hence, bishops "lay their hands" on the candidates.

Verse 7:

"...the word of God spread..." - It spread through evangelizing and preaching Christ.

The Church's problem was solved, the number of believers in Jerusalem increased and, for the first time, Jewish priests believed.

Verse 8:

"...Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." - In addition to his service in distribution, Stephen participated in evangelizing due to his strong faith. Through God's support for him, many were attracted to the Faith.

+ Do not be perturbed by problems. Rest assured that the Holy Spirit is capable of solving them. Resort to God through prayers. Follow the guidance of your confessor and other spiritual fathers. Be positive in your thoughts - then God will solve your problems.

2. Stephen's arrest - verses 9 - 15:

"Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel." (Acts 6:9 - 15)

Verses 9 & 10:

Satan and the Jewish leaders incited members of some of Jerusalem's synagogues (there were several for preaching) to stir up trouble.

"Freedmen" - They were descendents of the Jews enslaved by Pompey after his conquest of Judaea in 63 B.C. - eventually, set free.

"Cyrenians" - The Jews from today's Libya.

"Alexandrians" - Those were the Jews - numbering around one million in those days - who came from Alexandria.

"...those from Cilicia and Asia" - Cilicia was a province in Turkey's south, whose capital was Tarsus, Paul's homeland. Asia is today's Turkey or Asia Minor.

They all came to dispute **"...with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke."**

Verse 11:

"...they secretly induced men..." - They agreed with some of the Jews to bear false witness against Stephen.

"...**Moses...**" - This is in reference to Mosaic Law, since it referred, in turn, to the New Testament.

"...**God...**" - Stephen taught that Christ was God - they considered such teaching to be "blasphemous."

Those Jews resorted to false allegations, as did their leaders antecedently during Christ's trial. They claimed that Stephen blasphemed against Moses and God.

Verse 12:

"...**they stirred up the people** [the congregants in the synagogue], **the elders** [members of the Sanhedrin council], **and the scribes** [prominent members of the community who transcribed the Old Testament]..."

"...**the council...**" - This refers to the Sanhedrin or "council of the seventy elders," tasked with sentencing religious offenders.

Verse 13:

"...**does not cease...**" - They alleged that Stephen continued to spread teachings against Mosaic Law.

"...**this holy place...**" - This refers to the Jewish temple. Witnesses presented false testimony against Stephen, claiming that he desecrated the sanctity of their holy temple and Mosaic law.

Verse 14:

The false witnesses claimed that they had heard Stephen say "**this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.**" They referred to Christ mockingly as "**this Jesus of Nazareth**" since "nothing good came out of Nazareth" (see John 1:46).

Verse 15:

At the beginning of his trial, Stephen was calm and composed, and his face glowed fearlessly - as an angel's face.

+ *It is true indeed that God is evident in His children's features and behaviour. That is an indication of God indwelling our hearts, hence, "**A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance.**" (Proverbs 15:13) Repeat consistently prayers and psalms - these, in turn, will reflect calmness on your complexion - a silent message of good will to those around you.*



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Chapter 7

Stephen's discourse and subsequent stoning

1. From Abraham to Moses' birth - verses 1 - 19:

"Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.' Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. "But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham,

the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till another king arose who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live. (Acts 7:1 - 19)

Verse 1:

Stephen's trial transpired about seven years after Christ's ascension. The chief priest asked him to defend himself against allegations of blaspheming Moses, God and the holy temple.

Verses 2 & 3:

"...Haran..." - It was an ancient city of strategic importance, now a village, in southeastern Turkey. It lies along the Balikh River (a tributary of the Euphrates), 38 km southeast of Urfa.

"...a land that I will show you..." - The intent here is the land of Canaan, in the region of Jordan and Palestine; its name was not mentioned, in order to test Abraham's faith and obedience.

Stephen started his discourse on an evangelical note; amazingly, he never defended himself. He approached the Jews from a historical/evangelical perspective to win them on his side - hence, he addressed them courteously as, ***"Brethren and fathers."***

During his discourse, Stephen pointed out to them that God had many holy places throughout the world - not only the Jewish temple (of which they had accused him of blaspheming.) Thus, he told them that God did not appear to Abraham in Jerusalem, rather, ***"in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran."***

Verse 4:

"...the land of the Chaldeans..." - Ur was home to the Chaldeans.

"...this land in which you now dwell" - This refers to the land of Canaan. Our father Abraham obeyed God's call, and ***"he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran."*** His father, Terah, accompanied him, and, ***"from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you [the Jews] now dwell [Canaan]."***

Verse 5:

At that point in time, when Abraham had no children, God promised him that the land would belong to him and to his seed; Abraham, then, did not own any part of the land.

Verse 6:

Furthermore, God informed Abraham ***that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years.*** All that was fulfilled.

Verse 7:

God condemned Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their wickedness. Eventually, Abraham's descendents left Egypt and worshipped God in Canaan, not in Jerusalem, which the Jews held at the summit of holiness.

Verses 8 & 9:

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God, and Abraham and his seed. According to God's commandment, Abraham circumcised his son Isaac eight days after his birth. This symbolizes the link between the covenant and eternal life which, in turn, is symbolized by the number "8." The logic behind this symbolism is that "8" follows "7" which symbolizes the world's creation.

Subsequently, Jacob came on the scene, along with the twelve tribe patriarchs, who had envied Joseph and sold him into Egypt. This could be analogous to the Jews' envying Christ and delivering Him to the Romans.

Verse 10:

God delivered Joseph from prison and from Potiphar's wife. God blessed Joseph, such that Pharaoh appointed him ruler over Egypt.

Our Lord Christ chose to suffer, unto death, for our sake, then became our Shepherd, and Head of the Church and all His congregation.

Verses 11 & 12:

"Sustenance" - This refers to food for them and for their herds.

"Our fathers" - This refers to ten of his children - excluding Joseph and Benjamin.

"...he sent out our fathers first.." - The first time is mentioned in Genesis Ch. 42.

The famine started in Egypt and extended to Canaan - that included the tribes and their leaders. Their father, Jacob, sent them to Egypt to buy grain.

Verse 13:

Jacob sent them a second time (see Genesis Ch. 43), at which time Joseph revealed his identity to them, and introduced them to Pharaoh.

Verses 14 & 15:

Joseph sent and brought all his family (about 75 persons) to Egypt, where they spent the rest of their lives.

Verse 16:

During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, they carried back with them the bones of Jacob and the tribes' patriarchs, to Shechem, **"and laid in the**

tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.."

In fact, Abraham bought property from Ephron the Hittite at Machpelah which included a field and cave where Sarah was buried (see Genesis Ch. 23). Jacob bought land in Shechem (see Genesis Ch. 12) where Joseph was buried. Stephen "alluded" to both in his discourse, referring simply to Shechem.

Verses 17 - 19:

"...the time of the promise..." - This refers to the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt.

"...another king arose who did not know Joseph...." - He had no knowledge of Joseph's antecedent services to Egypt.

"...dealt treacherously... making them expose their babies...." - The Egyptian Pharaoh tried to eliminate the Hebrew race by instructing the midwives to kill all the male Hebrew newborns (see Exodus Ch. 1).

The Israelites multiplied significantly in Egypt, such that one of the kings (likely Ramses II) who reigned after Joseph, tried to promote their extinction by having their male firstborns killed.

+ *Despite Satan's attempts at fighting the Church to suppress its growth, God continues to deliver His congregation - always at the right time. Thus, the emergence of evil-doers should not perturb us, regardless of their apparent power, since God Himself is our protector. God's blessings are even more abundant during hardships and persecutions.*

2. The affront to Moses - verses 20 - 43:

"At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months. But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds. Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?' But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. And when forty years had

passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, 'I am the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. 'Then the Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." ' This Moses whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years. "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.' This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: 'Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'" (Acts 7:20 - 43)

Verse 20:

"At this time..." - That was the time when the royal edict was issued to kill all male Hebrew newborns.

"...his father..." - Moses' father, Amram, was a Levite (Exodus Ch. 2) Scholars proposed various dates for Moses' birth - most likely, it was in the late 14th century B.C. His Levite parents, seeing he was a beautiful child, hid him at home for three months in defiance of Pharaoh's order.

Verse 21:

When Moses' parents could no longer hide him, they put the child in a basket, and laid him by the river's bank (Exodus Ch. 2). God willed that

he be rescued by one of Pharaoh's daughters, who raised him in the royal palace, as one of her own.

Verse 22:

"...Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds...."

Verse 23:

"Now when he [Moses] was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel [since Egyptians - and Moses was considered one of them - did not mix with Jews.]"

Verses 24 - 27:

Moses saw a Hebrew being oppressed by an Egyptian. In attempting to defend his Hebrew brother, he killed the Egyptian, ***"For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand."*** However, ***"...the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?' But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?'"***

The Jews never understood that Christ was/is the Saviour; rather, they rejected Him, and said, through their leaders, ***"By what authority are You doing these things?"*** (Matthew 21:23)

Verse 28:

The Jews reproached Moses and accused him of being a killer. It was thus likely that they could deliver him to Pharaoh for execution.

Verse 29:

Moses fled the country, ***"and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons."*** He married Zipporah (Jethro's daughter), and his sons' names were Gershom and Eliezer (see Exodus Ch. 2).

Verse 30:

"And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai."
The bush was not consumed (see Exodus Ch. 3).

Verses 31 & 32:

"...the voice of the Lord..." - God did not appear to Moses in any form - rather, Moses heard His voice from the burning bush....Moses marvelled at the sight and, as he drew near to observe, the Lord told him: ***'I am the***

God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'

God desired to reassure Moses of His love for mankind, and of His intent to fulfill His promise to liberate the Israelites from Egypt's bondage. **"And Moses trembled and dared not look."**

Verse 33:

Then the Lord instructed Moses to remove his sandals, since he was on holy ground. Jewish priests consequently removed their shoes when serving in the temple.

Thus, Stephen emphasized that other holy places existed, besides the temple at Jerusalem, against which he had allegedly blasphemed. God sanctified other places, such as the bush through which He spoke to Moses. In the New Testament, our Lord sanctified many places such as churches.

Verse 34:

"The oppression of My people" - This refers to the suffering and subjugation of bondage they endured in Egypt.

"Their groaning" - This refers to their cries to God to deliver them.

"...have come down to deliver them..." - This is an expression in human terms that God would deliver His people.

God proclaimed that He would come to Egypt to deliver His people from Pharaoh, because He had heard, and responded to, their prayers - then He told Moses, **"I will send you to Egypt."**

The Son of God was incarnate in order to bind Satan and redeem us.

Verses 35:

"...by the hand of the Angel..." - God presents Himself as an angel, to enable communication with humans; however, it is clear that the voice emanating from the bush was the voice of God.

Stephen emphasized to the Jews that they - hence, their fathers - resisted Moses' salvational service, despite his having been sent by God to lead them. Later, God also sent His Son to lead and save them - but they rejected Him too.

Verse 36:

"...wonders and signs in the land of Egypt..." - This refers to the ten plagues.

"...in the Red Sea..." - That was when Moses divided the waters with his staff. It is named **"Red"** either because of its reddish algae or because of the red sand dunes on its shores - plus other theories about its name.

"...in the wilderness..." - That was in reference to feeding the Israelites with manna and quails in the Sinai wilderness.

Despite the Israelites' resistance, Moses fulfilled his mission (and the Son fulfilled salvation), and delivered them from Pharaoh's bondage, after all the signs and miracles he wrought, proving that he was sent from God (see Exodus Ch. 4). He divided the Red Sea and, after forty years in the wilderness, he led them to the boundaries of the promised land.

Verse 37:

Stephen quoted Moses' prophecy given in Deuteronomy: **"The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren."** (Deuteronomy 18:15) That prophecy referred to Christ the Saviour Whom God would raise from among the Jewish people. Furthermore, Moses had instructed them to heed Him: **"Him you will hear [same verse],"** but they resisted Christ just as they had resisted Moses.

Verse 38:

"...the congregation in the wilderness..." - This refers to God's meeting with His people in the wilderness, under Moses' and Aaron's leadership. Behold, Moses: he led them through the wilderness by the power of the bush's Angel (the Word of God), to whom God spoke on Mount Sinai and throughout their entire wilderness journey, and to whom God gave life-giving commandments.

Verse 39:

The Jews refused to obey him; rather, they desired to bypass him and return to Egypt which they had just left.

Verse 40:

The Israelites asked Aaron to make them idols to worship - they told him, **"Make us gods to go before us."** Thus, they preferred idols over God, claiming **"as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."**

Verse 41:

"And they made a calf in those days..." - Aaron made them a golden calf: **"And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf....."** (Exodus 32:4) That was similar to the calf "ibis" that the Egyptians worshipped.

Verse 42:

"...the book of the Prophets..." - That was all the prophecies which the Jews had collected in one book.

"...Did you offer...." - That was a rhetorical question, indicating that the Jews had offered sacrifices to God as well as to idols.

The Lord was angered, and delivered them to their enemies, because they had worshipped idols, as Amos had prophesied (see Amos 5:25 & 26), saying that they would worship idols throughout their journey across the wilderness.

Verse 43:

"You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon." - In addition to the tabernacle where they worshipped God, the Israelites worshipped idols named "Moloch" and "Remphan."

Solomon, David's son, had also built altars for Moloch, the Ammonite idol, in order to please his pagan wives (see 1 Kings 11:7). Israelite worshippers used to offer their children as burnt sacrifices to that idol - which practice angered God, Who delivered them into the hands of the Babylonians.

+ God performs great miracles with us, yet we resist Him, as did the Israelites of old. Let us contemplate God's bounties and blessings in our lives, and let us give Him thanks, and obey His commandments.

3. The rest of the story - verses 44 - 53:

"Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, Or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?' "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the

betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it. (Acts 7:44 - 53)

Verse 44:

"...the tabernacle of witness..." - The tabernacle where the Israelites worshipped contained the ark of the covenant, which contained the two tablets - labelled "tablets of witness" - on which were written the ten commandments. Moses had erected the tabernacle in accordance with God's instructions.

Verse 45:

Successive generations zealously followed their forefathers' religious practices of worshipping God.

"...possessed by the Gentiles..." - This refers to the promised land where the Israelites took possession of Gentiles' lands - Gentiles whom the Lord chased from before the Israelites.

The Israelites inherited that tabernacle from their fathers of Moses' generation; it was handed down to Joshua's generation and successive ones, up till the days of David.

Verses 46 & 47:

"...asked to find a dwelling..." - He desired to build a solid temple for the Lord instead of the tabernacle.

"But Solomon built Him a house..." - God did not permit David to build His house, because David had waged several wars and killed many people. God allowed David's son, who was more stable and much revered, to build His house.

Verse 48:

"...does not dwell..." - God's presence is not limited to the temple.

"...the prophet..." - This refers to Isaiah.

God proclaimed (see Romans 8:11) that He does not dwell in material buildings, rather, first and foremost, in believers' hearts.

Verses 49 & 50:

Heaven and earth cannot contain Him. He will not find rest in any dwelling regardless of its splendour - rather, He finds rest in His children's hearts, since it is His hand that created everything.

Verse 51:

At this point, Stephen changed his tone, from historical facts, to strong rebuke; likely, that was due to his having noticed anger/discomfort on their faces - so he desired to confront them quickly, in order to motivate them to repent before being heckled or totally rejected. Thus, he confronted them with the hardness of heart, which had been their consistent feature throughout their history. Their worship and circumcision were purely outward appearances, while their hearts and ears remained oblivious to Christ. As did their forefathers, they resisted the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 52:

Jews rejected the Holy Spirit's testimony concerning Christ in Old Testament prophecies, preferring to persecute and murder the prophets, as our Lord mentioned in His parable of the vineyard (see Luke 20:9 - 17) - they were the evil vinedressers in Christ's parable. They tried to suppress all prophecies about Christ's incarnation and, when He came, they delivered Him to the Romans, insisting that He be crucified.

Verse 53:

Jews never observed the commandments delivered by Moses; Moses had received them from God on the holy mountain.

+ *Rejecting the word of God given in the holy Bible leads to a person's total loss of God's blessings, while continuing to stray following his own whims. Accept the word of God, which you read each day, as a personal message, and apply it in your life.*

4. Stephen's martyrdom - verses 54 - 60, Ch. 8:1

"When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:54 - 60)

Verse 54:

Stephen's audience's anger peaked, because he had exposed the wickedness of their hearts. They manifested their anger when they ***"gnashed at him with their teeth."***

Verses 55 & 56:

"...the right hand of God..." - This refers to the perfection of Divine glory and splendour - since God is limitless and has no "right hand."

Having ended his discourse, fulfilled his mission, and exposed the Jews' wicked intentions towards him, Stephen lifted up his eyes towards heaven seeking God's support; he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and God desired to reveal to him a soothing revelation - thus, his eyes were opened and he saw the glory of God, with Christ on the right hand of God encouraging and comforting him. He declared this splendid revelation to his audience.

Verse 57:

Stephen's audience preempted the council's verdict; hence, they **"stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;"** they did not want to hear from him what they considered to be blasphemous. They rushed towards him screaming that he was worthy of death.

Verse 58:

"...the witnesses laid down their clothes..." - They did that to give themselves more freedom of movement - they laid their clothes **"at the feet of a young man named Saul** [his age was between 30 and 40 years at that time]."

"Saul" - That was Saul of Tarsus, persecuter of Christians, who became St. Paul the apostle. He was a member of the previously-mentioned council that had risen up against Stephen.

"...they cast him out of the city..." - They did that so as not to defile the city. They stoned him, bypassing any legal sentencing. According to the law, the witnesses started the stoning, in order to assume responsibility for testifying.

Verse 59:

Stephen remained calm and composed as he was being stoned, asking God to accept his soul with Him in heaven. This demonstrated the steadfastness of his faith, up till the last moments of his life.

Verse 60:

"...he fell asleep..." - This refers to "death," since it reflects the soul's repose as it ascends to its Maker.

Stephen knelt and prayed for the forgiveness of his stoners, following our Lord Christ's example on the Cross (see Luke 23:34). His life thus ended in prayer, as his soul rose to meet its Maker.

Christians are characterized by such sentiments: they love their enemies, praying for their forgiveness, even under the harshest of trials.

+ Ensure that your mission in life is concluded by witnessing for Christ and attracting others towards Him. Regardless of the severity of hardships, rest assured that Christ is always beside you, encouraging you, and preparing a great place for you in heaven.

Chapter 8:1

St. Luke declares that Saul of Tarsus continued to persecute Christians up till that point in time. He was among those who condemned Stephen and agreed to his death.



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Chapter 8

persecution - dispersal - examples of evangelizing

1. Persecution and dispersion - verses 1 - 8:

***"Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city."* (Acts 8:1 - 8)**

Verse 1:

Stephen's death heralded an era of great persecution for Jerusalemite Christians - they were flogged, robbed and imprisoned. But God turned that evil into good: hence, Christians were dispersed throughout all the Jewish villages plus Samaria (the southern and middle parts of the country). It should be pointed out that Samaritans were the natural enemies of Jews - thus, they accepted the fleeing Christians. The apostles, on the other hand, refused to leave Jerusalem, preferring to edify the newly-born Church in Jerusalem.

Verse 2:

"Devout men carried Stephen to his burial..." - Their disdain over his murder was expressed by their lamentations over his death. Christians were starting to experience Jewish persecutions.

Verse 3:

Saul was a Jew. "Saul" is a Hebrew name meaning "prayed for." He was of the tribe of Benjamin, and hailed from the town of Tarsus. He was born

in the first century A.D. and was also a Roman citizen (Paul or Paulus was his Roman name). Tarsus was as famous as Alexandria. At the time of Stephen's martyrdom, Saul was about 40 years old - and he was consenting to Stephen's stoning. He also participated in persecuting, robbing and oppressing Christians.

Verse 4:

"...the word..." - This refers to the word of God.

Christians who had been dispersed throughout Jerusalem, evangelized, and were unafraid of the Jews despite persecutions.

Verse 5:

Philip, the deacon, one of Stephen's companions, evangelized in Samaria, centrally located in the country.

Verses 6 & 7:

There was an overall very positive response to Philip's preaching. Likely, they remembered Christ's passage through Samaria, and His interaction with the Samaritan woman, about seven years earlier. Furthermore, they were significantly impressed by all the miracles performed by Philip in Christ's name.

Verse 8:

As a result of Philip's evangelizing and the wonders performed, **"there was great joy in that city."**

+ Indeed, the Lord transforms grief into joy and spiritual benefits. As long as we love Him, He controls all events in our life to work for good (see Romans 8:28). Let us not be perturbed by hardships - God will turn them all into our good.

2. Simon the sorcerer - verses 9 - 25:

"But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that

Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." Then Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me." So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:9 - 25)

Verse 9:

Simon the sorcerer resided in Samaria. He founded the "Simonian" sect and, traditionally, is the father of Gnosticism. The Samaritans were dazzled by his Satanic powers.

Verses 10 & 11:

He had many followers, who believed he was a great man, "***saying, "This man is the great power of God."***"

Verse 12:

"...the things concerning the kingdom of God..." - This refers to God's reigning over hearts, and to His work in believers through the Church and the sacraments. Philip's preaching Christ and the kingdom of God led them to believe and to be baptized. The Church founded in Samaria is later, traditionally, referred to as the "Church of Sebaste" where a group of forty Roman soldiers were martyred in the year 320 A.D. (mentioned in the Coptic Orthodox Synaxarion).

Verse 13:

Simon's belief was fake - he desired to profit from the new situation. Thus, he thought that, after learning how to perform miracles, he could fight the Church from within. He thought that the apostles were sorcerers like him. For this reason, he accompanied Philip, and was surprised that he could not perform any miracles. His evil intentions were revealed later (see verses 18 - 23).

Verses 14 & 15:

The apostles in Jerusalem responded to the news of founding a Church in Samaria by dispatching Peter and John to them, and, **"when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit."**

This accentuates the greatness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Hence, bishops, akin to the apostles, can grant the Holy Spirit through baptism, by "laying on" of their hands on the baptized; alternatively, the priest can anoint the baptized with the holy chrism.

Verses 16 & 17:

Given the small number of bishops and priests during the apostolic era, deacons, such as Philip, were permitted to baptize; however, they had no authority to grant the Holy Spirit through chrismation. The baptized received the Holy Spirit when Peter and John lay their hands on them. It should be noted that our Church received the "laying on" of hands from the early Church - this, in turn, accentuated the priesthood's authority.

Verses 18 & 19:

"...this power..." - Simon was referring to the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, in turn, he would be able to perform miracles and be more highly esteemed by the people. He thought that such power could be purchased, if he paid the right price - hence, **"he offered them money..."**

Verse 20:

Peter was greatly angered by Simon's offer, vehemently rejecting his money. The Holy Spirit cannot be purchased by any amount of money, and such thinking leads to perdition.

Verse 21:

"You have neither part nor portion..." - You will neither acquire the Holy Spirit nor His gifts.

"...this matter..." - This refers to his acquiring the Holy Spirit.

"...your heart is not right..." - This means that your belief on Christ is not out of love for Him, and you are not planning to lead a spiritual lifestyle; rather, you continue to be attached to wealth and worldly stature, and you intend to exploit Christianity and the work of the Holy Spirit to satisfy your goals.

Verse 22:

"...this your wickedness..." - This refers to his quest to purchase God's gifts.

"...pray God..." - Repentants' prayers are accepted.

"...if perhaps..." - You will only be forgiven if your repentance were sincere.

Peter invited Simon to repent of his warped intentions, and to pray to God, Who would forgive him upon repenting sincerely.

Verses 23 & 24:

"...poisoned by bitterness..." - The heavy burden of Simon's sin poisoned his life.

"...bound by iniquity..." - This expression not only refers to enslavement by sin, but also causing others to fall into it.

"Pray to the Lord for me..." - The apostles' warnings scared Simon; he also felt that his prayers would not be answered due to his sinfulness - therefore, he asked them to pray for him. This has the following implications:

1. His heart was not moved towards repentance and love of God.
2. It is important to intercede on behalf of others.

"...none of the things which you have spoken..." - He was referring to perdition, as implied by the apostles.

Verse 25:

"Theytestified and preached..." - They completed teaching and preaching the Christian Faith, plus details for worship and spirituality.

They preached **"the gospel in many villages"** - The apostles returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in villages along the way.

+ Among the gravest errors is the use of religion as a trading avenue, or seeking religiousness to further one's ambitions, as opposed to love for God. This is the trap in which Judas fell, leading him to sell his Master, and leading Simon to trade with religion and institute the "Simonian" sect.

My dear brother, ask yourself, whether your service and attendance in church is out of love for Christ, or out of ulterior motives...Make sure that perishing materialism does not lead to loss of your eternity.

3. Philip the deacon, and the eunuch - verses 26 - 40:

"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the

Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth [Isaiah 53:7 & 8]." So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus [known today, and in the Old Testament, as "Ashdod"]. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea." (Acts 8:26 - 40)



Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch

Verse 26:

The Lord dispatched an angel to speak to Philip saying, "**Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.**" That road was roughly 100 kilometres long.

Verse 27:

Philip obeyed the angel and, on his way down that road, he met an Ethiopian eunuch who had converted to Judaism. He was a government official, "**under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians..... who had come to Jerusalem to worship, [and] was returning.**"

It is worth noting that king Solomon had a relationship with Ethiopia, since the visit of the queen of Sheba. Akin to Alexandria, a Jewish Ethiopian community had been established.

Verse 28:

The eunuch was returning to his country after having worshipped in Jerusalem. He was reading from the Book of Isaiah as he rode in his chariot - an indication of his devoutness.

Verse 29:

The Holy Spirit ordered Philip to proceed and introduce himself to the eunuch. This constitutes a confirmation that the Holy Spirit is a Person, not merely, in human terms, a form of God's might.

Verses 30 & 31:

"...Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah..." - For some people, reading in a loud voice is helpful for concentration. Philip started conversing with him, and asked him if he understood what he was reading. We may infer that Philip was familiar with Isaiah's prophecies. The eunuch, in turn, humbly invited Philip in his chariot, and asked him to explain what he was reading.

Verses 32 - 34:

"He opened not His mouth..." - Our Lord Christ willingly gave up His life to redeem mankind. He did not defend Himself against the false allegations, and **"He was led as a [silent] sheep to the slaughter."**

"In His humiliation..." - Christ humbly endured all His suffering, oppression and humiliation.

"His justice was taken away..." - The high priests unjustly sentenced Christ in defiance of the civil authority (Pilate).

"His generation...." - This refers to Christ's contemporaries.

"...who will declare...." - None of Christ's contemporaries knew that He suffered for humanity's sake, rather than for wrongdoing.

"For His life is taken from the earth..." - He was sentenced to death on earth, but He was resurrected and lives as our God.

The eunuch was reading from the Book of Isaiah (as indicated above); hence, Christ was taken as a sheep to the slaughter, without ever uttering a word in His defence. The eunuch then asked Philip whether Isaiah was referring to himself or to someone else...

Verse 35:

Philip then started narrating the story of Christ's life and redemption, how those prophetic verses foretold the advent of Christ, how the Church

started, and how believers were converted to Christianity through baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them.

Verse 36:

"Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

This confirms the following:

1. Baptism is accomplished through full immersion in water; if mere sprinkling were sufficient, the eunuch and Philip could have used some of the drinking water, which they must have had with them (all travellers carry drinking water).
2. Philip spoke to him about the importance of baptism after he had accepted the Faith.

Verse 37:

"Jesus Christ is the Son of God." That was a brief declaration that Christ is our God and Saviour. Philip confirmed the eunuch's belief prior to his baptism, in order to fulfill the Lord's aphorism: ***"He who believes and is baptized will be saved..."*** (Mark 16:16)

Naturally, this applies to adults. In the case of children, their parents can profess the Faith on their behalf until such a time as they reach adulthood. In this way, children would not lose their nature's renewal, and would not lose the blessings of communion, simply because they are children.

Verse 38:

"...both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water..." - Philip baptized the eunuch in the pond they encountered by the side of the road.

Verse 39:

"...the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away..." - The Holy Spirit transported Philip to Ashdod (a town about 40 kilometres north of today's Gaza), where he would continue his evangelical mission.

"...he went on his way rejoicing..." - The eunuch exulted in his newly-acquired faith and in his baptism - he was keen on preaching them in his country.

"Caesarea" - That was a city named after Caesar, located on the Mediterranean coast.

Philip resumed his evangelism in Ashdod and Caesarea - hometown of the Christian historian, Bishop Eusebius, and the site of a theological school, founded by Origen (after having studied in Alexandria). That city

was also the final residence for Philip and his virgin daughters (see Ch. 21:8 & 9).

Such was the early Church's activity; the Church continues to be active in spreading the Faith, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

+ Let us zealously serve God, and let us overcome our personal preoccupations, and direct our efforts towards attracting souls into the fold of the Church.



*"Interpretation of the holy Bible - the New Testament"
taken from the series: "Patristic expositions and meditations"*

*An exegetical study of
the Acts of the Apostles*

Chapter 9

Paul's conversion - Peter's miracles

1. The revelation - verses 1 - 9:

"Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank." (Acts 9:1 - 9)



Saul on the road to Damascus

Verse 1:

Saul continued to oppress Christians, uttering threats against them and persecuting them - even after he had consented to Stephen's stoning. He attempted to obtain letters from the high priest that would legitimize his quest to murder Christians and stem the spread of Christianity.

Verse 2:

Damascus was an ancient city, about 280 kilometres north of Jerusalem. "**...the Way...**" - That was the label attached to Christ's followers during the apostolic era. Saul had expected that some of them might be in Damascus, due to their dispersion promulgated by Jewish persecution of Christians in Jerusalem.

"**....men or women...**" - Thus, women did not escape Saul's cruelty.

Thus, Saul "**went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any...[Christians] he might bring them bound to Jerusalem...**"

Verse 3:

On Saul's way to Damascus, "**suddenly a light shone around him from heaven** [brighter than the sun - that was around noon - see Ch. 26:13]."

Verse 4:

Saul was so terrified that he fell to the ground; then he "**heard a voice** [Christ] **saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"** Our Lord Christ considered Saul's persecutions to be persecutions directed against Him. Christ gently rebuked Saul and asked him for his reasons for persecuting Him. The Lord and His Church are as unified as a head and its body. The Lord spoke to Saul in Hebrew (see Ch. 26:14) saying, "**I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**" The men travelling with Saul heard a voice but saw no one. (According to Acts 9:27, Saul saw Jesus during that encounter.)

Verse 5:

"**Goads**" - These are spikes used to drive animals.

Christ responded to Saul's query, saying, "**I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting...**" Our Lord used His incarnate name to accentuate to Saul that He was the Son of God. The expression "**It is hard for you to kick against the goads**" means that whoever resists or persecutes the Church will only wind up hurting himself.

Verse 6:

The Divine proclamation of Christ's Divinity perplexed Saul; he was also terrified at the enormity of the error that he had been committing against the Church. Thus, he humbly asked Christ, "**Lord, what do You want me to do?**"

The Lord instructed him to proceed to Damascus where he would be told what to do.

In this way, God emphasized the necessity of submitting to the Church and its clergy, to acquire the holy sacraments from them, and to listen to their teachings. It is insufficient for a person to have a personal relationship with God, away from the fold of the Church and the guidance, through the Church, of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 7:

Saul's entourage was also terrified, since they saw the light and heard the voice, yet they neither saw anyone, nor understood what was said.

Verse 8:

"...without sight..." - This is because he had seen Christ (see Acts 9:27) with His bright light - the accompanying men did not lose their sight since they saw the light but did not see Christ. That was God's prompting for Saul's humility - the gateway to a spiritual lifestyle.

"Then Saul arose from the ground [after having lost his sight temporarily], **and when his eyes were opened he saw no one** [after seeing Christ we can see nothing and no one else]. **But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus"** [thus, he entered Damascus humbly, in a completely different form from what he had originally planned/anticipated].

Verse 9:

Saul remained for **"three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank."** Likely, he spent his time meditating and praying.

+ Thus, out of love, the Lord intervenes in our life, to change our course at the right moment. Therefore, we should always discern His voice, and obey Him.

2. Belief - baptism - debut of service - verses 10 - 22:

"Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief

priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ." (Acts 9:10 - 22)

Verses 10 - 12:

"...a certain disciple..." - This denotes "a Christian."

"...a vision..." - A vision is something seen in a dream, trance, or religious ecstasy, especially a supernatural appearance that usually conveys a revelation.

"...of Tarsus..." - This means that he hailed from "Tarsus," a famous city in Asia Minor (in today's Turkey.)

"...he is praying..." - Now, he prays humbly, as opposed to his antecedent prayers as a proud Pharisee.

"...in a vision he has seen..." - Although Saul was awake, and unable to see surrounding people or objects, God revealed to him a spiritual scene, namely, **"a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."**

The Lord appeared to a devout Christian priest named Ananias who, eventually, baptized Saul, and told him, **"Arise and go to the street called Straight."** That street was a mile-long, an east-west oriented street, split into three parts by rows of magnificent columns - it exists unto our present day.

The Lord directed Ananias to proceed to **"the house of Judas,"** where he would find Saul praying. The Lord also gave consistent indications to both Saul and Ananias, that the latter would put his hands on Saul's eyes, restoring his eyesight.

Verses 13 & 14:

Given Saul's reputation at the time - his adversity towards Christians - Ananias was perplexed at the Lord's instruction to go to Saul. Nevertheless, he obeyed the Lord.

Verses 15 & 16:

"Gentiles" - Saul/Paul would preach to nations other than Jews; that was beyond the Jews' understanding, since they believed that they were God's chosen people and that the Messiah would only come for their benefit.

"Kings" - This refers to the kings and rulers before whom, eventually, Paul was tried - those included Felix, Festus, Agrippa and Nero.

"The children of Israel" - Upon arrival at any town/city, Paul preached initially to the Jews, then to the Gentiles.

The Lord reassured Ananias, saying "[Paul] **is a chosen vessel of Mine...**" who would proclaim Christ's name not only to the children of Israel, but also to kings and Gentiles. That was indeed fulfilled throughout Paul's evangelical journeys. The Lord also indicated to Ananias that Paul would suffer much for Christ's sake. Today, Christians continue to suffer for Christ's sake.

Verse 17 - 19:

Ananias was reassured and proceeded to "the house of Judas." He lay his hands on Saul and blessed him (he did not ordain him.) He addressed Saul as **"brother"** and told him, **"the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit [after baptism]."**

Scales fell from Saul's eyes confirming the miracle. He then ate after having fasted and prayed for three days. He spent a few days with Damascus' Christians - thus, the wolf was transformed into a lamb.

Verse 20:

"Immediately" - Paul started preaching immediately after his baptism - he also preached in Damascus after his return from Arabia (see Galatians 1:17).

"Synagogues" - The apostles preached in synagogues citing prophecies to prove their message.

The early Church started its service as a progeny emerging from the Jewish nation; this helped Christianity's spread among the Jews. Saul preached Christ and His Divinity in the Jewish synagogues. It should be noted though, that according to Galatians 1:16 - 18, he spent three years in seclusion in the Arabian desert, where God **"revealed His Son to him."** After his encounter with Peter and James in Jerusalem, some people referred to Paul as the "thirteenth apostle."

Verse 21:

Paul's service was met with some trepidation from the Jews, who knew his past in persecuting the Jerusalemite Christians - he was now numbered among those whom he antecedently persecuted.

Verse 22:

Not only did Paul's eloquence amaze the Jews, but also his knowledge of the law and the prophets, proving that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah.

Nothing is impossible for God - who would have imagined that such a transformation would materialize?!

+ "Saul" is a Hebrew name meaning "prayed for;" "Paul" has the Latin meaning of "small, humble." He Who transformed Saul into Paul continues to seek our permission to change us into sincere children of His. God is capable of changing you regardless of the extent of your sins or weaknesses - He is your omnipotent Creator. Do not reject God's voice, either within you, or through messages from the Church or its servants. Do not immerse yourself in sin or ignore the words of God. Rather, arise, confident in His support - you will then redeem your life and become as great as Paul....

3. The escape from Damascus - verses 23 - 30:

"Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket. And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus." (Acts 9:23 - 30)

Verse 23:

After having completed three years of seclusion in the Arabian desert, Saul returned to Damascus. The Jews, irritated by his evangelism, plotted to kill him, as they had done with Stephen.

Verse 24:

The Jews had arranged with the city's governor to have Saul arrested as he was leaving - so they had the city's gates watched. Their plot, though, became known to Saul.

Verse 25:

"Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket." Thus, he left the city, unseen by the Jews, and Christ's words were fulfilled: ***"When they persecute you in this city, flee to another"*** (Matthew 10:23) and evangelism spread. Saul fled from Damascus, contrary to his earlier expectations, that he would lead Christians out of it to be tortured and killed in Jerusalem.

Verse 26:

"...when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple." They were apprehensive, thinking he was spying for the Jews.

Verse 27:

"Barnabas" - He was among Christ's twelve disciples. According to Acts 4:36 & 37, he was also named Joses, a Levite hailing from Cyprus, and ***"having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."***

Barnabas intervened, and brought Saul to Peter and James (see Galatians 1:18 & 19), who were still in Jerusalem (likely, the rest were evangelizing elsewhere). Barnabas told them about Saul's sincere faith, Christ appearance to him on the road to Damascus, and his service in Damascus.

Verse 28:

Saul remained with Peter and James in Jerusalem for fifteen days, following which he went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:18 - 21).

Verses 29 & 30:

Saul ***"spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists [Greek-speaking Jews]."*** He debated with the Hellenists most likely in the same synagogues where Stephen preached - ***"but they attempted to kill him."*** Therefore, ***"when the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus."*** He subsequently spent three or four years in Tarsus (see Ch. 22:17 - 21). It should also be noted that God had instructed him to leave Jerusalem.

+ Do not hesitate in proclaiming the truth, regardless of any resistance or hardships you may encounter - rest assured that God will protect you to proclaim His name. Also, you should not waste time in futile debates - flee evil, and continue your positive work in drawing people closer to God.

4. Healing Aeneas - verses 31 - 35:

"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda. There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately. So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord."
(Acts 9:31 - 35)

Verse 31:

"....the churches....had peace...." - Jewish persecution of the Church in Jerusalem had subsided due to Saul's transformation from persecuter to believer, to believers' dispersal to other cities, and to Jewish general preoccupation with resisting Roman authorities.

"....walking in the fear of the Lord..." - This imparted a spiritual lifestyle which, in turn, attracted others to the Faith.

"....the comfort of the Holy Spirit..." - This refers to the Holy Spirit's encouragement and support for God's children.

The Church extended from Jerusalem to Samaria and other regions of Judaea, including Galilee. Persecution subsided after Stephen's death; the Jews were preoccupied with resisting the Roman emperor, Caligula, who had ordered the erection of a statue of himself in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (an order that he eventually rescinded after Caligula was warned by the governor of Syria of the disturbances among the Jews that it would cause).

Verse 32:

"Lydda" - Lydda is a town located about 35 kilometers (22 miles) northwest of Jerusalem and 15 kilometers (9 miles) from the Mediterranean Sea. Lydda is in the coastal plain and is now called by its Arabic name, Lod.

Peter's outreach journey included a visit to Lydda. It should be noted that, initially, he reached out exclusively to Jewish converts, since the Faith had not yet spread to Gentiles. Christians were first labelled "disciples," then "believers," then "saints," then "brethren," and, finally, "Christians."

Verses 33 & 34:

"There [in Lydda] he [Peter] found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed." Then he arose immediately.

Verse 35:

"Sharon" - The Plain of Sharon was an area of ancient Israel that was bounded by Mount Carmel and its mountain range in the north and Joppa in the south. Its western border was the Mediterranean Sea. The miracle, having been seen by all those in the region of Sharon, edified their faith.

+ ***"To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven...." (Ecclesiastes 3:1) The Lord is capable of healing at the right time. Let not the length or severity of an ailment or a hardship discourage you; rather, use it to strengthen your relationship with God, trusting a timely solution through His omnipotence and wisdom.***

5. Raising Tabitha - verses 36 - 43:

"At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them. But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up; and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner." (Acts 9:36 - 43)



Peter prayed and raised Tabitha from the dead

Verse 36:

Joppa was an important port of Judaea, about 75 kilometres south of Caesarea, and 80 kilometres west of Jerusalem.

A devout Christian girl named Tabitha resided in Joppa. "Tabitha" is a female name of Aramaic origin, meaning "gazelle" or "gracious."

Verses 37 - 39:

"But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her [according to a Christian custom],....And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them [likely, they believed that Peter could raise her from the dead]. Then Peter arose and went with them....all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them."

Verses 40 & 41:

"...she sat up..." - This indicates that she had risen from the dead.

"...he gave her his hand.." - This reassured her that she lived again and would be able to join the others assembled outside.

"saints" - This refers to all believers on Christ.

"...Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed..." - Peter prayed to the Lord in private, so that no one would see him - since he did not seek fame. He prayed, asking Christ to raise her - then she rose immediately.

Verses 42 & 43:

"...he stayed many days..." - Peter resided in the house of Simon the tanner for about three years.

+ ***In Tobias 4:7 we read, "Give alms out of thy substance, and turn not away thy face from any poor person: for so it shall come to pass that the face of the Lord shall not be ..."***

May you love giving, since this is a great blessing; when you give a needy person, you are offering Christ's love - personally. Do not delay in helping all around you - even through a small deed or a kind word. If you are incapable of doing or saying - then your prayers will move God's mercies to help them.



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Chapter 10

acceptance of Gentiles into the Faith

1. Cornelius' vision - verses 1 - 8:

***"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa."* (Acts 10:1 - 8)**

Verse 1:

"Caesarea" - It was a city on the shore of the Mediterranean, on the great road from Tyre to Egypt, about 100 kilometres northwest of Jerusalem, at the northern extremity of the plain of Sharon.

"The Italian Regiment" - This refers to a cohort of volunteer Roman soldiers recruited in Italy and stationed in Caesarea when Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius. It consisted mostly of Italians who could not find service in the Praetorian Guard.

"Cornelius" - This is a masculine name of Latin origin meaning "of a horn." He was centurion of the "Italian Regiment."

Verse 2:

Cornelius, along with his entire household, were Gentiles. However, they "feared God....gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always..."

This verse identifies five virtues that Cornelius had:

1. **"A devout man...."** - He led a righteous lifestyle, fully submitting to God.
2. **"One who feared God..."** - He did what was pleasing to God - shunning sin.
3. **"With all his household..."** - He cared for all his household's spiritual life.
4. **"Gave alms generously..."** - Despite his being a Roman, he was compassionate towards the poor and needy, contrary to Roman practice towards their colonies.
5. **"Who.... prayed to God always...."** - Although, initially, he was a pagan, most likely he must have heard of the God of Israel, and started to worship the God Whom he did not know.

Verse 3:

"About the ninth hour of the day he [Cornelius] saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!"

Verse 4:

"He was afraid..." - The angel's splendour scared him.

"What is it, lord?" - This shows Cornelius' humility and submissiveness to God and His angels.

"....a memorial before God..." - This means that God was pleased with him and accepted his good deeds.

Cornelius spoke to the angel and asked him what he should do; so the angel told him that his good deeds were pleasing to God.

Verses 5 & 6:

"Simon" was Simon Peter's initial name, and **"Peter"** was the name that Christ gave him.

"By the sea" - The angel gave Cornelius precise instructions for reaching Peter's lodging place.

"....what you must do...." - Put differently, Peter would tell Cornelius the principles and elements of Christianity and proper worship.

A person may be saved through faith, baptism, good deeds, and the holy sacraments. Thus, the angel instructed Cornelius to summon Peter from Joppa, where he had resided after raising Tabitha from the dead.

The angel delegated the task of preaching to Cornelius to Peter, thus demonstrating the Lord's respect for priesthood. We note that Peter started his evangelism to the Jews at Pentecost, and started it to the Gentiles with Cornelius.

Verses 7 & 8:

"...when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier [Cornelius' righteous lifestyle affected some of his troops] *from among those who waited on him continually...*" This indicates Cornelius' obedience to the Lord's instructions - we should follow his example.

+ God recognizes all your worship and good deeds, and showers you with blessings. This is because your service demonstrates your love for God. Continue your prayers, almsgiving and love for all - these prove your sonship to God.

2. Peter's vision - verses 9 - 16:

"The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again." (Acts 10:9 - 16)



Peter's vision

Verse 9:

"...as they went on their journey and drew near the city..." That was about a twelve-hour journey (from Caesarea to Joppa).

"...the housetop..." - That was a quiet place well-suited for prayer.

"...the sixth hour..." - That was about noon in today's time scale. The Jews used to pray the third and ninth hours - the more pious ones added the sixth.

Verse 10:

"...he fell into a trance..." - God caused him to sleep as though he were unconscious.

Peter prayed, **"Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat..."** He fell into the trance while they were preparing for him something to eat...Prayer is helpful in revealing God's will...

Verses 11 - 13:

Peter **"fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air..."**

"...a voice came to him..." - A voice from heaven - hence, from God.

The sheet descending from heaven indicates that it represented a heavenly proclamation. Through the notion of many kinds of food, God declared to Peter that He desires salvation for all Gentiles also - not merely for the Jews. It should be noted that the sheet descending from heaven included animals that, according to Jewish law, were unclean (see Leviticus 11:2 - 7 and Deuteronomy 14:3 - 20).

Verse 14:

"Not so Lord!" - That was an exclamation, rather than a defiance of the Lord's order, since Mosaic law directed Jews not to eat what was then considered to be "unclean" - some of which was on the sheet. However, in the New Testament, **"To the pure all things are pure..."** (Titus 1:15).

The Divine order amazed Peter, being a Jew, since Jews refrained from eating forbidden food.

Verse 15:

"...a voice spoke to him again the second time..." - The second time, the voice gave the same instruction to Peter, thus emphasizing that all creatures are clean - since they are all God's creation.

"This was done three times..." - That was a confirmation that Gentiles were also the target of Christ's redemption, and that the trance was purposeful - not merely an illusion.

This Divine proclamation fulfills the law, negating the belief, that Jews had, that some things were unclean.

+ *Christ purified us, as Gentiles, and opened for us the door to salvation - we should live it and fully enjoy it.*

Let us have an open loving heart, embracing all, confident that God desires salvation for everyone. Furthermore, some people who may seem wicked, could believe, and beat you to God's kingdom.

3. The men's arrival - verses 17 - 23:

"Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him." (Acts 10:17 - 23)

Verses 17 & 18:

"Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant...." At that point, Cornelius' men arrived, and asked for Peter.

Verses 19 & 20:

"...three men..." - That was the sign the Holy Spirit gave Peter, to reassure him that God had sent them, and that he should accompany them.

"...doubting nothing..." - Peter could have doubted, since the men were Gentiles.

Verse 21:

"...for what reason have you come..." - The Holy Spirit had not revealed to Peter the reason for those men's visit.

Verse 22:

"**Centurion**" - That was one of the Roman army's generals residing in Rome's colonies.

"...a holy angel..." - This singles out the angel as Divine-sent, as opposed to the fallen Satanic angels.

The men told Peter the story of the righteous Cornelius, and said that they had come seeking Peter according to the angel's instructions to Cornelius.

Verse 23:

Peter hosted them overnight, allowing them to rest prior to their return journey. Some believers from Joppa subsequently accompanied Peter to witness the Gentiles' acceptance.

+ *It is incumbent on the servant to obey God, without seeking his own benefits, regardless of God's commandments' apparent difficulty. God will provide help to execute His will, and provide, eventually, an explanation of the power and blessings of the commandments.*

Do not neglect your confessor's advice - even if against your expectations. Rest assured that you will acquire the abundant blessings of obedience.

4. Arrival at Caesarea - verses 24 - 33:

"And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I myself am also a man." And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" So Cornelius said, "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.

When he comes, he will speak to you.' So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.'" (Acts 10:24 - 33)

Verse 24:

One day after their departure from Joppa, they arrived at Caesarea. ***"Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends..."*** Clearly, that indicated the sense of responsibility Cornelius had for his friends and members of his household: he called them to hear the message of salvation. Thus, the righteous spread blessings to those around them and, similarly, the wicked spread evil to their associates...

Verses 25 - 27:

"As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him [as a gesture of respect]." Peter, then, explained to him ***"I myself am also a man"*** - Peter feared that Cornelius might have thought he was an incarnate god, being initially a pagan...Then they both went to where everybody was assembled.

Verses 28 & 29:

"...unlawful..." - Such was the teaching of the Jewish elders, although Mosaic law stipulated that they refrain only from participating in Gentile evil practices and from intermarrying.

"...God has shown me..." - God showed Peter through the sheet descending from heaven during his trance.

"I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?" Peter wanted to know, first hand, what Cornelius wanted - just in case the men had missed something in their narrative.

Without going into details, Peter told them about his vision. He told them that, despite Jewish teaching, ***"how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation..."*** God told him that he should not consider any man common or unclean, hence, he ***"came without objection as soon as I [Peter] was sent for..."***

Verses 30 - 32:

"Four days ago...." - This accounts for the return journey Caesarea-Joppa.

"...this hour..." - As indicated earlier, it was the ninth hour or, in today's time scale, about three o'clock pm.

"..I was fasting..." - This indicates Cornelius' piety, his coupling of prayers with fasting, and his being influenced by Jewish practices and rites.

"...a man...in bright clothing...." - This refers to the angel who had appeared to him.

"...has been heard...remembered...." - God cares about humans' prayers and alms-giving, He guides even those outside the Faith, because of their love for Him.

"....he will speak to you..." - This means that he will explain to you the principles of the sound Faith.

Cornelius narrated to Peter his encounter with the angel, and the angel's instruction to send for Peter in the house of Simon the Tanner.

Verse 33:

"I sent to you immediately..." - This demonstrates Cornelius' obedience to God.

"....you have done well to come....we are all present before God..." - Cornelius welcomed Peter, and submitted to God's direction coming through Peter.

+ *The Holy Spirit paves the way for servants, and prepares the hearts of those served. Let us, therefore, resort to Him for help through prayers, prior to any service undertaking that God sends our way, confident in His might working through us, and opening hearts, regardless of their resistance.*

5. Peter's evangelism - verses 34 - 43:

"Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ--He is Lord of all-- that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."" (Acts 10:34 - 43)

Verse 34:

"Then Peter opened his mouth..." - This indicated the importance of what Peter would say, concerning evangelizing Gentiles, and their acceptance into the Faith.

"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality..." - Through the sheet that descended from heaven, and the angel's appearance to Cornelius, God confirmed His acceptance of Gentiles, and His impartial mercy enveloping all who resort to Him.

Peter started preaching by saying that God shows no preference of one nation over another.

Verse 35:

"...whoever fears Him and works righteousness..." - This refers to those who have a pure conscience, obey the voice of God, shun evil, and perform good deeds.

"...is accepted by Him..." - God accepts such a righteous willingness, proclaiming to the person the good news of salvation, while rendering him a member of His Church. The proof is that Peter preached to all present and baptized them. Accepting to be within the fold of the Church is a prerequisite. The belief that "salvation is available to all without the need for the Church" is false.

Peter confirmed that God accepts all who seek Him - Jews and Gentiles.

Verse 36:

"The word" - This refers to the Bible preached by the Jews.

"...preaching peace..." - The ultimate goal of the Bible's message is reconciliation of mankind with God, as well as inner peace through reconciliation of the spirit with the body.

"...through Jesus Christ..." - The holy Bible's message is based on the blood of Christ our Saviour and Redeemer, the head of the Church.

"...He is Lord of all..." - That was a declaration of Christ's Divinity, hence, He is Lord of all humanity, Jews and Gentiles, and He came for the salvation of all.

Verse 37:

"...that word..." - Christ's preaching in Galilee and Judaea.

"...the baptism which John preached..." - Christ's evangelism started after John the Baptist had paved the way for it through Christ's baptism.

Thus, Peter pointed out that Christ started His preaching after He had been baptized by John the Baptist.

Verse 38:

"Jesus of Nazareth" - This highlights Christ's humanity and His hometown where He lived most of His life (Nazareth of Galilee).

"God was with Him..." - This points out Christ's Divinity, through which He performed miracles and cast out demons.

Thus, Christ is/was Jesus of Nazareth, Who came to redeem mankind, cure ailments, and save many from Satan's bondage.

Verse 39:

Peter continued his discourse saying, **"...we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, Whom they killed by hanging on a tree [at the hands of the Romans]."**

Verses 40 & 41:

"...Him God raised up on the third day..." - In verse 38, Christ's humanity was proclaimed; in this verse, His Divinity is proclaimed - hence the Divinity, united with Christ's humanity, raised Him up - hence, Christ raised Himself up from the dead. This is accentuated here, so that people would not believe, erroneously, that He is a different God from the Old Testament One known to the Jews. Therefore, it is One God Who raised Christ - put differently, the Divinity, united with Christ's humanity, raised Him up from the dead (as indicated earlier).

After Christ's resurrection, He appeared to those who had believed in Him - thus, He ate and drank with His disciples to confirm His resurrection.

Verse 42:

After His resurrection, Christ **"commanded us** [His disciples and those to whom He appeared] **to preach to the people** [the whole world]..." proclaiming that He would come, the last day, to judge the living and the dead, and give each one according to his deeds.

Verse 43:

Peter concluded his discourse saying that, **"To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."** This provides further proof regarding the holy Bible's message.

+ *This is the joyful message of salvation, namely, we share an inheritance with all the saints - this is our dearest acquisition from our journey on earth - let us guard it carefully with all our senses, contemplating, with thanks, God's care for us.*

6. Descent of the Holy Spirit - baptism - verses 44 - 48:

"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days." (Acts 10:44 - 48)

Verse 44:

"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word." The Holy Spirit's descent signalled their having been accepted in the Faith - although they had not been baptized yet. However, baptism is the entry point for Christianity - the Holy Spirit subsequently indwells the baptized through Chrismation. In this case, the opposite occurred, indicating to the Jews that, like them, Gentiles were accepted in the Faith.

Verse 45:

"...the gift of the Holy Spirit..." - This refers to speaking with tongues, as mentioned in verse 46. Christians of Jewish origin, who had accompanied Peter from Joppa, were surprised that Gentiles had been accepted in the Faith.

Verses 46 & 47:

Peter's companions saw and heard the Gentiles, assembled in Cornelius' house, speaking with tongues and praising God - similarly to what had happened on Pentecost, about eight years earlier, and which had been confined to Jews. Therefore, Peter declared: ***"Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"***

Verse 48:

Peter consequently, ***"commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord [without their prior circumcision]"***.

Both Jews and Gentiles then lived together for several days, having become one in Christ.

+ If you grew up within the Church's fold, do not despise those who strayed and joined the Church at a later age - they could grow in the love of Christ and beat you to His kingdom.

Do not be proud of your origins or your religious knowledge - rather, humble yourself before all - then you will see Christ in them, and learn from them.



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Chapter 11

Peter defends acceptance of Gentiles into the Faith

1. Debating the Gentiles' acceptance - verses 1 - 18:

"Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." (Acts 11:1 - 18)

Verse 1:

"...the word of God..." - This refers to belief on Christ.

The other apostle, founders of the early Church in Jerusalem, heard of the Gentiles' acceptance at Peter's hands, and had difficulty accepting it.

Verses 2 & 3:

"...those of the circumcision..." - This refers to baptized Christians of Jewish origin.

Upon Peter's arrival at Jerusalem, he was met with strong objections from originally-Jewish Christians, since they felt that his mingling with Gentiles contravened Mosaic Law.

Verse 4:

Peter started by narrating what had happened, step-by-step, **"in order from the beginning,"** to prove to them that it was God's decision, rather than his, to accept Gentiles.

Verses 5 - 7:

Peter told them about his trance on the roof in Joppa - hence, the sheet descending from heaven bearing all kinds of animals and fowl, plus God's instruction to eat, since God's creations are all clean.

Verses 8 - 10:

Peter initially objected, stating that he never consumed anything unclean; however, God emphasized three times that nothing is unclean, thereby signalling the start of the New Testament, and ending all symbolisms of Mosaic Law.

Verse 11:

Peter subsequently linked the message conveyed by his trance to the arrival of Cornelius' messengers.

Verse 12:

"...the man's house..." - This refers to Cornelius' house.

The Holy Spirit reassured Peter about the trance's genuine message, and instructed him to accompany the men. Peter took with him six Christians from Joppa, to witness his encounter with Cornelius.

Verses 13 & 14:

They entered Cornelius' house being influenced by the angel's direction, rather than their own opinion, bearing the message of salvation to young and old.

Verses 15 & 16:

"...as upon us at the beginning..." - This refers to Pentecost, when the early Church had started by the Holy Spirit's descent upon the assembled apostles.

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Peter's audience proves that the Gentiles had been accepted. Peter then recalled Christ's teaching about New Testament believers' baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Verse 17:

"...the same gift..." - This refers to the descent of the Holy Spirit and His gifts.

"...who was I that I could withstand God?" - God has instructed us to accept Gentiles into the Faith - no one can oppose God's decision...

Verse 18:

"...they became silent..." - They were convinced and there was no other ground for their objections.

"...and they glorified God..." - That was proof of their conviction, and joy in the Lord's work.

"...repentance to life..." - This refers to life as members of the Church and, eventually, eternal life.

The Jerusalemite Church was fully convinced, ended the debate, submitted to God's will, and praised God for having accepted Gentiles without circumcision.

+ Submit to the words of the holy Bible and the Church's teaching - even if your mind failed to comprehend all. At that point, God will convince you, because of your love for, and obedience to, Him. Persist in a life of repentance and obedience to God - then you will enjoy life with Him.

2. The service's extension to Antioch - verses 19 - 30:

"Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the

disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:19 - 30)

Verse 19:

"Phoenicia" - This is today's Lebanon; its most important cities are Tyre and Sidon - ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Its name is derived from Greek meaning "land of dates or palm trees."

"Cyprus" - This is an island in the Mediterranean.

"Antioch" - This city lies in Syria, on the river Orontes, about 25 kilometres from the Mediterranean, and some 500 kilometres north of Jerusalem. It was the metropolis of Syria, and afterwards became the capital of the Roman province in Asia. It ranked third, after Rome and Alexandria, in point of importance, of the cities of the Roman empire. It was called the "first city of the East." Christianity was early introduced into it, and the name "Christian" was first applied here to its professors. It is intimately connected with the early history of the gospel. It was the great central point whence missionaries to the Gentiles were sent forth. It was the birth-place of the famous Christian father Chrysostom, who died A.D. 407. It bears the modern name of Antakia, and is now a Turkish town.

With the exception of the apostles, believers dispersed from Jerusalem - to Phoenecia, Cyprus and Antioch - after the persecution which started with Stephen's martyrdom. They preached solely to their Jewish compatriots.

Verses 20 & 21:

Some of the Jews hailing from Cyprus and Cyrene, being less fanatic than those hailing from Palestine, evangelized in Antioch to the pagan Greeks. Through God's help, many believed.

Verse 22:

"...news of these things..." - This refers to the Faith's spread not only among Jews, but also among Antiochian Gentiles.

Having received the news, the Jerusalem Church dispatched Barnabas, an able Cypriot preacher, to help the service in Antioch.

Verses 23 & 24:

"...full of the Holy Spirit..." - He was a righteous vessel through which the Holy Spirit worked powerfully towards good deeds and effective evangelism.

Barnabas rejoiced at seeing the Antiochian Christians. He preached to them to edify their faith. He was helped, by the Holy Spirit, in spreading the Faith further and in edifying believers.

Verse 25:

At that point in time, Saul resided in an unknown location in Tarsus. Barnabas felt it would be beneficial if they teamed up to serve in Antioch - according to Ch. 9:27, they had served together in Jerusalem.

Verse 26:

"So it was that for a whole year they [Barnabas and Paul] assembled with the church and taught a great many people..." That was about ten years since Christ's crucifixion. Furthermore, **"...the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."** This tells us that the Person of Christ was the focus of believers', and the Church's, lives in Antioch in those days.

Verse 27:

"...in these days prophets [those were Jerusalemite Christians who prophesied] came from Jerusalem to Antioch...." God dispatched to Antioch believers having the gift of prophesying.

Verse 28:

Those prophets foretold **"...a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar [in the year 44A.D.]..."**

Verse 29:

"Then the disciples [Antiochian believers], each according to his ability, determined [the Antiochian Church elders decided to send donations to the Christians of Jerusalem] to send relief [donations] to the brethren [the Christians] dwelling in Judea."

The Antiochian Church's love became immediately evident. Believers collected what they could to help the Jerusalemite Christians undergoing persecutions from the Jews.

Verse 30:

They sent their collections to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Saul. The Jerusalemite elders received all the donations.

+ Barnabas was a great, kind-hearted man. He loved to share the service with others, rather than caching it for himself. We also see in Ch. 4:37 that he sold his possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles. May God grant us the greatest of virtues, namely, love and open-heartedness. Then we would give the needy, and share the service with those around us, thereby giving them priority in being recognized and honoured, leading to their encouragement and joy in serving the Lord.



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Chapter 12

James' martyrdom - Peter's imprisonment - Peter's escape



Peter's escape

1. James' martyrdom - Peter's arrest - Verses 1-5:

***"Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church."* (Acts 12:1 - 5)**

Verse 1:

"Now about that time..." - That was around the year 44 A.D. at the time when Barnabas and Saul had arrived with donations for the poor Jerusalemite Christians.

"...some..." - This refers to some of the Christians.

"Herod" - This name recurs several times in the holy Bible. Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1 - 3) murdered Bethlehem's children, and his son Aristobulus. Herod the Second, also called Herod Antipas, murdered John the Baptist (Mark 6:14). Herod the Third, Herodias' brother, grandson of Herod the Great, also named Herod Agrippa I, murdered the apostle James (Acts 12:1 & 2).

Herod Agrippa started persecuting (harassing) Jerusalem's Christians. That is considered to be the first round of Roman persecutions to the Christians - prior persecutions were all by Jews.

Verse 2:

"James the brother of John" - He was one of the three who had accompanied Christ more times than any of the other disciples. John, his brother, was alive after James' murder - the Book of Acts was also written after his murder.

Herod had James beheaded - as his uncle had done with John the Baptist - to please the Jews.

Thus, James drank of the cup, as Christ had told him (see Matthew 20:22), when his mother had asked a position for her son at the Lord's right hand.

Verse 3:

Herod was an outsider trying to assert his rule over the Jews - thus, he tried to appease them by persecuting Christians.

Herod **"proceeded further to seize Peter also....during the Days of Unleavened Bread."** Since Peter was a prominent figure - Herod intended to murder him too as he had murdered James.

Verse 4:

"....four squads of soldiers..." - In today's terms, a "squad" consists of 7 - 14 soldiers. Likely, two soldiers held Peter's hands and two guarded the prison doors - guards were changed on a three-hour-shift basis.

"...to bring him before the people after Passover..." Herod intended to have Peter murdered after the feast, since murder was not permitted during the Jewish feast - another attempt on his part to please the Jews.

Verse 5:

"...constant prayer..." - This accentuates the depth of the Church's love for Peter, and the strength of the Church's faith in God's ability to rescue him. The power of prayer is the sole recourse through which the Church confronts the world.

+ *Be not perturbed by the extent of others' abuse or mistreatment. Raise your heart in prayer, trusting God's support. Though He may permit trials your way for your benefit, He is capable of limiting others' abuse, and responding to your prayers - since He loves you.*

2. Peter's escape - verses 6 - 19:

"And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel." Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place. Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not

found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there." (Acts 12:6 - 19)

Verse 6:

"...Peter was sleeping..." - Likely, that was during the guard's shift change at night - Peter's absence was discovered (see verse 18) in the morning.

Peter was sleeping calmly, fully confident in God's economy. He was chained to two soldiers, while two others were guarding the prison door.

Verse 7:

"Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him [the angel stood by Peter], and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands [the guards never felt it]."

Verses 8 & 9:

Peter thought he was in a trance, as the angel told him, **"Gird yourself and tie on your sandals....Put on your garment and follow me."**

Verse 10:

So he [Peter] went out and followed him [the angel], and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him."

Verse 11:

"....when Peter had come to himself..." - Peter became aware of what had transpired. He realized that the angel had rescued him from Herod and from the Jews who hated him.

"...I know for certain..." - Peter became certain that God had brought him out of prison.

"...the expectation of the Jewish people.." - This refers to the expectations of those who hated him and wanted to get rid of him.

Verses 12 - 14:

"..the house of Mary, the mother of John [his Jewish name] whose surname was Mark [his Greek name].." Customarily, people had two names in those days.

That is the house where our Lord had the Last Supper with His disciples, and where the disciples assembled routinely, and where they were assembled praying at that point in time. ***"And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate."***

Verse 15:

The assembled disciples disbelieved her, and told her that she was hallucinating. However, the maid insisted that it was indeed Peter at the gate of the house.

Here we note a puzzling situation: the disciples prayed and believed in the power of prayer - nevertheless, their faith was insufficient to believe that their prayers would be answered!

Furthermore, Christians believed that for every person there is a guardian angel - thus, they told the maid, ***"It is his angel."***

Verse 16:

Peter continued to knock - then they opened the door and were amazed at seeing him.

Verse 17:

However, Peter motioned to them with his hand to keep silent, and ***"he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison."***

Peter then asked them to ***"Go, tell these things to James*** [James the apostle, son of Alpheus, one of the twelve - bishop of Jerusalem at that time] ***and to the brethren."*** Peter subsequently ***"departed and went to another place,"*** likely, to escape Herod's spies.

Verse 18:

"Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers [they were not only concerned about Peter's disappearance, but they also feared Herod's punishment] ***about what had become of Peter*** [they could not understand how he managed to escape without leaving any trace].

Verse 19:

"But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there."

Roman law stipulated that prison guards would suffer the same fate awaiting a prisoner who had escaped while under their guard. Herod subsequently went to Caesarea (a significant city on the Mediterranean's coast - and the Romans' headquarters) where he spent the rest of his (short) life.

+ *Everything in our life is subject to God's perfect economy - nothing is determined solely by our actions. Thus, Peter escaped, and it was Herod who was destined to die. Let us not be perturbed by evil-doers' insurgence, or by worldly trials; God is capable of rescuing us and changing the course of events.*

3. Herod's death - verses 20 - 25:

"Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country. So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark." (Acts 12:20 - 25)

Verse 20:

Tyre and Sidon were cities on the Mediterranean coast in today's Lebanon.

"Now Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon [because they were competing, commercially, against Caesarea]; but they came to him with one accord [they sorted out their differences and came to Herod hoping to resume commercial relationships with him], and having made Blastus the king's personal aide their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king's country."

Verses 21 & 22:

"...on a set day..." - Likely, that was one of Caesarea's national feasts. When Herod, attired in his regal clothing, sat on his throne and started talking to his pagan audience about forgiving them, they flattered him, shouting that he was a god - not a human being.

Verse 23:

Herod believed his audience's flattery, "***Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died.***" He died at the age of 54, during the fourth year of his reign.

Verse 24:

"...the word of God..." - This refers to evangelizing - the gospel of Christ. This is the conclusion of Chapter 12, which started by James' murder and Peter's imprisonment, and ended by Herod's death and the spread of the word of God.

Verse 25:

"...their ministry..." - This refers to the distribution of the Antiochian Church's donations to the needy of the Jerusalemite Church.

Finally, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, "***and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark*** [Barnabas' cousin]."

+ *Never allow yourself to be puffed-up, regardless of your authority or power. God is long-suffering, and capable of punishing the wicked - though He gives them a chance to repent. Be humble, let not your weaknesses perturb you, and trust God's supportive power - as He supported the early Church, so will He support you through His grace and love.*



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Chapter 13

the first journey of Barnabas and Paul



1. Prelude to the first journey - verses 1 - 3:

"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:1 - 3)

Verse 1:

"**....prophets....**" - Those could have been gifted either with foretelling the future, or with preaching, teaching and exhorting the audience to prepare for the kingdom of heaven. Examples of the former were **Agabus,showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar** [Ch. 11:28]," plus St. Paul's arrest (Ch. 21:10 & 11).

Paul's evangelical journeys start in this chapter. Earlier chapters addressed Peter's work. Paul and Barnabas started their evangelical work together, during the first journey, which included preaching in Syria, Turkey and Cyprus.

The journey started in Antioch, Syria, where the first Gentile Church was founded, and which included teachers such as "**Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.**"

Verses 2 & 3:

"**As they ministered to the Lord....**" - This refers to leading the congregation in prayers, preaching, teaching and outreach to believers.

"**....and fasted...**" - This accentuates the importance of fasting and prayer, as two significant tenets of the early Church.

"**....the Holy Spirit said...**" - The Holy Spirit communicated with them in some fashion we do not know (likely via an angel, a vision,)

Thus, "**the Holy Spirit said, "....separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them away...**" The importance of fasting and prayer is emphasized once more, prior to any service; this also shows the Church's authority in directing servants throughout their service - although Paul and Barnabas were the Church leaders, they needed the Church's direction prior to commencing their service.

The following was Paul's and Barnabas' itinerary (see the verses below):

1. From Antioch (Syria) to Selucea (Syria) by land.
2. Onwards to Salamis (Cyprus) by sea.
3. From Salamis to Paphos (Cyprus) by land.
4. Onwards to Perga in Pamphylia (Turkey).
5. By land to Antioch in Pisidia (Turkey), then to Iconium (see Ch. 14).
6. From Iconium they "**fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region.**" (see Ch. 14:6)

It is worth noting that Lystra, Asia Minor was Timothy's hometown (Acts 16:1), and was the town where Paul was stoned (see Acts 14:19).

7. Finally, Paul's first journey took him through Antioch Pisidia (Turkey), Perga, Attalia, then back to Antioch (Syria) where the journey had started.

That was a 3-year journey (45 - 48), covered in Chapters 13 and 14.

+ *Great indeed is the Holy Spirit's economy! Significant fruit is yielded by submitting to Him. Seek God's will before making any decision. Pray and fast often, especially before significant undertakings.*

2. Evangelizing in Cyprus - verses 4 - 12:

"So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord." (Acts 13:4 - 12)

Verse 4:

"....sent out by the Holy Spirit..." - This is a confirmation that they had been sent by God, rather than according to their own initiative.

"Seleucia," was an ancient city on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, a few kilometres from the Orontes River and Antioch.

"Cyprus," was part of the Roman Empire, (still today's Cyprus, a Mediterranean island), and had a large Jewish community.

Barnabas was born in Cyprus (see Ch. 4:36), which was about 80 kilometres from Antioch (Syria).

Verse 5:

"Salamis," in the south-east corner of Cyprus, was its most important trading port. The two apostles started preaching in the synagogues there, accompanied by Mark - then, their disciple.

Verse 6:

They crossed from Salamis to Paphos, a distance of about 160 kilometres, most likely preaching along the way (given that the length of the entire island is about 250 kilometres)....

"Paphos," was the capital of Cyprus, and the headquarters of the Roman governor. It was identified with the cult of the goddess Aphrodite. The name **"Bar-Jesus"** means "the son of Joshua." The apostles met that Jewish sorcerer as they traversed the island.

Verse 7:

"...who was with the proconsul..." - Bar-Jesus was one of the proconsul's close advisors, entertaining him with sorcery and prophecies.

"....the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man....called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God." He was an intelligent man, seeking to hear the truth, from Paul and Barnabas, about this "new teaching."

Verse 8:

"But....the sorcerer....withstood them... seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith." - Bar-Jesus argued and tried to mock them, confident in the proconsul's trust in him. Seeing the proconsul's inclination to believe the two apostles' message, he tried to dissuade him from believing in Christ.

Verse 9:

"...Then Saul, who also is called Paul...." - As indicated earlier, "Paul" is a Latin name meaning "small" or "humble." Likely, he felt it would be more palatable to Gentiles to use the Latin version of his name. The Holy Spirit's support rendered Paul to rebuke Bar-Jesus vehemently, and punish him publicly; in this instance, Paul acted ahead of Barnabas.

Verse 10:

"O full of all deceit and all fraud [that was the sorcerer's modus operandi], you son of the devil [since Satan is a liar and the father of it - John 8:44] , you enemy of all righteousness [he tried to dissuade people from the truth and righteousness] will you not cease [that was a rhetorical question to an intelligent person persisting in evil]..."

Verse 11:

"...the hand of the Lord is upon you [God will punish you to induce your repentance], and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time [for a period of time allowing his repentance]." And immediately a dark mist fell on him [he lost his sight completely], and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand..."

Paul asked the Lord to smite the sorcerer with blindness, in order to lead him to repentance. The Lord responded to Paul's request.

Verse 12:

"Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord [he was amazed at the power of the apostles' message and heaven's immediate response]."

+ It is true indeed that we reap what we sow. Thus, the Lord brightens the path for whoever enlightens others - and the converse is true. Take care to do good, and to help those around you; distance yourself from gossip, judging others, and evil deeds, regardless of prevailing compelling circumstances - rest assured that, eventually, good deeds are rewarded bountifully.

3. Ministry in Antioch/Pisidia - verses 13 - 41:

"Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it. Now for a time of about forty years He put up with their ways in the wilderness. And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet. And afterward they asked for a king; so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when He had removed him, He raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.' From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a

Savior--Jesus-- after John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.' Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead. He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. And we declare to you glad tidings--that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.' Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.' For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: "Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you.' ""
(Acts 13:13 - 41)

Verse 13:

"Perga in Pamphylia" - Perga was the capital of the Roman province of Pamphilia, which is the southern coastal province of Antalya in today's Turkey.

The apostles sailed to Turkey's southern coast, at which point St. Mark left them, and returned to Jerusalem (St. Luke did not mention the reason). However, we know that Paul was upset and argued with Barnabas - who defended Mark - about it (see Ch. 15:37 - 39). Paul, eventually (see 2 Timothy 4:11) reinstated his love and trust in Mark.

Verse 14:

"Antioch in Pisidia" - Antioch of Pisidia was an important city during Roman times. Pisidia was a mountainous region in the south-central section of Asia Minor. In 295 B.C. the Romans created the province of Pisidia with Antioch as its capital (which is quite different from Antioch, Syria, by the Orontes River.) The road to Antioch from Perga was mountainous and dangerous.

"they....went into the synagogue...and sat down" - Many Jews resided in Antioch, Pisidia, in addition to Greek converts to Judaism. The apostles sat down in the place assigned to teachers. Likely, during their trip to Antioch they did not preach - they started their ministry at the synagogue, as was their wont.

Verse 15:

"...men and brethren..." - It would seem that the apostles' general attire indicated that they were strangers - yet, knowledgeable in the holy scriptures. After the readings, they were invited to speak.

Verse 16:

"...then Paul stood up..." - Once more, we note Paul leading, rather than Barnabas, despite the latter being an experienced orator; Paul, nevertheless, had become more famous. He **"motioned with his hand"** to attract his audience's attention.

"Men of Israel, and you who fear God..." - This refers to the Israelites as well as the Greeks who were inclined to hear his teaching, but were not Christian converts yet.

Paul delivered the first sermon recorded in the holy Bible. Quite similar to Stephen's, it summarized the Jewish nation's history, up till Christ's advent, crucifixion and resurrection.

Verses 17 & 18:

"...chose our fathers..." - Paul spoke as a Jew, using the pronoun **"our"** to identify himself as one of them. The **"fathers"** to whom he referred were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, plus Jacob's twelve sons.

"The God of this people....exalted the people....and with an uplifted arm [the ten plagues plus dividing the Red Sea]....He put up with their ways..." - This means that the Israelites' God blessed them with might, as well as with sons and daughters, and He tolerated their repeated rebellion, their desire to return to Egypt, and their rejection of the promised land.

Paul mentioned God's choosing Abraham and his seed, their estrangement in, and exodus from, Egypt, through God's miracles, and their rebellion-filled sojourn in the wilderness.

Verse 19:

Upon the Israelites' arrival at the promised land, Joshua partitioned among them the land belonging to the seven nations, all descendants of Canaan, son of Ham and grandson of Noah, and all of whom Joshua crushed; when enumerated separately, one of the seven nations is called Canaanites, while the others are the Amorites, Girgashites, Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites and Perizzites. The **"land of Canaan"** lay west of the River Jordan (Aram lay east of the river).

Verse 20:

The Israelites' generation, which followed after Joshua's death, defied Joshua's instructions and **"did evil in the eyes of the Lord...and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them...in His anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them."** (Judges 2:11 - 14) Subsequently, God sent them judges to liberate them - that "era of judges" lasted 450 years, and culminated with the prophet Samuel.

Verse 21:

The Israelites asked Samuel to anoint a king for them; he rebuked them, because God was/is their king. But, in order to please them, **"God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years."**

Verse 22:

Because of his wickedness, God rejected Saul, and anointed David, through Samuel, to be king. David's heart was pure, and he was submissive to God's will.

Verse 23:

"From this man's [David's] seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior--Jesus..." (see 2 Samuel 7:12, 13 & 16 and Psalm 89:34 - 37). This verse was the object of Paul's sermon - the previous ones were a prelude to it.

Verses 24 & 25:

"...as John was finishing his course..." - This refers to John's completion of his ministry, his preaching, and his baptism of repentance. All Jews believed and revered John the Baptist; he paved the way for Christ's advent through the baptism of repentance, and he acknowledged his weakness compared to Christ's might.

Verse 26:

"Brethren" - Paul selected this word of endearment, to attract Jewish members of the audience to the Faith.

"...sons of the family of Abraham..." - Paul was again addressing the Jews who cherished their sonship to Abraham.

"...those among you who fear God..." - Paul was referring to the Greek Gentiles who loved God and who had come to hear Jewish teachings.

"...the word of this salvation..." - This refers to evangelizing - preaching Christ the Saviour.

Paul was exhorting his mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles to embrace the Faith in Christ the Saviour.

Verse 27:

"...they did not know Him..." - They failed to understand that Christ was indeed the awaited Messiah, since they believed that the Messiah would be a terrestrial, rather than a celestial, King.

"...the voices of the prophets..." - This refers to all the prophecies indicating that the Messiah would suffer and die for His people.

"...they...have fulfilled them in condemning Him..." - They caused Him to be sentenced to death.

Jewish residents of Jerusalem, the temple's site, rejected faith in Jesus Christ, to the point of persecuting Him and causing Him to be sentenced to death; thus, prophets' prophecies were fulfilled through them.

Verse 28:

"And though they [the Jews] found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death." Thus, despite Christ's proven righteousness and innocence, their wickedness drove them to prevail upon Pilate to have Him crucified.

Verse 29:

"...the tree..." - This refers to the Cross.

Having completed their agreement with Judas to have him deliver Christ to them, the high priests had Christ arrested, flogged, mocked, crucified and buried.

Verse 30:

That Jews believed that they had managed to rid themselves of Christ - however, they were shocked at His resurrection the third day. Paul said, **"God raised Him from the dead,"** meaning "through the Father's will and the Son's Divinity, Christ's body was raised on the third day."

Verse 31:

"...*many days...*" - Those were forty days.

"...*those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem...*" - This refers to the twelve disciples, the apostles, and many of Christ's followers. Our Lord Christ confirmed His resurrection by appearing many times over a forty-day period, following His resurrection, to His disciples who evangelized in His name, and testified to His resurrection.

Verse 32:

"...*that promise which was made to the fathers....*" This refers to God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to all the Jewish nation's forefathers, concerning the awaited Messiah. As the apostles evangelized in Jerusalem and Judaea, Paul and Barnabas evangelized in Antioch/Pisidia, thus fulfilling God's promise of salvation for the entire world through Christ Jesus.

Verse 33:

St. Paul quoted the second psalm, which refers to Christ's Divinity, hence, "***As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'***" Namely, Christ is the eternal Son of God, Who was incarnate as a human being, at the appointed time, in order to save the world. God fulfilled this, for us, through Christ's redemption, death and resurrection.

Verse 34:

"...*no more to return to corruption...*" This means that He would not die a second time, as those who rose from the dead such as Lazarus and Jairus' daughter.

"...*the sure mercies of David...*" This refers to God's promises to David for salvation, that would be realized through Christ, and which we acquire through the Church of the New Testament.

There is no death following Christ's resurrection from the dead, thus imparting to humanity the mercies of Christ the Son of David.

Verses 35 - 37:

In Psalm 16:10, David states that the body of Christ would not see corruption. David died, was buried, and his body decayed; Christ rose from the dead, and His body saw no corruption.

Verses 38 & 39:

"***Therefore let it be known to you, brethren,....***" This emphasizes the significance of subsequent statements.

"... through this Man...." This means "by believing on Christ."

"....by the law of Moses...." Mosaic law specifies sin, its punishment, and the rewards of following the commandments. However, it does not justify man - Christ, through His blood, is the only avenue to justification.

This is the message of forgiveness, justification, absolvment from punishment, and deliverance from evil. We would thus escape sin's authority and its eternal punishment - all of which the law was incapable of providing.

Verses 40 & 41:

"....you despisers..." they are those who refuse to obey the word of God, whether during the days of Habakkuk, or during evangelizing.

"...Marvel" This means they neither believe nor understand.

"..and perish!" This refers to the Divine punishment which had descended on the Jews during the days of Habakkuk. It could also refer to the Jews massacre in Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D.

"For I work a work in your days..." This refers to the perdition awaiting those who reject the Faith.

"A work which you will by no means believe..." *Though one were to declare it to you.' ""* This refers to perdition for those who reject the word of God - either the Babylonian captivity during Habakkuk's days, or the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This is a warning of the extreme punishment in eternal fire.

St. Paul warned them of complacency, so that they escape what was foretold in Habakkuk 1:5, where the Babylonian captivity was foretold concerning those who neglected leading a godly life. Unfortunately they disbelieved the prophecy and perished at the hands of the Babylonians. We note that, twenty years after this sermon, the Romans wreaked destruction and havoc on Jerusalem.

This is a message of salvation offered to all of us.

+ *God calls you to repentance. Do not reject His voice sent to you through the holy Bible, and through the Church's fathers and teachers. The opportunity to repent is available now to enjoy His forgiveness. His grace and bounties will overflow, and you will escape eternal perdition.*

4. Resistance to Paul in Antioch/Pisidia - verses 42 - 52:

"So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout

proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.' " Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 13:42 - 52)

Verse 42:

Paul's audience was moved by his sermon, especially the Greek Gentiles who frequented Jewish synagogues, but who had not yet converted. They asked the apostles to teach them more the following Saturday.

Verse 43:

"...devout proselytes..." This refers to the Greeks who liked to hear Jewish teaching in the synagogues.

The devout members of the audience who had been moved by the apostles' teaching, did not wait till the following Saturday to hear more about Christ; they followed the apostles along with some of the Jews. They went to the apostles' residence to hear teachings about Christ. The apostles, in turn, took care to edify their budding faith.

Verses 44 & 45:

"...almost the whole city..." This includes the Jews and the predominantly pagan inhabitants of the city.

"....they were filled with envy..." They were envious because they sensed that Jewish teaching did not attract pagans as much as Christian teaching. The Jews also felt superior to the Gentiles and they resented the thought of being equal in Christianity.

"...and contradicting..." They offered arguments against the new teaching to cast doubts on it.

"...and blaspheming..." They declared that the awaited Messiah was not the weak Christ Who suffered and died.

"...they opposed the things spoken by Paul." They stated that the new teaching was wrong, and that the sound teaching was the Jewish one.

The Jews were envious of the apostles' success, upon seeing a great number of people assembled the following Saturday in the synagogue. Thus, they started resisting and blaspheming.

Verses 46 & 47:

"Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold..." They did not fear the Jews, and proclaimed the sound teaching.

"It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first..." It was the will of God that the Jews be the first to be evangelized, due to their knowledge of the prophecies foretelling the Messiah's advent - thus, they were more amenable to accepting the faith than others.

"...since you reject it..." This means that they rejected the Faith.

"...and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting lif..." You will incur the punishment for rejecting the Faith, which is eternal torment.

"...behold, we turn to the Gentiles..." This means that the apostles would henceforth focus on the Gentiles.

"...a light to the Gentiles..." Christ is the Light of the world. Christ's servants and apostles evangelize the Gentiles, extracting them from the gloom of sin to the light of the Faith.

"...salvation to the ends of the earth...." Christ's salvation is offered to all humanity - not merely to the Jews.

The apostles confronted them saying that their rejection of the word of God confirms their unworthiness of it, and then the apostles would evangelize the Gentiles according to Isaiah 49:6.

Verses 48 & 49:

"...this..." This is in reference to salvation being offered to the Gentiles and the Jews alike.

"...glorified the word of the Lord..." They adhered to the Faith and thanked God. The Gentiles rejoiced and many, who had been predestined by God, believed. They have a share in eternal life. The word of God spread throughout the region.

Verse 50:

"...But the Jews stirred up..." The Jews spoke against the apostles, attempting to discredit their teaching. They incited prominent women and the city's leaders.

".....**the devout and prominent women...**" This refers to the converted women from paganism who had enjoyed Jewish teachings, and society's wealthy women.

"....**and the chief men of the city...**" Those were the city's leaders.

"...**raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.**" They attempted to ridicule the apostles' teachings and expelled them from the city.

Verse 51:

But they shook off the dust from their feet against them [against the Jews who had expelled them and rejected the Faith] ***and came to Iconium*** [a city in Asia Minor, about 80 kilometres from Antioch].

The disciples followed Christ's instructions (see Luke 9:5) by shaking the dust off their feet, indicating that they had not sought any personal benefits from their evangelizing.

Verse 52:

"....**the disciples...**" This refers to all who followed Christ and had become Christians.

"....**were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.**" The new converts rejoiced in their newly-found Faith and in the work of the Holy Spirit despite all the persecutions and hardships.

+ *Our Christianity is capable of instilling joy within us, regardless of any trials or hardships we may face. Let us adhere to God's commandments - despite objections from others. Let us offer our love and services, unceasingly, to others, in order to win their hearts.*



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Chapter 14

the rest of St. Paul's first missionary journey

1. In Iconium - verses 1 - 7:

"Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles. And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there."

(Acts 14:1 - 7)

Verses 1 & 2:

"The Greeks" - This refers to those Greeks who attended the Jews' synagogue, heard the apostles, and believed on Christ.

"....stirred up....and poisoned..." - Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles against the apostles and their teaching, stating that they resisted their faith and caused disturbances in their city.

"The Gentiles" - Those were the pagan Greeks who persisted in their paganism and did not attend Jewish synagogues. Wicked Jews joined those pagans in resisting the apostles and their evangelizing.

"The brethren" - Those were Christian converts, both Jews and Greeks.

As usual, evangelizing in Iconium started in the Jewish synagogue; many Jews and non-Jews believed - this infuriated the non-believers, leading them to resist believers.

Verse 3:

"....speaking boldly..." - The unbelieving Jews' resistance did not scare the apostles - they persisted in their bold evangelizing.

"....bearing witness to the word of His grace..." - This was evident via:

- unequivocal proof given by the apostles,
- the large number of converts, and
- the miracles such as healing the sick and casting out demons.

"...granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands..." - Those served to edify the faith of converts, to attract others, and to stimulate trust in the apostles' teaching.

Verse 4:

"But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles."

Verse 5 - 7:

"...both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers..." - Unbelieving Jews joined the pagan Gentiles, with both the latter's and former's leaders.

"And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled to Lystra [a large city, about 65 kilometres from Iconium] and Derbe [a large city about 40 kilometres from Lystra], cities of Lycaonia [a region in today's Turkey], and to the surrounding region. And they were preaching the gospel there."

They attempted to plot or fabricate some means for arresting the apostles, intending to stone them to death. The apostles did not flee out of fear, rather, to resume their preaching; they preached in the regions traversed on their way to Lystra and Derbe.

+ It would be quite advantageous for us if our progress were unimpeded by obstacles, and if we continued struggling positively. Closed doors should not trouble us. We should seek the open door and persevere in our service, work and love for those around us.

2. In Lystra - verses 8 - 20:

"And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked [his infirmity existed since his birth]. This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices [they praised their gods], saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front

of their city [that was the location of the god's statue], **brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes** [that was a Jewish custom - even practised in Upper Egypt, expressing much pain or anguish] **and ran in among the multitude** [mostly pagans], **crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things?"** [they reproached the multitude for what they were doing] **We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things** [idolatry] **to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations** [from the beginning of creation till Christ's incarnation] **allowed** [He was longsuffering] **all nations to walk in their own ways** [idolatry]. **Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."** **And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them. Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium** [the ones who had rejected the Faith and cast Paul and Barnabas out of their cities] **came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples** [the converts from Lystra] **gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe."** (Acts 14:8 - 20)

Verse 8 & 9:

The crippled man **"heard Paul speaking..."** - Apparently Paul preached in an area where many people could hear him. The man was interested in what Paul was saying.

"....seeing that he had faith..." - The man's face showed signs that he was convinced of what Paul was saying. Furthermore, the gift of the Holy Spirit enabled Paul to fathom the man's sentiments.

Verse 10:

"...with a loud voice..." - This accentuates St. Paul's authority to heal - it also alert all present to the miracle - to induce them to believe.

Verses 11 - 14:

"....what Paul had done...." - Paul authoritatively ordered the man to stand - so he stood immediately. Everyone was awestruck and expressed their sentiments in their local language which the apostles did not understand (they spoke Greek). Hermes was the Greek patron of languages and, in Latin, his name translates to "Mercury (one of the

planets)." As the chief Greek deity, Zeus was considered the ruler, protector, and father of all gods and humans.

Verse 15:

"....with the same nature as you..." - We experience hunger, thirst and sickness just like you do - we are not gods (pagans believed that gods had the same sentiments as humans.)

Verse 16:

God left the Gentiles to indulge in their heathen practices, until the advent of the incarnate Christ. He chose the Jewish nation to be His people.

Verse 17:

"He did not leave Himself without witness..." - God manifests Himself to the Jews by speaking to them through the prophets; but He reveals Himself to the entire world through the conscience, which is God's voice within a person, and through His bounties, showered on everyone - all this is a testimony to His love and existence.

"....rain from heaven...." - They quench the thirst of all plants and creatures and demonstrate God's love.

"....fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness..." - This refers to favourable weather/climates nurturing plants, humans and animals, leading to joy, satiation, and thanksgiving to God.

Verse 18:

Through their declaration that they were humans, and that God grants everyone bounties, the apostles managed to convince the multitude to refrain from offering them sacrifices.

Verse 19:

"....having persuaded the multitudes..." - They convinced the multitudes that the apostles' teachings were false, and that they had blasphemed against their gods claiming that their worship rites were invalid, and that someone called Jesus was/is God.

Verse 20:

"...he rose up..." - Paul was either unconscious, or God healed him and gave him strength to rise and walk.

"...the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe." The evil-doers believed that they had killed him. He hastened to leave Lystra since he felt he had no chance to serve there. It would seem that Barnabas was unharmed since he was not as verbose as Paul. We note that Paul rejoiced in being stoned for Christ's sake, as did Stephen.

+ We should not be swayed by people's have ever-changing views. Initially, the multitudes honoured the apostles, then they tried to kill them! Be cognizant of God's views, regardless of what people say. Do not please others at God's expense - rather persist in God's way.

3. In Derbe then the return to Antioch - verses 21 - 28:

"And when they had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe] and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in Whom they had believed. And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia [a region in Asia Minor adjacent to Pisidia]. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia [a port in Asia minor]. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples." (Acts 14:21 - 28)

Verse 21:

"...they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch..." - This accentuates the apostles' courage, by returning to the cities where people had tried to kill them. Most likely, rather than preach there, they just met with the converts.

Verse 22:

The apostles edified believers' faith, indicating that enduring hardships is the way to prove one's love of God, and is the path to salvation and the kingdom of God.

Verse 23:

"...prayed with fasting..." - This accentuates the importance of fasting and prayer when nominating people for the priesthood, and preparing them for discharging their duties.

"...they commended them..." - They considered those churches to be consignments in God's hands, for their edification and nurturing.

The Aramaic **"elders"** corresponds to "priests." The congregation used to nominate them for ordainment by the apostles. The apostles organized the service, then left them in God's care.

Verses 24 & 25:

Having edified believers in Antioch, Pisidia's capital, they passed through Pisidia and, likely, they preached in some regions.

Verses 26 - 28:

The Church dispatched them to evangelize entrusting them in God's hands. Their work thus succeeded in all the cities through which they had passed during that evangelical mission; they returned to Antioch, Syria, where they met with the believers and narrated to them their achievements.

The apostles spent two years in Antioch, after their first, three-year journey, which started in 45 A.D. Thus, they served two years in the Antiochian Church.

+ When a person feels he had accomplished what God had assigned to him, he feels overjoyed and thanks God for God's work having been achieved through him. Dear brother, complete all the tasks that God had entrusted to you, since you will be accountable for them before Him - then He will help you and gladden your heart.



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Chapter 15

*the Council of Jerusalem - beginning of Paul's second
missionary journey*



Paul's missionary journeys

1. Gentile and circumcised believers - verses 1 - 5:

"And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them [representatives of the Antiochian

Church] **should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia** [today's Lebanon] **and Samaria** [the northern part of Judea], **describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy** [Christians in those regions were not strict adherents to Mosaic law, and happy to convert to Christianity without Judaization] **to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."** (Acts 15:1 - 5)

Verse 1:

"From Judea...." - Jerusalem was the centre of Judaism. Thus, Jerusalemite believers on Christ felt responsible for shepherding other Christians, since Christ was crucified in Jerusalem; they also continued to adhere to Mosaic law, failing to realize that it was a prelude to Christianity. Those Jewish converts remained unconvinced of Peter's encounter with Cornelius; it is believed that they may have constituted the seeds of the Ebionite movement. They travelled from Jerusalem to Antioch, preaching **"Unless you** [Gentile converts to Christianity] **are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."**

Verse 2:

"Dissension.....dispute..." - This refers to disagreements between Paul and Barnabas on one side, and Jewish converts on the other.

"They determined..." - The two groups decided to resort to the Church's leadership, represented by the apostles, who were headquartered in Jerusalem. This is mentioned in Galatians 2:1 - 9, namely, St. Paul went to Jerusalem, according to God's instruction, to seek a decision from the apostles' council, with respect to this issue.

"....elders...." - This refers to the priests accompanying the apostles - an indication that Church leadership was the council consisting of priests and the apostles which, today, is the Church's Holy Synod.

Verses 3 & 4:

The apostles and their companions arrived at Jerusalem, where they were welcomed as the official delegation from the Antiochian Church. They briefed those present about their achievements during the first journey - this also served as an introduction to the Council's meeting.

Verse 5:

Many Christians attended, included some who were originally Pharisees - hence, strong adherents to Mosaic law. They started objecting to Paul's

assertions of Gentiles' faith, emphasizing the necessity of circumcision for a Gentile in order to be saved.

+ *We can see the Church's open-heartedness; the Church will only reject an opinion after prayers, discussions, and the emergence of the truth without prejudice. This is the sound approach for the Church's leadership, in order to open the door for all to repent and be convinced.*

2. Peter's sermon - verses 6 - 12:

"Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ [Christ's grace grants us faith and the holy sacraments] we [Christians of Jewish origin] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles]." Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles." (Acts 15:6 - 12)

Verse 6:

"...the apostles and elders..." - They were either present in Jerusalem, or had arrived from neighbouring regions; they formed the first council in Church history in the year 50 A.D. A council comprising the apostles and elders was convened, in order to discuss whether circumcision was a prerequisite for conversion to Christianity.

Verse 7:

"...much dispute..." - Discussions continued for a long time prior to the council's meeting, between Paul and Jewish converts, about the importance of the law and circumcision, in the context of salvation.

"....a good while ago..." - Peter was referring to his preaching to Cornelius, about ten years earlier. Divine guidance had led Peter to be the first one to evangelize Gentiles, hence, Cornelius and his household.

Verse 8 & 9:

"...God, Who knows the heart..." - God knows whether a person is amenable to accepting the Faith or not.

"...acknowledged them..." - That was through Peter's preaching.

"...by giving them the Holy Spirit..." - The Holy Spirit's gifts were manifested through their ability to speak in different tongues; thus, they acquired the same power of the Holy Spirit that had been granted to Christians of Jewish origin. The Holy Spirit descended on Gentiles prior to their baptism, thus proving God's acceptance of their baptism with neither circumcision nor knowledge of the law's commandments. Hence, Gentiles' belief on Christ purified their hearts, making no differentiation between them and Jews.

Verse 10:

"...you test God..." - This refers to enforcing rules for salvation which God had not instituted. God requires faith, baptism and church life - Christians are neither required to be circumcised, nor to observe the law. Given God's acceptance of Gentiles, we cannot require of them proof of their faith through circumcision and observing the law. We would be testing God, especially since Jews had been incapable of fully observing the law themselves.

Verse 11 & 12:

The audience's silence indicated their agreement. Paul and Barnabas started expounding the miracles they had wrought with the Gentiles during their journey.

+ *Encourage those who had strayed away from the Church to return to the Church's fold, accentuating God's love for all, especially sinners. Do not burden them with many rules. Give a chance, first, to have them direct their love towards God.*

3. James' sermon - verses 13 - 21:

"And after they had become silent, James [one of the twelve, the son of Alphaeus, author of the epistle, labelled "righteous," chairman of the Jerusalem council] **answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord Who does all these things.' "Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God** [those who have believed on Christ and forsaken idolatry], **but that we write to them to abstain**

from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations [for hundreds of years] those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath [dedicated to worship and attending the synagogues]." (Acts 15:13 - 21)

Verse 13 & 14:

James addressed the audience, explaining that God had accepted Gentiles into the Faith, at the hands of Peter, upon baptising Cornelius and his household. Furthermore, God confirmed His acceptance of Gentiles at the hands of Paul and Barnabas when they evangelized Gentiles and founded churches among them.

Verses 15 - 18:

"...after this..." - After Jews had strayed into the letter rather than the spirit of worship, and they became preoccupied with their carnal desires, the Jewish nation was subjected to captivity and destruction of the temple.

"...the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down..." - This refers to the tabernacle of meeting; put differently, the Jewish worship which had strayed and fallen, from God's perspective.

"...its ruins..." - This worship was destroyed, but God will reinstate it and complete it through Christian worship.

"...the rest of mankind..." - This refers to non-Jews residing around them.

"...even all the Gentiles who are called by My name..." - All humans were created in God's likeness and image - they are God's children; He will call them in the fullness of time to believe on Christ.

"...Who does all these things..." - God created all mankind, and chose the Jews to be His special people; then He was incarnate, fulfilled redemption, and will accept Jews and Gentiles through belief on Christ.

"...known to God..." - All the antecedent was through Divine economy since eternity: hence, to redeem all mankind and accept them through faith in Him.

James stated that the Gentiles' acceptance had been foretold by the prophets (Amos 9:11 &12), namely, that the Lord would rebuild the Jewish temple which had strayed, then accept the Gentiles, since God calls everyone - His creation - and that was His plan since eternity.

Verse 19:

"...not trouble..." - This refers to burdening the Gentile converts with the Mosaic law, so that they may be saved. Thus, James was of the view that Gentile Christians should not be circumcised according to Mosaic law.

Verse 20:

"....**blood**...." - Mosaic law prohibited the consumption of blood (see Deuteronomy 12:16) Christianity also prohibits the consumption of blood, since blood represents life.

Verse 21:

"**Moses**" - This refers to the Pentateuch which prohibits sexual immorality and consuming blood.

"...**every city**..." - This refers to Jewish cities, and cities to which Jews emigrated, where they built synagogues, where the holy scriptures were read.

It was known world-wide, through the Jewish synagogues, that Mosaic law prohibited consumption of blood or things strangled. Thus, Gentile Christians should also refrain from consuming blood or things strangled, and from sexual immorality.

+ *Distance yourself from evil-doers, lest you should become involved in their wrong-doings. Have a loving heart towards everyone. Pray for everyone. Commit to pursuing a good conduct, setting the example for all.*

4. Reporting the Council's decisions - verses 22 - 35:

"Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas [they were sent to confirm the council's decisions], leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"--to whom we gave no such commandment-- it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord [agreement on a single viewpoint], to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well [godly conduct pleasing to God]. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets

also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also." (Acts 15:22 - 35)

Verse 22:

The Jerusalem Council agreed to send two emissaries (Barsabas and Silas) to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, representing the Church of Jerusalem. Silas also accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey.

Verse 23:

The Council gave its emissaries a letter, bearing the Council's decisions, addressed to the Churches of Antioch and Syria.

Verse 24:

The Council clarified and emphasized that Christians of Jewish origin, who had travelled from Jerusalem to Antioch, had insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised according to Mosaic law. However, the Council confirmed that the Jerusalemite Church had issued no such instructions.

Verses 25 - 27:

The Council agreed unanimously to dispatch two apostles, devout followers of Christ, along with Paul and Barnabas. They would also report the Council's decision verbally.

Verses 28 & 29:

James announced the Council's decision, which had resulted from the meeting involving the Holy Spirit, the apostles, and the Church elders. That decision demonstrated that God leads the Church through prayers, and guides the Church in all matters. The decision simply required them to refrain from consuming blood, all things strangled, sexual immorality and whatever was offered to idols.

Verse 30:

The emissaries delivered the message to the Antiochian Church.

Verse 31:

Believers were pleased and comforted after the message had been read. They were reassured that their faith was sound, and that they were not required to be circumcised according to Mosaic law. Contentions within the Church ended, barriers between Jewish and Gentile Christians fell, and they were reassured of the support of the Jerusalemite mother Church.

Verses 32 & 33:

"...themselves being prophets..." - "Prophecy" in the New Testament means "foretelling the future, which is the kingdom of heaven, and calling for preparedness for eternal life." Judas and Silas preached to the Antiochians, encouraging them to lead spiritual lifestyles, and edifying them in the Faith. The Church subsequently sent them back to join the apostles in Jerusalem.

Verse 34:

It seemed that some believers insisted that Silas remain with them - hence, he continued his service in Antioch.

Verse 35:

Paul and Barnabas continued the service in Antioch, which they had started prior to their participation in the Jerusalem Council. They were assisted by several other servants.

+ *The Holy Spirit uniquely leads the Church through its bishops and priests. May you consistently commit to the Church's teaching, rather than to your own opinions. If ever you are perplexed by an issue, consult the Church's fathers and servants, to attain the unity of spirit, and to grow in the love of God.*

5. Debut of the second journey - verses 36 - 41:

"Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." (Acts 15:36 - 41)

Verse 36:

"....after some days...." - This could have been one year, during which Paul and Barnabas continued to serve the Antiochian Church; this means that they started their second journey around 51 A..D. Paul suggested the second journey to reach out to those to whom they had preached during the first journey; this accentuates the importance of outreach, to follow-up on the effectiveness of the word of God.

Verses 37 & 38:

Barnabas wanted to take his nephew Mark with them on the second journey. However, Paul disagreed, since Mark had not completed the first journey with them, preferring to return to Jerusalem.

Verse 39:

Their disagreement bore no hard feelings, since we note that Paul praised Barnabas (1 Corinthians 6:9), and praised Mark (2 Timothy 4:11 and Colossians 4:10 & 11). Thus, each of Paul and Barnabas proceeded in their evangelical journeys, with other companions. Barnabas travelled with Mark to Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland; there, he was flogged to death.

Verses 40 & 41:

Brethren bade Paul farewell with their prayers, and he proceeded, accompanied by Silas, to preach in Syria and Cilicia (today's Turkey).

+ Let not your peace forsake you in the event of disagreements with those around you; make sure that the result is always pleasing to God - even if the outcome is not quite what you wanted, since God turns everything to good for those who love Him.



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Chapter 16

**Paul's second missionary journey - evangelizing in Europe
and Asia**

1. Travelling to Turkey - verses 1 - 10:

***"Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily. Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us [hence, transport us from the darkness of idolatry to the light of Christianity]." Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them."* (Acts 16:1 - 10)**

Verses 1 - 3:

St. Paul's second missionary journey was characterized by debuting in Europe, for the first time, in the city of Philippi. This three-year journey (around 51 - 54 A.D.) started by land from Antioch, Syria, and ended in Jerusalem - it was covered in the Acts Ch. 15:36 - 18:22. Paul and Silas travelled westwards through the region of Cilicia, following a Roman road that would have taken them through Tarsus, Paul's hometown. By land they went through Derbe, Lystra and Iconium - all in today's Turkey. The following are details of the rest of Paul's second missionary journey:

1. They worked in Derbe and Lystra, where Timothy was recruited to join them. They travel on to Iconium. In these cities they have success in strengthening the disciples and making new converts (Acts 16:1-5).
2. They pass through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit would not let them go to Asia. In Mysia the Spirit changed their plans again and sent them to Troas (Acts 16:6-8).
3. They were now far out of the territory covered by the first journey. But they were to be called further yet. Paul received a vision calling him to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-12).
4. In Philippi they convert Lydia (Acts 16:13-15).
5. They cure a slave girl of her evil spirit and are thrown into prison (Acts 16:16-24).
6. Their jailer is converted (Acts 16:25-34).
7. They are released from prison with some embarrassment to the authorities (Acts 16:35-40).
8. Next they go to Thessalonica, preach in the synagogue and make converts. But some Jews make trouble (Acts 17:1-9).
9. Paul and Silas are sent by night to Berea. Working in Berea, they find ready minds to receive the gospel. But the trouble makers arrive and Paul is taken to Athens to avoid them (Acts 17:10-15).
10. Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17:16-34).
11. After Athens Paul went to work in Corinth, where he met Aquila and Priscilla. In Corinth, Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul (Acts 18:1-5).
12. In Corinth, some Jews make serious trouble again (Acts 18:6-17).
13. Paul sets sail to go back to Syria. From Corinth Paul went to Ephesus via Cenchrea. He stayed at Ephesus only a short time on that occasion (Acts 18:18-21).
14. He took a ship to Caesarea (south of Tyre and Ptolemais), visiting the church there, then went back to Syrian Antioch where his journey had begun (Acts 18:22).

In Lystra, Paul recruited Timothy, who became Paul's disciple. Timothy's mother's name was Eunice, (which means "good victory.") His father was a Greek pagan. Timothy's faith, spirituality and service were acclaimed by all. Paul decided to circumcise him, to avoid the risk of his being rejected when accompanying Paul in his teachings in Jewish synagogues.

Verse 4 - 5:

The apostles systematically delivered the decisions of the Jerusalem Council to all the cities they visited, and where they founded churches. That was to shield the Gentile converts from Jewish converts claiming that circumcision and Mosaic law were prerequisites for conversion to Christianity. The churches continued to grow and multiply.

Verse 6:

"Phrygia" - This was a large region amidst Asia Minor - now Turkey. Colossae and Herapolis are among its most significant cities.

"Galatia" - That was a region of Asia Minor, east of Phrygia, with mostly pagan inhabitants plus some Jews.

"Asia" - That was region west of Asia Minor - quite different from today's continent of Asia. Its capital was Ephesus. It comprised the seven cities to which messages were sent, mentioned in the Book of Revelation.

The apostles travelled through Turkey and Galatia; but the Holy Spirit prohibited them from preaching in Asia.

Verses 7 & 8:

"Mysia" - That was a region in Asia Minor's north-west.

"Bithynia" - This was a region of Asia Minor, east of Mysia. Bythina also contained Nicaea, location of the First Ecumenical Council.

"Troas" - That was a port on the Mediterranean in the region of Mysia.

The Holy Spirit did not permit the apostles to preach in Bythina - so they went to the port of Troas.

Verse 9:

"Macedonia" - that was a Greek region - the hometown of Alexander the Great.

Verse 10:

Paul and his companions encountered Luke who was preaching in Troas, and who subsequently joined them. After seeing the vision, they all sailed to Macedonia, confident that God wanted them to evangelize in Europe.

+ *Do not be perturbed, if you experience delays due to circumstances beyond your control. God's will is better than yours. Accept God's economy, and be honest in everything you do. Be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. Rest assured that everything works for good, for those who love God.*

2. Evangelizing in Philippi - verses 11 - 15:

"Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace [a small island between Troas and Neapolis], and the next day came to Neapolis [that was the port of Philippi], and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer

was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." [The apostles always took great care not to burden anyone] ***So she persuaded us.***" (Acts 16:11 - 15)

Verse 11 - 13:

The apostles left Neapolis - the absence of Jews there could have been a contributing factor. They proceeded to Philippi whose residents were Roman citizens; they spent a few days there. On the Sabbath, Paul started preaching at a gathering of the Jews outside the city, since there was no synagogue, foreign religions were prohibited, and the river's water was practical for purification. They started preaching to the women assembled there.

Verse 14 & 15:

Purple was the dye used to colour royalty's clothing. Lydia, a Turkish Gentile convert, listened to the apostles' teaching.

+ *Be hospitable to strangers in your church and in your home. Encourage them with kind words and help them as much as you can. Be empathetic, and be confident that in so doing, you are offering your love to God Himself. Our Lord Christ said "I was a stranger and you took Me in."* (Matthew 25:35)

3. The fortune-telling slave girl - verses 16 - 18:

"Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour." (Acts 16:16 - 18)

Verse 16 - 18:

On the apostles' way to pray (likely, the third canonical hour - 9 a.m. our timing), they were met by a demon-possessed slave girl, who was working as a fortune-teller, using satanic powers, reaping much money for her masters.

She cried out to them, seeking attention from passers-by. She followed them, disrupting their teaching. The demon witnessed for the apostles, to clinch the multitudes' trust. The demon's disruptions continued for many days, and Paul, being annoyed, **"turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour."** That was because Christ rejects Satan's witnessing for Him.

+ *Evil-doers' testimony is rejected due to their wicked conduct. Guard your deeds and words meticulously, lest you should offend someone when speaking of God. Reject anything unbecoming you as a Christian - even if that were not sinful. Repent speedily, and God will protect you against offending others.*

4. In prison - verses 19 - 24:

"But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas [because they were the most verbose] and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought them to the magistrates [those were the Roman military rulers], and said, "These men, being Jews [the Romans hated the Jews], exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks." (Acts 16:19 - 24)

Verses 19 - 21:

"...saw..." - They perceived that the girl's calmness indicated that the demon had been cast out.

"....customs..." - Roman law prohibited the practice of any religion or new custom without permission from the authorities. The girl's masters said that the apostles were teaching new, unauthorized, customs, thus implying they should be punished.

Verses 22 - 24:

The girl's masters managed to stir up the crowds sufficiently against the apostles, to induce the magistrates to order their flogging after stripping off their clothes, then having them secured **"into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."**

+ Endure pain for the sake of serving God and adhering to His commandments - regardless of the severity of any hardship. God will support you. God will permit Satan to do his worst, then He will be glorified in you and grant you victory. Rest assured that God highly values everything you endure, and He will reward you for that - not only in this life, but also in the next one.

5. Opening the doors - the prison keeper's conversion - verses 25 - 34:

"But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep [he would have been punished for sleeping on the job] and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself [according to Roman law, he would have been sentenced to death if the prisoners had escaped]. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household." (Acts 16:25 - 34)

Verse 25:

".....at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..." - Despite their pain and suffering, they sang praises to God, for allowing them to share Christ's suffering. Other prisoners were astounded at their joy.

Verse 26:

"....a great earthquake...." - That was a reflection of the power of the God to Whom Paul and Silas were praying. The other prisoners realized that the earthquake, and the doors' opening, were the result of the apostles' prayers; they were so awestruck, that none of them attempted to escape.

Verse 27 - 29:

The jailer woke up and, seeing the jail's open doors, assumed the prisoners had escaped, for which he would have incurred the death penalty. The Lord revealed this to Paul, who cried out to him to refrain from committing suicide. The jailer, realizing the apostles' supernatural powers, knelt before them.

Verses 30 - 32:

The jailer was amenable to the apostles' teaching, and was concerned about his salvation; they preached the word of God to him and his household.

Verse 33 & 34:

"And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized." He did not wait till daybreak. ***"All his family"*** indicates the importance of baptizing children as well as adults, to grant salvation unto all. The jailer set food before them; it is speculated that Paul might have celebrated Eucharist with them, such that they partook of the holy sacraments following their baptism.

+ *God seeks you, regardless of your preoccupations. Rest assured that surrounding circumstances bear messages for you to repent and return to God. Seize every opportunity to learn, and lead a godly lifestyle.*

6. The apostles' release - verses 35 - 40:

"And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, "Let those men go." So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out." And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed." (Acts 16:35 - 40)

Verse 35:

Apparently, the earthquake scared the magistrates, leading them to think that their gods had been angered by their treatment of the apostles. Hence, they ordered their release.

Verse 36 - 38:

Following their meal with the jailer and his household, the apostles returned to jail with the jailer, whereupon he informed them of the magistrates' decision to set them free. The magistrates had been informed of the apostles' Roman citizenship.

The magistrates had committed three errors against the two apostles, who had Roman citizenships:

1. They humiliated the apostles by having them publicly flogged.
2. They had them bound.
3. They had them imprisoned.

Roman law prohibited such actions against Roman citizens. Consequently, the magistrates were liable for punishment by law. Paul, appreciating all that, demanded the magistrates' formal apology in person.

Verses 39 & 40:

The magistrates apologized and begged the apostles to leave the city. The apostles then proceeded to Lidia's house where, likely, believers were assembled. The narrator related what had transpired and everyone was thankful.

The Church in Philippi was thus founded. It helped Paul financially, and its love for Paul was demonstrated. It would seem that Luke remained in Philippi. He subsequently accompanied Paul, upon the latter's return to Philippi (see Ch. 20:6)

+ *Use your capabilities and position for the glorification of God, rather than for your own benefit - even if this meant hardships for you. Work towards edification of the Church and the service. Glorification of Christ's name should be your first priority.*



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Chapter 17

....from Thessalonica to Athens....

1. In Thessalonika - verses 1- 9:

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures [the Old Testament Books], explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded [they believed what Paul and Silas were preaching and became members of the Church of Thessalonica]; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king--Jesus." And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go." (Acts 17:1 - 9)

Verse 1:

Paul and Silas exited Philippi, and passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia without stopping there - likely because of the absence of Jewish synagogues there, which usually constituted Paul's starting point for teaching. They proceeded to Thessalonica, a well-known port in northern Greece.

Verse 2:

As was their wont, Paul and Silas entered the synagogue, to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles who used to frequent Jewish synagogues. They continued their preaching there for three weeks, although they spent longer in that city. They acquired donations from Philippi, and Paul used to work as a tent-maker (see Acts 18:3 and 2 Thessalonians 3:8.)

Verse 3:

Paul used the scriptures/prophecies to prove the imperativeness of the Messiah's - Christ's - suffering, His crucifixion, resurrection and reign. Although Jesus Christ is/was the Messiah, the Jews believed that the Messiah would liberate them from the Romans; therefore they rejected the idea of His suffering and death as the prophecies had foretold.

Verses 4 & 5:

Some Jews and pious Greeks believed. Jason was a Jewish convert and early Christian believer - he hosted Paul in his house. It is speculated that Jason also hailed from Tarsus. The Jews were upset when Gentiles believed in God like them - they believed that God's blessings were meant exclusively for them. Thus, they instigated evil-doers to stir up the people against Jason and the apostles.

Verses 6 - 8:

The crowd failed to locate Paul and Silas in Jason's home; so they arrested him as well as some Christians and brought them before the rulers, accusing them of spreading strange teachings. The crowd also claimed that the apostles, hosted by Jason, were inciting rebellion against Caesar.

Verse 9:

The rulers accepted a sum of money from Jason, to guarantee that the apostles would be cast out of the city. Subsequently, they were all released.

+ *Do not incite people against those who oppose you. Be meticulous in your speech to ensure that baseless allegations are not attributed to them. Respect others' opinions, even if different from yours. Let God do His will, even if it is against your views. Your rage will not alter God's economy - it will merely increase your tension and sins. Let your primary preoccupation be your inner peace, and peaceful relationships with others.*

2. In Berea - verses 10 - 15:

"Then the brethren immediately [the day of their release - see verse 9] sent Paul and Silas away by night [to avoid their potential harm by Jews] to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded [more intelligent or more intellectually-advanced] than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed." (Acts 17:10 - 15)

Verse 10 & 11:

Berea lay in the Macedonian region, south-west of Thessalonica; it had fewer Jews than Thessalonica. The apostles were dispatched by night to avoid detection and potential harm by the Jews. They started teaching in the synagogue. Berean Jews excelled over the Thessalonians in searching the scriptures and prophecies (as our Lord said, ***"You search the scriptures..."*** (John 5:39))

Verses 12 & 13:

Many men and women believed - both Jewish and Gentile converts. The spread of the Faith in Berea angered Thessalonian Jews, who sent men to stir up the Bereans against the apostles.

Verses 14 & 15:

In order to appease the Jews, Christians took Paul to the harbour, seemingly to travel by sea - however, he proceeded to Athens by land. Silas and Timothy remained in Berea to continue the service. Thus, Paul concluded his service in Macedonia, namely, in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, in accordance with the Divine calling (see Ch. 16:9). The Holy Spirit subsequently directed him to serve in Athens, Greece's centre of philosophy. Some Christians accompanied Paul from Berea and, subsequently, Silas and Timothy joined him in Athens.

+ *Let your goal be the love of Christ, and your presence with Him in eternity. Maintain your focus on Christ. Flee any obstacles, and continue marching towards your goal. Be not perturbed by opposition - Satan is weak and, although he may stir up trouble, he is incapable of preventing your love of God, and your quest to seek Him.*

3. In Athens - verses 16 - 21:

"Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." (Acts 17:16 - 21)

Verses 16 & 17:

Paul awaited the arrival of Silas and Timothy in Athens. He was particularly disturbed by the extent of permissiveness and abundance of idolatry, as Petronius once said, "In Athens it is easier to find a god than a man!" In addition to the synagogue, Paul preached in the marketplace, since, in addition to trade, people gathered there for debates.

Verse 18:

"Epicurean" - Epicureanism was a system of philosophy founded around 307 B.C. based upon the teachings of Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher. Epicurus was a materialist, believing in hedonism, and generally disbelieving any divine intervention.

"Stoic philosophers" - Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. was a school of Hellenistic philosophy that flourished in Ancient Greece and Rome. Stoics believed that the practice of virtue is enough to achieve a well-lived life, and identified the path to achieving it with a life spent practicing the four virtues in everyday life: wisdom, courage, temperance/moderation, justice, and living in accordance with nature.

Paul encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who thought he was preaching two strange gods, since he mentioned Christ and His resurrection. Thus, they despised him, referring to him as a **"babbling."**

Verses 19 & 20:

"Areopagus" - Also known as: Areopagite Council, Council of the Hill of Ares Areopagus, was the earliest aristocratic council of ancient Athens.

Philosophers invited Paul, on the Hill of Areopagus, to tell them about his "philosophy."

Verse 21:

Athenians were primarily preoccupied with novel philosophical discussions. Paul's new teaching, in their view, belonged to that category.

+ Let us spend our time productively, rather than in pointless debates. Avoid useless arguments, that could lead to erroneous thoughts. Present Christ in your speech and deeds, in the form of love to those around you.

4. In Areopagus - verses 22 - 34:

"Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them." (Acts 17:22 - 34)

Verse 22:

Paul started his discourse in Athens' most significant philosophical venue, by saying how impressed he was by Athenians' religiousness, evidenced by the multiplicity of their deity. Thus, to captivate his audience, he praised their virtue of religious inclination, albeit in the wrong direction.

Verse 23:

Historically, there were several altars in Athens, at that time, bearing the label "to an unknown god." It is speculated that the origin of such altars dates back to the time when Epimenides, the Cretan seer, put an end to a plague in Athens, by setting loose black and white sheep, on the Areopagus, to be sacrificed on the spots where they lay down, to "the god concerned (yet not known by name)," namely, who was the author of the plague.

Paul escaped the charge of preaching a new religion, by telling them that he had come to make known to them the God Whom they feared, but Whose name they did not know.

Verse 24:

Paul said that he was preaching the God Who created heaven and earth and all that is therein, Who transcends dwelling in temples built by humans - which mirrors what Stephen had said in his pre-martyrdom sermon (see Ch. 7:48 - 50). Such teaching does not negate the Lord's existence either in the Old Testament's tabernacle and Solomon's temple, or in the New Testament's Church. Rather, God's existence fills the entire universe, and is not bound by man-made walls. This last assertion contradicted the ancient Athenians' beliefs.

Verses 25 - 27:

Paul proclaimed that God, the granter of life and all bounties, does not need human service or offerings, rather, He seeks worship, repentance, love and thanksgiving. Paul also went on to say that God "***has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth...***" such that races were created, and should live, indiscriminately. Athenians' haughtiness was thus unfounded. God is close to everyone - He is not merely with us, rather, He is within us.

Verse 28 - 31:

Paul accentuated the fact that God is the source of life for all mankind, even quoting some of the Athenians' poets who had said, "***For we are also His offspring***" (demonstrating his knowledge of Greek culture). The Divine essence far transcends all idols. Paul emphasized the imperativeness of repentance, since God has determined the day of judgement - the Judge will be Christ Who rose from the dead.

Verse 32 - 34:

Some, including the Epicureans, mocked Paul, and continued their belief in hedonism, and disbelief in judgement day. The Stoics were more

amenable to Paul's teaching, and to belief in One God. However, after their initial apparent acceptance, they concluded that Paul's teaching contradicted their beliefs and rejected him.

Dionysius and Damaris were prominent people amongst a number who decided to believe the resurrection of Jesus and become followers. Today we do not know anything really about these 2 people only that Luke mentions them. Some say Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens and later died a martyr; he is venerated by the Coptic Orthodox Church.

+ Despite being rejected by many, Paul persisted in evangelizing, and few accepted his message. Offer your love to all around you - even if many reject your message. Some may accept it, while others may eventually be positively affected.



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Chapter 18

***service in Corinth - conclusion of the second missionary
journey***

**1. In Corinth - conversion of the ruler of the synagogue - verses 1
- 11:**

***"After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus [in north-east Turkey], who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled [motivated] by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized. Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."* (Acts 18:1 - 11)**

Verse 1:

It would seem that Paul was not expecting much success in Athens, whereupon he departed to Corinth, in the southern region of Greece. Corinthians were famous for significant degeneracy and sexual promiscuity, especially under the guise of "worship" of their idol Aphrodite. According to verse 11, Paul spent 18 successful months there; he wrote his first Thessalonian epistle in Corinth - likely, also the second.

Verses 2 - 4:

In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and his wife Priscilla, both Christians of Jewish origin; they had been forced to leave Rome by Claudius' decree. Both were tent-makers, a trade that Paul had learnt in Tarsus. He lodged with them, sharing their trade, thereby providing for himself and avoiding dependence on others for his sustenance. Paul ***"reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks."***

Verses 5 & 6:

"When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia [they were in Thessalonica]...." Paul had been preaching Christ's salvational work to the Jews in Corinth. Some Jews, however, ***"opposed him and blasphemed..."*** Therefore, he ***"shook his garments"*** and decided to go to the Gentiles.

Verse 7:

Paul subsequently took up residence in ***"the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue."*** That house's location was convenient for Paul to resume his preaching.

Verse 8:

In 1 Corinthians 1:14, we read that Paul had baptized Crispus, ruler of the synagogue, along with his household. This was helpful for several Jews' conversion to Christianity. Thus, we see that Paul's mission was quite successful in a very sinful city, providing further proof that God's work should motivate us continually to do good.

Verses 9 - 11:

"....I am with you..." - That was/is God's promise to comfort and encourage evangelism, and to endure evil-doers' resistance. The Lord appeared to Paul in a vision, encouraging him, and saying that many would believe, despite prevailing wickedness and strong resistance. Consequently, Paul continued to preach for 18 months, and founded a Church, along with rules for worship and responsibilities.

+ *Neither give up nor lose hope, when evil-doers resist you. God will support you - He is mightier than all of them. He knows that some people will only accept the truth after a long time - but, eventually, they will become stronger than others.*

2. **Jews file a complaint to the proconsul against Paul - verses 12 - 17:**

"When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying, "This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law [they refer to Jewish law approved by the Romans]." And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters." And he drove them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things."
(Acts 18:12 - 17)

Verses 12 & 13:

Corinth was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. Gallio was a just man. The Jews' accusations against Paul, were couched in severe allegations, namely, preaching an unauthorized religion.

Verses 14 - 16:

Believing that Christianity was a subset of the approved Jewish religion, Gallio did not wait for Paul's defence - rather, he told the Jews to sort out their internal religious differences, of no concern to the Romans. If tried in a Jewish synagogue, Paul's utmost punishment would be banishment from the synagogue. Due to their frequent internal fights, the Jews were hated by both Romans and Greeks.

Verse 17:

The Greeks beat Sosthenes, leader of the synagogue, to humiliate the Jews; however, Gallio did not care, refraining from involvement in religious disputes. Sosthenes had succeeded Crispus who had believed. According to 1 Corinthians 1:1, Sosthenes believed and accompanied Paul.

+ ***Have no fear of evil-doers' snares. God is capable of rescuing you as He rescued Paul, regardless of hardships and endless allegations. In the end, God will transform everything to your benefit and grant you inner peace. God will also reward you in eternity for all you would have endured.***

3. **Conclusion of the second missionary journey - verses 18 - 22:**
"So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren [Corinthian believers] and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. And he came to Ephesus [the capital of Asia Minor], and

left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus. And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch." (Acts 18:18 - 22)

Verse 18:

Paul completed his service in Corinth after a while, then he bade them farewell and departed for Syria, his final destination. He had his hair cut, at Cenchrea, to fulfill a personal vow according to Mosaic law. Christians of Jewish origin, like Paul, continued to follow Mosaic law precepts with the exception of sacrifices.

Verses 19 - 21:

Paul continued preaching to the Jews in the synagogue in Ephesus. The Ephesians responded positively to his teaching, but he declined their invitation to remain with them, preferring to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem. He promised to return to Ephesus on his third missionary journey (he did return - see Ch. 20:31).

Verse 22:

Paul sailed from Ephesus to Caesarea, and from thence to Jerusalem, where he reported, to the Church and the apostles, his second journey's progress. That was Paul's fourth visit to Jerusalem - then he returned to Antioch, in preparation for his third missionary journey.

Paul's second journey lasted about three years (51 - 54 A.D.)

+ *Paul's valiant labour was stupendous. May our lives be that fruitful, as we labour for the Lord! Do you spend your time in useful endeavours? May your goal be constantly focused on the love for Christ - He will then provide you with all the stamina you need for your spiritual work.*

4. Start of the third missionary journey from Antioch - verses 23 - 28:

"After he had spent some time there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples. Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though

he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ."
(Acts 18:23 - 28)

Verse 23:

Paul spent less than one year in Antioch. Subsequently, he started his third missionary journey through Turkey and Europe. That trip lasted from 54 to 58 A.D. (see Ch. 18: 23 - Ch. 21:17).

The following was Paul's itinerary throughout his third trip:

1. Antioch (Syria) to Tarsus (Turkey) by land.
2. From Tarsus (Turkey) to Derbe (Turkey), to Iconium (Turkey), to Antioch (Turkey) - all by land.
3. From Antioch (Turkey) to Ephesus (Turkey) by sea, where Demetrius led an uprising.
4. From there to Miletus (Turkey), then Troas (Turkey) and Philippi (Greece) all by sea.
5. By land to Thessalonica (Greece), then by sea to Corinth, and by land to Berea (Greece).
6. By sea to Philippi and Troas (where Paul raised the young man Eutychus from the dead.)
7. By land to Assos (Turkey), then to Mitylene (Turkey), to Samos (Turkey), and to Miletus (Turkey), all by sea.
8. To Cos (Turkey) by sea, to Rhodos (Greece) by sea, and to Tyre (Palestine) by sea.
9. To Caesarea (by land) and finally, to Jerusalem by land.

Verses 24 - 28:

Prior to Paul's arrival in Ephesus, where he had left Aquila and Priscilla, **"...a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus."** Apollos led a spiritual lifestyle - but his sole knowledge of Christianity was John the Baptist's witness for Christ. He also had no knowledge of Christ's teachings, death and resurrection. **"When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately..."** He listened and believed. Apollos proceeded to evangelize in Corinth, also bearing a message from the Ephesians to accept him with no reservations.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, Apollos "**vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.**"

+ Each person has certain talents which he/she could use in Christ's service, as Apollos did. Try to discover your talents, through prayer and your confessor's help; use them for the Church's benefit. You are responsible for utilizing your talents, and you will be accountable for them. Simultaneously, you will glean blessings fostering your spiritual growth along with those who benefit from those talents.



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Chapter 19

Paul's service in Ephesus

1. Paul's service and miracles in Ephesus - verses 1 - 12:

***"And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all. And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them."* (Acts 19:1 - 12)**

Verse 1 - 3:

As indicated earlier, Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor, and home of the goddess Diana. Paul headquartered himself in Ephesus to serve the Churches in Asia Minor (Turkey); he established analogous headquarters in Corinth to serve Churches in Greece. Paul started his third missionary journey by a land tour of Turkey. His arrival in Ephesus coincided with Apollos' preaching in Corinth. He met several of John the Baptist's disciples, who knew Christ solely through John's testimony. Similarly, Apollos knew about Christ through John the Baptist. Consequently, none of John's disciples knew about the Holy Spirit, or about Christian baptism.

Verses 4 & 5:

Paul taught them, saying that whereas John's baptism was for repentance, it was a prelude to Christianity's baptism with the Holy Spirit, through which salvation is acquired, as fulfilled by Christ on the Cross. The Ephesians heard, believed, and were baptized in Christ's name.

Verses 6 - 8:

Subsequently, ***"Paul....laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all."*** Those were a group of Ephesians - others, who had believed during Paul's earlier visit, had already acquired the Sacrament of Baptism. Paul spent about three months teaching, as usual, in the synagogue.

Verses 9 - 12:

Some of the Jews ***"were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way [they blasphemed] before the multitude...."*** Consequently, Paul left ***"and withdrew the disciples,"*** and resumed his teaching ***"in the school of Tyrannus."***

Paul continued to teach in that school for two years; thus, the message spread to Jews and Greeks throughout western Turkey and the surrounding regions, including Ephesus and the Churches mentioned by St. John in his Revelation.

God wrought great miracles through Paul, ***"so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them."*** This accentuates to us the significance of saints' blessings and intercessions, which we should always seek.

+ *As much as you encounter opposition from evil-doers, as much as God's grace will support you to an unimaginable extent. Let your love and service remain uninterrupted. Flee confrontations with evil, since your goal is doing good. Do not debate with those who refuse to listen; rather, use love and longsuffering to convince those amenable to respond positively.*

2. The sons of Sceva - verses 13 - 20:

"Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I

know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." (Acts 19:13 - 20)

Verses 13 & 14:

Some Jews claimed to have the power of exorcism, using incantations prohibited by Mosaic law. Upon seeing Paul repeating the name of Jesus Christ to cast out demons, they incorporated Christ's name in their incantations. Among the Jewish exorcists were seven sons of a chief priest named Sceva, who was among the priests serving the Jewish temple.

Verses 15 - 17:

A great miracle occurred: the evil spirit confessed the power of Christ, and Paul's faith; the demon attacked, and overpowered the men. The news spread throughout Ephesus, and Ephesians appreciated the power of the name of Christ. They feared Christ, and Paul His disciple, whose power clearly surpassed the sorcerers'.

Verses 18 & 19:

Seeing the magnificence and fear of Christ, many new converts were motivated to confess their sins - an indication of the practice of public confessions in the early Church.

Many Christians, who used to practise sorcery prior to their conversion, burned all their books of incantations, despite the resulting material loss. They considered that belief on Christ was worth much more. That was a demonstration of practical faith: their deeds proved the sincerity of their repentance.

Verse 20:

The word of God and His Church grew significantly. We note the following:

1. The name of Christ is not a mythical incantation that exorcises demons. Rather, we must have an unwavering faith in that name, coupled with a corresponding spiritual life.

2. All kinds of sorcery are prohibited; those include foretelling by seers, interpretation of dreams, revealing secrets unknown to anyone, divulging hidden treasures, palm-reading, charms for inducing love between couples, belief in omens, and others, all of which constitute calling on Satan's help.

+ Let not the future preoccupy you. Your God provides you with the best of everything. Fear no one, for your protector is the God of all gods. Beware of falling into Satan's hands by seeking knowledge of the future. Know that Satan is awaiting your weak moments to attack you. If you had erred and resorted to some form of sorcery, hasten to confess and partake of the holy sacraments - burn whatever you may have acquired through satanic avenues. Persist in prayers and in reading the holy Bible.

3. **Demetrius' revolt - verses 21 - 41:**

"When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time. And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana [the Latin version of the goddess Artemis], brought no small profit to the craftsmen. He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: "Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship." Now when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul's travel companions. And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him. Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends [they were Paul's friends - not necessarily believers], sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theater. Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander motioned with his hand, and wanted to make his defense to the

people. But when they found out that he was a Jew, all with one voice cried out for about two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said: "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus [the Roman Jupiter]? Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess. Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly. For we are in danger of being called in question for today's uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering." And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly." (Acts 19:21 - 41)

Verses 21 - 24:

After having spent about three years evangelizing in Ephesus, Paul decided to proceed to Jerusalem, through the Greek regions of Macedonia and Achaia, purposing to go, eventually, to Rome. He dispatched Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia, while he completed his service in Ephesus. In the meantime, Christianity's spread caused an uproar in Ephesus, spearheaded by a silversmith named Demetrius, who had amassed significant wealth by selling silver figurines of the Ephesian goddess Diana; he had foreseen a loss of revenue, to himself and other silversmiths, promulgated by Christianity's spread.

Verses 25 - 31:

Demetrius convinced the other silversmiths that their trade was threatened because of Paul's successful, continual, evangelizing, syphoning worshippers away from Diana. **"So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater....having seized Gaius and Aristarchus.....Paul's travel companions.....when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him."**

Verses 32 - 34:

The people's cries were confused and significant, since they believed that an aggression was occurring against their gods and city. It is uncertain who Alexander was; some believe it was the same Alexander, the Jewish coppersmith, that Paul mentioned in his letters to Timothy. Upon the realization that he was Jew, the crowd became even noisier, since pagans hated the Jews.

Verses 35 & 36:

Ephesus was considered to be the keeper of the "Zeus-fallen." The city clerk calmed the crowd, extolling their gods, and emphasizing the greatness of Diana.

Verses 37 - 40:

The clerk cleverly pointed out the crowd's errors, namely, the arrest of Gaius and Aristarchus without any formal charges, and without any intent on their part to rob or attack Diana's temple. Paul had never said anything against Diana, rather, he had extolled the name of Christ. The clerk went on to say that the proper way of doing things was to file a complaint before the court - thus, there was no need to incite an uproar over the entire city. Likewise, if Demetrius or others had any complaints, then these should be brought before the courts. Finally, an illegal uproar or uprising would expose the city to the Romans' anger with consequential punishment.

Verse 41:

The clerk wisely defused the crowd's misguided anger, by praising their care for Diana's temple; they calmed down and dispersed.

+ Often, our God uses non-believers, such as Diana's clerk, to deliver His children - He is the omnipotent God doing all for their good. We should not permit hardships to perturb us. Do not think beyond your means to solve your problems. Trust your God to Whom you pray - He will solve your problems in ways that you would never have imagined.



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Chapter 20

Paul's return to Greece - the farewell in Ephesus

1. Paul's trek through Greece - verses 1 - 6:

"After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia. Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece and stayed three months. And when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia--also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. These men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas. But we sailed away from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days." (Acts 20:1 - 6)

Verses 1 - 6:

After the Ephesians' uproar had ceased, Paul purposed to go to Greece, through Macedonia; however, having heard of trouble in Corinth, he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, around 53 - 54 A.D. from Ephesus, prior to his departure. He served briefly in Macedonia, then spent three months in Greece. The Jews' plot against him led him to change his plan to sail to Syria, and he returned through Macedonia instead. A number of Paul's disciples preceded him to Troas (Turkey), where he spent seven days.

+ *Fleeing evil is not a weakness, rather, wisdom and strength; it gives you a greater opportunity to persist in positive work, maintain your inner peace, and save evil-doers from falling into the sin of harming you.*

2. Raising Eutychus - verses 7 - 12:

"Now on the first day of the week [traditionally, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first day of the week has always been Sunday] , when the disciples came together to break bread [to celebrate the Sacrament of the holy Eucharist], Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together.

And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him." Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed. And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted. (Acts 20:7 - 12)

Verse 7:

On the day of the Lord, which started at sunset on Saturday, believers assembled to celebrate the Sacrament of the holy Eucharist. Subsequently, Paul delivered a sermon that lasted till midnight. It was his farewell speech, since he was leaving on Sunday morning.

Verses 8 - 12:

The fact that there were "**many lamps**" indicates that it was night-time. Our Church, customarily, keeps all the lights lit, even during daytime, in reference to the Light of the world, Christ, Whom we celebrate during Divine liturgy.

During Paul's lengthy sermon, the young man, Eutychus, overwhelmed with fatigue, was overcome by sleep at a window on the third floor; consequently, he fell to his death. However, Paul embraced him and raised him from the dead. Thus, Paul's action mirrored Elisha's and Elijah's (see 1 Kings 17:21 and 2 Kings 4:33 - 35). Likely, Paul said "**his life is in him**" to detract attention from the miracle's significance. Celebration of the holy Eucharist continued until dawn, everyone rejoiced at Eutychus' return to life, and Paul subsequently departed. Believers' care for spiritual discipleship is accentuated, in their persistence in prayers throughout the night.

+ *A servant's humility in being God's tool for working miracles is indeed a virtue. Do not seek others' praise, and do not ask opinions about your service hoping for commendations. By extolling your efforts and extracting acclamations, you fall into pride, and loss of Divine rewards.*

3. Paul's trip to Mitylene - verses 13 - 16:

"Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there intending to take Paul on board; for so he had given orders, intending himself to go on foot. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios. The following day we arrived at Samos and stayed

at Trogyllium. The next day we came to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 20:13 - 16)

Verse 13:

After having spent one week in Troas, Luke and Paul's other companions sailed to Assos. Assos was a port on the Aegean Sea, about 50 kilometres from Troas or, roughly, at least a two-day walk. The Bible does not tell us the reason for Paul's decision to walk - he may have considered it necessary for him to reflect on his service.

Verse 14:

Paul joined his companions in Assos, and they sailed to Mitylene, the chief city on the east coast of the island of Lesbos, in the Aegean Sea.

Verse 15:

Subsequently they sailed to Samos, passing by the island of Chios; they spent one day at Trogyllium, and arrived the following day at Miletus, about 50 kilometres from Ephesus.

Verse 16:

Paul did not wish to pass through Ephesus, fearing he would miss Pentecost in Jerusalem. Arriving at Miletus, he summoned the Ephesian elders to meet him there (see verse 17 below).

+ *Paul paid much attention to seclusion and meditation - hence, being alone from Troas to Assos. It is beneficial to spend some quiet time in prayer and praise, away from the daily rowdy preoccupations. Let us set aside each day, or at least once a week, some quiet time with God at home or in any quiet place, meditating on the word of God, opening our hearts to Him and doing some soul-searching.*

4. Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders - verses 17 - 38:

"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them: "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not

knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' " And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship." (Acts 20:17 - 38)

Verses 17 & 18:

Paul summoned the Ephesian elders to Miletus to counsel them. This is among Paul's most significant sermons mentioned in the holy Bible. It can be used as an example for priests' and servants' lifestyles. As a teacher, Paul guided his disciples, expounding his practical, spiritual experience, while clarifying how to achieve success in the service. He referred to his life among them since the debut of his three-year, humble, prayerful, and tearful missionary sojourn in Ephesus, despite all the opposition he faced from the Jews. This sermon may be subdivided into three parts:

1. His service among them and the reasons for his hasty departure (verses 18 - 24.)
2. His faithfulness to the service and wariness of the future (25 - 31).
3. His urging to follow his example (32 - 35).

Verse 19:

Paul accentuated the following attributes of his service in Ephesus:

1. Humility in all his dealings.
2. His tenderness and compassion for sinners, reflected in his tearful prayers.
3. His endurance of suffering from opposing Jews.

Verse 20:

Paul pointed out his faithfulness in service, and in transmitting all the spiritual facts to them, both in the individual sense and collectively in synagogues.

Verse 21:

Throughout his evangelical mission to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul consistently emphasized two aspects: repentance with abandonment of antecedent sins, and belief on Christ the Saviour.

Verse 22:

Paul told them that, guided by the Spirit, he was on his way to Jerusalem, where his fate was uncertain. He simply fully submitted to God's will.

Verse 23:

The Holy Spirit announced to Paul that he would face trials and hardships throughout his evangelical journeys, without giving any details.

Verses 24 - 27:

Paul was not expecting to see the Ephesians again, physically, beyond that point in time. Thus, he gave them the essence of his shepherding instructions and teachings. He emphasized his focus on evangelizing, sacrificing everything - even his own life - to achieve that goal and, emphasizing, that selflessness for Christ's sake was the source of his joy. He then absolved himself of any accountability before God, for anyone choosing to disobey the word of God.

Verse 28:

Paul directed them to be vigilant, vis-a-vis their salvation as well as the salvation of those whom they serve, since Christ purchased our souls with His own precious blood. This verse highlights Paul's belief in Christ's simultaneous humanity and Divinity, since, while Christ's Divinity is highlighted, His blood underscores His humanity, since God (Christ) being Spirit, has no blood.

Verses 29 - 31:

Paul warns them of Ephesian "**savage wolves**" (see "**Nicolaitans**" in Revelation 2:6) who would arise and spread heresies among them, deceiving many. Perseverance in the service, following Paul's three-year, relentless example - he "**did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears**" - was thus essential.

Verse 32:

The time had come for him to leave them in Christ's care, and relinquish the consignment, namely, their souls. God would henceforth shepherd them through His word that, in turn, would edify them up till their attainment of eternal life along with all the saints.

Verses 33 - 35:

Paul emphasized that he had "**coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel**" and that his hands provided for his necessities, as well as for those who laboured with him (Paul earned his living as a tent-maker.) It should be noted that Paul's quotation "**It is more blessed to give than to receive**" is not mentioned in any of the gospels.

Verses 36 - 38:

Paul knelt and prayed with them, and they bade him an emotional, tearful, farewell. They accompanied him to the ship that would take him to the Greek islands and, from thence, to Phoenicia and Syria (see Acts 21).



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Chapter 21

Paul's return to, and arrest in, Jerusalem

1. The journey to Tyre - verses 1 - 6:

"Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home." (Acts 21:1 - 6)

Verses 1 & 2:

Paul and his companions started their trip back to Jerusalem, after having bidden farewell to the Ephesians in Miletus. They passed by the Mediterranean islands of Cos and Rhodes, ending in the Turkish port of Patara, from which they boarded a ship to Phoenicia (today's Lebanon).

Verses 3 - 6:

They passed Cyprus on the way and continued to Tyre, where the ship unloaded its cargo. At Tyre, they spent seven days with the Christians, to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed that Paul would experience difficulties in Jerusalem. At the end of their seven-day sojourn, the Christians bade them farewell after having prayed on the shore together. Subsequently, Paul and his companions resumed their trip.

+ During the course of your service and spiritual life, let not hardships perturb you or deviate you from your godly path. The Holy Spirit indwelling you will consistently guide you through your confessor. You will then feel Christ's support more than ever.

2. Paul's soujourn in Caesarea - verses 7 - 16:

"And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais [today's Acre, Israel], greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea [a Mediterranean port, 120 kilometres from Jerusalem], and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "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.' " Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done." And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge." (Acts 21:7 - 16)

Verses 7 - 10:

Paul and his companions arrived at Ptolemais, were greeted by the Christians there, and spent one day with them. Subsequently, they travelled to Caesarea, and lodged for many days in the house of Philip the deacon, who was one of the seven chosen deacons, and who had baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip ***"had four virgin daughters who prophesied."***

Verse 11:

During the soujourn of Paul and his companions, ***"a certain prophet named Agabus....from Judea....took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "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 [in reference to the Romans]."***

Verses 12 - 14:

Upon hearing this prophecy, Paul's friends, as well as the locals, entreated him not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul stated that their show of compassion distressed him, since his desire was to endure suffering, and death, for Christ's sake. They subsequently submitted to the will of God.

Verses 15 & 16:

They proceeded by land to Jerusalem and were joined by some believers from Caesarea. They lodged with **"....Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple."**

+ Closely examine the words of those expressing compassion for you
- do not pay attention if they constitute an impediment to your spiritual life
- simply thank them for their love.

3. Paul in Jerusalem - and in the temple - verses 17 - 32:

"And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads [that was a requirement of Mosaic law], and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality." Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the

garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul." (Acts 21:17 - 32)

Verses 17 & 18:

That was Paul's fifth visit to Jerusalem - believers welcomed him. Paul met with James, "***the Lord's brother,***" and bishop of Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19, Acts 15:13,19). Jerusalem's elders attended the meeting.

Verse 19:

Paul expounded the Lord's work throughout his service among the Gentiles; he gave account of all the Churches he had founded, and of the funds he had collected for Jerusalem's needy.

Verse 20:

They all rejoiced and glorified the Lord at Paul's report. They also told him that countless Jews "***have believed, and.....zealous for the law.***"

Verse 21:

Some deceivers, though - Jewish converts - distorted Paul's message, claiming that Judaization was a necessary prerequisite for Christianity. Unbelieving Jews hated Paul, while some believers doubted him. Thus, the notion was spread that Paul was urging them to forsake Moses, and "***that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.***"

Verse 22:

During the Pentecostal season, both Jews and Jewish converts were expected to converge on Jerusalem. Naturally, they would encounter Paul, of whom it was said that he opposed Mosaic law. Therefore, the Church devised a method to allay adverse emotions towards him.

Verses 23 & 24:

Paul joined four men in fulfilling their vows in accordance with the Mosaic law purification requirements, to prove that allegations him were false.

Verses 25 & 26:

James and the elders further advised Paul that they had told the Gentile Christians not to observe Mosaic law, "***except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.***" Thus, what they had asked Paul to do was merely to appease the rebellious crowd, and not to be taken as a general requirement for all Christians. Paul subsequently did as he was asked.

Verses 27 - 29:

When the vow's remaining seven days had almost ended, the Jews from Asia stirred up crowds against Paul, **"crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.'"** Such a crime (defiling the temple) was punishable by death. The Jews had **"seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him [with Paul] in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple [thus defiling it]."**

Verse 30:

"....all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut [to avoid the temple's defilement]. They sought to kill Paul.

Verses 31 & 32:

Since the commander was accompanied by **"soldiers and centurions,"** and since each centurion had 100 troops under him, there must have been over 200 troops. According to Acts 23:26, the commander's name was Claudius Lysias. When the crowd saw the Roman troops, **"they stopped beating Paul."**

+ *It is incumbent on us to be careful about our deductions, so as not to treat others unfairly, believing that we were correct in our perceptions. Anger blinds people's minds and leads to hysterical reactions. Let us not be impulsive in our speech and deeds, and let us rely on prayers, to avoid unfair treatment of others. Avoid "mob mentality" and do not spontaneously agree with others - lest they should be at fault.*

4. Paul in the Roman government's custody - verses 33 - 40

"Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, 'Away with him!'" Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people." So when he had given him permission,

Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, (Acts 21:33 - 40)

Verse 33 & 34:

The commander ordered that Paul be bound with two chains ***"and he asked who he was and what he had done."*** However, because of the tumultuous multitude, he could not ascertain the truth, therefore, ***"he commanded him to be taken into the barracks."***

Verses 35 - 37:

"Away with him...." - The multitude clamoured for Paul's execution. Upon reaching the barrack's stairs, Paul ***"had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob."*** The commander was subsequently amazed when Paul addressed him in Greek, thus demonstrating his high level of education.

Verse 38:

The commander initially thought that Paul was ***"the Egyptian who... stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness."*** According to Josephus, The Egyptian was a false prophet, who a short time before this, under the procuratorship of Felix, had led about 30, 000 men to the Mount of Olives, promising them that they should see Jerusalem destroyed. His followers were routed by Felix, but he himself escaped.

Verses 39 & 40:

"But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia [that was a significant region in today's Turkey]. Furthermore, Paul sought the commander's permission to address the multitude. Having secured that permission, Paul gestured to the crowd, and "there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language...."

+ *God dispatches to His children, at the appropriate time, those who would save them from the hands of their oppressors. He will save their lives, thus permitting them to fulfill their mission as He did with Paul. Therefore, persevere in your godly life, undaunted by evil-doers' threats.*



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Chapter 22

Paul's speech to the Jews in the temple

1. Paul's vision on his way to Damascus - verses 1 - 11:

""Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel [indicating that Gamaliel was his teacher], taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way [Christianity] to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus." (Acts 22:1 - 11)

Verses 1 & 2:

Despite the crowd's attempt to kill him, Paul addressed them as **"brethren and fathers"** in Hebrew, promoting their silence to hear his defence.

Verse 3:

Paul started narrating his lifestory: hence, his birth in Tarsus (Cilicia - Turkey), and studying Jewish law at the hands of the great Jewish teacher, Gamaliel - a member of the Sanhedrin's seventy elders.

Verse 4:

Paul persecuted Christians, **"delivering into prisons both men and women."** (followers of **"the Way"** as Christianity was labelled then - furthermore, Christ said **"I am the Way..."** John 14:6). Paul even supervised Stephen's stoning.

Verses 5 - 8:

Paul continued narrating his story of conversion: from persecution to evangelism. He mentioned the high priests' full support in punishing Christians, and bringing **"in chains even those who were there [in Damascus] to Jerusalem to be punished."** Then he mentioned his encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus: **"...near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'"**

Verse 9:

Paul's entourage during that journey testified that they were terrified at the light, and the voice which they could not understand. We note the consistency between Paul's narrative here, and the account in Acts Ch. 9.

Verses 10 & 11:

Subsequently, the Lord instructed Paul to **"go into Damascus..."** where he would be told what to do. Since Paul **"could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand...."** He came, eventually, to Damascus.

+ *If you err inadvertently, the grace of God will guide you to the path of repentance and return to God. Obey the Lord's voice, enjoy His shepherding, and His glorification through you.*

2. Paul's baptism - verses 12 - 16:

"Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth [this refers to Paul's encounter with Christ during his 3-year seclusion in the wilderness - Galatians 1:17 & 18]. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'" (Acts 22:12 - 16)

Verses 12 & 13:

Paul continued saying that **"a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there...."** came to him and said, **'Brother Saul, receive your sight.'** Paul received his sight instantly.

Verses 14 & 15:

Paul proclaimed that Christ said he would be **"His witness to all men of what you [Paul] have seen and heard."** For this reason, The Coptic Orthodox Church considers Paul to be of the same stature as the twelve disciples since, like them, he saw, and spoke to, the Lord.

Verse 16:

Ananias called on Paul to wait no longer, and to **"be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."**

+ Great indeed is the grace of knowing Christ and adhering to the Church's fold. Diligently pursue an in-depth knowledge of God through His Church, and submission to His will given in the holy Bible and counselled by your confessor. Seek to teach others, attracting them to fellowship with you in the Church of God.

3. Paul's trance in the temple - the Jews' uprising against him - verses 17 - 24:

"Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' " And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him." (Acts 22:17 - 24)

Verses 17 & 18:

According to Galatians 1:17 & 18, Paul spent three years in Arabia prior to returning to Jerusalem. During that period, he received from the Lord the sound Faith that he was preaching (1 Corinthians 11:23).

By praying in the temple in Jerusalem, following his baptism, he indicated his adherence to his forefathers' teachings, and demonstrated to the Jews that he was not different from them. He saw Christ in a trance, telling him, ***"Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me."***

Verses 19 & 20:

Paul thought that the Jews would accept him, since they witnessed his persecution of Christians, and his consenting to Stephen's stoning.

Verse 21:

Nevertheless, Christ sent Paul to evangelize the Gentiles, away from Jerusalem and Judea. This means that Paul's evangelizing the Gentiles was a Divine instruction, rather than an adversarial reaction to the Jews or to forefathers' teachings.

Verse 22 & 23:

The Jews were infuriated, due to their belief that Paul felt they were inferior to Gentiles. They intended to stone Paul - but the commander stopped them. Thus, they rejected Paul's evangelism, analogously to their rejection of Christ when He had wept over Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41).

Verse 24:

"...the commander ordered him [Paul] to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him." It should also be pointed out that the commander did not understand Hebrew - the language which Paul had chosen to address the crowd.

+ *It is important for us to discern God's voice - rather than ignore it as those crowds did. This could indeed be the last chance for repentance, prior the heart's hardening and persistence in the path of evil. Let us therefore scrutinize and examine ourselves, daily, using each and every God-sent word. This should give us the opportunity to repent of any impulsive or inadvertent speech or deed we might have made.*

4. The attempt to scourge Paul - verses 25 - 30:

"And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." The commander answered, "With a

large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. (Acts 22: 25 - 30)

Verses 25 - 30:

These verses are self-explanatory. Paul knew that scourging a Roman citizen was a crime punishable by death; so he revealed his citizenship to the commander's centurion who, in turn, alerted the commander to Paul's citizenship. Consequently, he released Paul from his bonds, and brought him before the Jews' council.

+ Do not hesitate to defend your rights using means available to you; but this must be for God's glorification, rather than for personal gain. At the same time, do not be perturbed for failing to defend yourself - accept suffering for Christ's sake, ensuring you have not erred. Suffering and accepting oppression, while being innocent, earns us rewards in heaven.



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Chapter 23

***Paul's speech in the Sanhedrin - the Jews' plot - transporting
him to Caesarea***

1. Failure of the first trial - verses 1 - 11:

"Then Paul, looking earnestly [he glowered] at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest? Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' " But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection--and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." (Acts 23:1 - 11)

Verse 1:

Paul used to be one of them for many years, persecuting Christians and putting Stephen on trial for the very reason he was being tried. Thus, he

addressed them as "**brethren**," emphasizing that he served God faithfully both as a Jew and as a convert.

Verse 2:

Ananias was a hated, Sadducee, chief priest. He ordered that Paul be struck, to show his contempt, and anger at Paul's exposing their false accusations.

Verse 3:

Paul's prophecy against Ananias, hence, "**God will strike you**," was fulfilled when, eventually, Ananias was murdered by the people, at the beginning of the first Jewish-Roman war. Paul had rebuked him for ordering someone to strike him, which was against the law's stipulation, namely, a person should be given a chance to defend himself first.

Verses 4 & 5:

Paul was unaware that Ananias was the high priest, since high priests were replaced frequently contrary to the law. There was also no evidence that Ananias was of the seed of Aaron, qualifying him to be high priest. Paul also demonstrated his knowledge of the provisions of the law.

Verse 6:

Paul realized that some of them were Pharisees, believing in spirits and the resurrection, while others were Sadducees who believed in neither - they believed that the spirit dies with the body never to rise again; so he declared his Pharisee pedigree, pitching one group against the other, having realized the futility of the council's ruling in his favour.

Verses 7 & 8:

Despite the Sadducees' acceptance of Moses' pentateuch, which refers to angels and the resurrection of the dead, they believed that angels merely served humans and would eventually disappear. The Pharisees therefore sided with Paul, and a dissention arose between them and the Sadducees.

Verse 9:

Seeing that Paul was one of them and shared their beliefs, the Pharisees supported Paul, crying, "**We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.**" Their support of Paul was purely out of bias against the Sadducees, rather than a confession of Christ.

Verse 10:

The commander ordered Paul's return to the barracks, to protect him against possible harm caused by the uproar between Pharisees and Sadducees.

Verse 11:

The following night, the Lord stood by Paul and said, , **"Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."**

+ Ananias, the chief priest, was a poor example, leading people to shun his religion. On the other hand, Paul's uprightness contrasted sharply by his open confession. Rest assured that those around you observe closely, and imitate, your speech and deeds. You are Christ's image - make sure you do not distort it and become a curse to His name. Rest assured that "actions speak louder than words."

2. The conspiracy - Paul's transfer to Caesarea - verses 12 - 35:

"And when it was day, some of the Jews [most likely some Sadducees] banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me? And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you. So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me." And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor." He wrote a letter in the following manner: Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to

be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell. Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium." (Acts 23:12 - 35)

Verses 12 - 15:

"Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy [most likely, more than forty Sadducees conspired to kill Paul]. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul [thus, they vowed to kill an innocent person who had neither been tried nor condemned]. Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

Verse 16:

News of that conspiracy was leaked to other Jews. The conspirators did not suspect the presence of one of Paul's relatives - his nephew; so **"he [Paul's nephew] went and entered the barracks and told Paul."**

Verses 17 - 22:

"Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." [This accentuates the importance of taking action to defend oneself, rather than being complacent while waiting for God's deliverance]

"So he [the centurion] took him [Paul's nephew] and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me? And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council

tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you. So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me [this was to protect the young man from reprisals against him.]""

Verses 23 - 25:

Caesarea had the Roman empire's headquarters - about 100 kilometres from Jerusalem. The commander, Claudius Lysias, believed the story of Paul's nephew, and ordered that Paul be transferred to Caesarea's governor, Felix, guarded by 470 troops, along with the following message:

"This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him."

Verses 26 - 35:

Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. "

+ *Mysterious indeed are the Lord's provisions for delivering His children. Thus, He protected Paul against the Jewish evil-doers, and helped him to witness for Christ in Rome. Similarly, the Lord works with us when we submit to His will. Let not evil-doers' conspiracies perturb us. God will grant grace to those responsible for us, to consider us favourably. He will deliver us in amazing ways until we fulfill His will.*



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Chapter 24

Paul's continued captivity till the end of Felix' rule

1. Paul's trial before Felix - verses 1 - 21:

"Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders and a certain orator named Tertullus. These gave evidence to the governor against Paul. And when he was called upon, Tertullus began his accusation, saying: "Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your foresight, we accept it always and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us. For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law. But the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him." And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so. Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: "Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city. Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me. But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation, in the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a mob nor

with tumult. They ought to have been here before you to object if they had anything against me. Or else let those who are here themselves say if they found any wrongdoing in me while I stood before the council, unless it is for this one statement which I cried out, standing among them, 'Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day.' " (Acts 24:1 - 21)

Verse 1 & 2:

"Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders [some of the Jewish elders representing the Sanhedrin] ***and a certain orator named Tertullus*** [a Roman lawyer]. ***These gave evidence to the governor against Paul.***" Ananias was filled with rage against Paul. The lawyer then began his accusations against Paul.

Verse 3:

It should be noted that Antonius Felix was formerly a slave but was promoted by Claudius Caesar to the office of governor. The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as "cruel, licentious, and base." In 58, Felix hired assassins to murder Jonathan the high priest. Tertullus started by praising Felix, telling him ***"through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity."*** Felix had managed to eliminate gangs that had terrorized the land with robberies and murder.

Verse 4:

Tertullus wisely shortened his introductory, flattering, remarks, acknowledging Felix' busy schedule.

Verses 5 & 6:

"Nazarenes" was the label attached to Christ's followers, since He hailed from the village of Nazareth.

Tertullus accused Paul of three crimes:

1. He incited rebellion and dissent among the Jews.
2. He led a group of Nazarenes and, unceasingly, created problems.
3. ***"He even tried to profane the temple."*** That was based on the Jews' false allegation that he had brought the Gentile, Ephesian, Trophimus, into the temple, where Gentiles were not allowed.

Verse 7 - 9:

Tertullus added that ***"the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him."*** Thus, the lawyer blamed Lysias for the Jews' failure to judge Paul, and for the long trip that had to be made to try Paul before Felix. The Jews agreed with everything he said.

Verses 10 - 12:

As he spoke in his own defence, Paul acknowledged that, having ruled the Jews for many years, Felix would be aware of the Jews' williness. Paul emphasized three facts in his defence:

1. He had spent no more than 12 days in Jerusalem.
2. He had come to worship in the temple, with no intent to defile it, **"believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets,"** and believing that Christianity was an extension of Judaism.
3. He denied all accusations of inciting rebellion or dissent.

Verses 13 - 15:

Paul rebuffed all accusations of inciting dissent or defiling the temple. On the other hand, he acknowledged his Christianity, considering himself the Nazarenes' forerunner, while emphasizing that Christianity, a complement to, rather than a contradiction of, Judaism, also believed in the general resurrection. Hence, while he believed in the God Whom the Jews worshipped, he also believed the law and the prophets. Consequently, since the Romans acknowledged Judaism as a religion, then its natural continuum, Christianity, should not be at odds with the law.

Verses 16 & 17:

Paul declared that he strove **"to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."** He also said that, after many years, he had come to Jerusalem bearing alms and offerings to the Jews.

Verses 18 & 19:

The Jews found Paul in the temple purifying, in accordance with the law. Some Jews from Asia (Turkey) had accompanied him, but failed to testify in his defence. He was not stirring any trouble.

Verses 20 & 21:

Finally, Paul said that the Jews present had tried him before their council and found him blameless - unless it was for one statement he had made, namely, **"Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day."**

+ Paul seized that opportunity to preach to his accusers, and to Felix himself, the resurrected Christ from the dead. That message was his most significant goal, and he tried to seize every opportunity to further it. Let us, therefore, seize every opportunity to manifest Christ through our love, good deeds, and kind words. God's support will allay all fears.

2. The trial's outcome - verses 22 - 27:

"But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way [Christianity], he adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case." So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him. And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound." (Acts 24:22 - 27)

Verse 22:

The Jews sought a quick sentencing from Felix. However, due to his prior knowledge about Christianity, he preferred to await the arrival of Lysias the commander, since the Jews had quoted him in their case against Paul.

Verse 23:

The centurion placed Paul, unbound, under house arrest. Likely, he seemed convinced of Paul's innocence.

Verses 24 - 26:

And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ [this could have been in response to a request from his wife to hear about Christianity from Paul]. ***Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid*** [likely, Felix was afraid of judgment because of the multitude of his sins - his wife did not seem too concerned] ***and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him*** [Felix thought that Paul might try to buy his freedom].

Verse 27:

Paul remained under house arrest for two years; that was Felix' attempt to please the Jews. After that time, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus.

+ God transforms everything for good for His children. Felix had no knowledge of the fact that his action would result in Paul travelling to Rome, to be tried, and to evangelize, there. Let us accept God's economy, even if it seems contrary to our expectations, since God loves us and plans everything for our good.



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Chapter 25

Paul is brought before Festus - he appeals to Caesar

1. Paul's trial before Festus - verses 1 - 12:

"Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Then the high priest and the chief men [members of the Sanhedrin] of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem--while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. "Therefore," he said, "let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him." And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, while he answered for himself, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all." But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar." Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!" (Acts 25:1 - 12)

Verse 1:

Porcius Festus became the fifth procurator of Judea, from about 59, succeeding Antonius Felix. Caesarea was the capital of that province. It is believed he retained that position for about 2 - 3 years. History describes him as being fair and reasonable.

Verses 2 & 3:

Through their elders and chief priest, the Jews renewed their accusations, to Festus, against Paul, and requested that Paul be summoned to stand trial in Jerusalem, purposing to ambush him along the way and kill him.

Verse 4 & 5:

Festus denied their request, and ordered that Paul be retained in Caesarea - that was Divine provision for Paul's protection. Furthermore, he instructed the Jewish leaders to accompany him, ***"and accuse this man [Paul], to see if there is any fault in him."***

Verses 6 & 7

Festus proceeded with Paul's trial in Caesarea after having spent ten days in Jerusalem. Paul was brought before him, and the Jews repeated their unfounded allegations against him.

Verse 8:

In his defence, Paul focused on his innocence of all accusations: he never disobeyed the law, defiled the temple or rebelled against Caesar - namely, the same accusations which had been brought against him before Felix.

Verse 9:

Festus tried to please the Jews who clamoured for Paul's trial in Jerusalem. On the other hand, realizing Paul's innocence, he asked him if he desired a Jerusalem trial, in order to be acquitted from both the civil and religious perspectives. Thus, Festus was just on two counts:

1. The religious trial in Jerusalem would take place in his presence, to avoid any injustice.
2. He sought Paul's wish: whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem.

Verse 10:

Being fully cognizant of the Jews' wiliness, Paul protested his trial in Caesarea, and emphasized his innocence. Thus, he exercised his civil rights to defeat the Jews' snares, especially as the procurator himself was convinced of his innocence.

Verse 11:

Paul, fully convinced of his innocence, and fully aware of his rights as a Roman citizen, asked to be tried before Augustus, thus: ***"For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar."***

Verse 12:

Festus agreed to grant Paul his request, which was legal according to Roman law. So he told Paul, ***"To Caesar you shall go."***

+ Paul seized every opportunity to evangelize, even in Rome, the empire's capital. His ultimate goal was to evangelize, rather than to prove his innocence. Such is the perfect servant: his focus is solely on fulfilling his mission (see Ch. 20:24). Capitalize on each opportunity to portray Christ through your speech and deeds. Love everyone you encounter - such is the Christ-like lifestyle.

2. Meeting between Festus and Agrippa - verses 13 - 22:

"And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.' Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him." (Acts 25:13 - 22)

Verse 13:

There are two King Agrippas in the Bible, both part of the Herod family. King Herod Agrippa I was a grandson of Herod the Great; he ruled over Judea and Samaria. Agrippa I is the "King Herod" who killed James and imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:1 - 3). The son of Agrippa I was King Herod Agrippa II, also known as Julius Marcus Agrippa; he was the brother of Bernice and Drusilla and heard Paul's defence of the gospel in Acts 26.

Verses 14 - 16:

Their visit lasted for a long time. Festus described to them Paul's situation. The Jewish elders and priests tried to upend the trial before Agrippa. Festus, though, was committed to the rule of law, namely, a person is innocent until proven guilty.

Verses 17 & 18:

The Jews were incapable of proving any of their accusations, against Paul in Caesarea, before Festus, they. Likewise, Festus was unable to find anything that Paul did against Roman law.

Verse 19:

Festus advised Agrippa that the dispute between the Jews and Paul was purely of a religious nature, and that the arguments revolved around a certain Jesus, Who had died, but Whom Paul claims to have risen from the dead.

Verses 20 & 21:

Although that from the perspective of Roman civil law, Festus could see that Paul was innocent, he hesitated to release him altogether; so he asked Paul if he agreed to a trial in Jerusalem, that could also clear him of any religious wrong-doing. However, Paul declined Festus' offer, and raised his appeal to Caesar. Thus, Festus had no choice but to accept Paul's appeal (according to Roman law).

Verse 22:

Festus agreed to satisfy Agrippa's request, namely, to hear Paul's story from Paul's mouth.

+ Maybe the Lord desired to grant Agrippa and his sister a chance to repent, following Paul's testimony - God desires repentance for all His children, regardless of their deeds. REgrettably, we tend to waste precious opportunities such as this one! Rest assured that each and every spiritual word you hear within or without the Church constitutes a personal message for you, to apply in your life, rather than a message for someone else....

3. Paul before Agrippa - verses 23 - 27:

"So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the

examination has taken place I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him." (Acts 25: 23 - 27)

Verses 23 - 26:

Festus organized a celebration to welcome Agrippa and Bernice. The celebration, held in the auditorium, was attended by the city's "***commanders and prominent men.***" Paul was subsequently brought in, and Festus introduced him to the assembly, stating that, because of Paul's request, he was compelled to send him to Caesar.

Verse 27:

Festus indicated that a reason must be found for sending someone to Caesar. Likely, God was continuing to prod Festus to believe, through Paul's assertions. God desires salvation for all.

This constitutes Paul's fifth trial session, since his arrest in Jerusalem:

1. Before the Jews in the temple.
2. Before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.
3. Before Felix in Caesarea.
4. Before Festus in Caesarea.
5. Before Agrippa and Festus in Caesarea.

In each case, Paul was deemed innocent.

+ *We should not be amazed when declaration of our innocence is delayed. There is a time for everything under heaven - and we are not greater than St. Paul. Accept false accusations, and be not perturbed when your assertions of innocence are ignored. Rest assured that God highly values your endurance, and He will reward you for it. At the opportune time, He will reveal your innocence.*



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Chapter 26

Paul's protest before Agrippa

1. Paul's life prior to his conversion to Christianity - verses 1 - 11:
"Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers [the promise that the awaited Messiah would come and save His people]. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26:1 - 11)

Verses 1 - 3:

When Agrippa permitted Paul to speak, the latter started by expressing his gratitude at Agrippa's familiarity **"in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews."** This allowed Paul to express himself in detail, since, normally, Romans had no interest in Jewish customs.

Verses 4 & 5:

Paul expounded his upbringing as a devout Pharisee. Pharisees were known to adhere strictly to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the law.

Verses 6 & 7:

Paul proclaimed his belief in eternal life and the resurrection from the dead - fulfilled by Christ, the awaited Messiah. He linked Jewish belief in a Messiah, to the resurrected Christ. Stating that, since he shared the Jews in their beliefs, he argued that there was no case against him for which he should stand trial.

Verse 8:

Paul wondered why it was difficult for the Jews to believe in resurrection, and particularly in Christ's resurrection, hence, ***Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?***

Verse 9:

Paul acknowledged that, as a Jew, he resisted Christ and Christianity, not having understood that it was an extension and fulfillment of Judaism.

Verse 10:

Most likely, Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, which may be deduced from his assertions: ***This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.***

Verse 11:

Paul's aggressiveness had extended to "***every synagogue***" and he had "***compelled them*** [Christians] ***to blaspheme.***"

+ *Paul wronged Christ, believing that he was doing the right thing. Do not be impetuous in your decisions or actions. Heed godly counselling to avoid expressing incorrect opinions, or abusing innocent people.*

2. Paul's vision and the change in his life - verses 12 - 23:

"While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the

Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.' "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."
(Acts 26:12 - 23)

Verse 12:

Paul acknowledges the fact that he was travelling ***"to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests*** [authorizing him to persecute Christians]."

Verse 13:

Paul narrates, for the third time, his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (see Chs. 9:3 and 22:6); hence, ***"at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me."***

Verse 14 & 15:

Paul (Saul) and his companions fell to the ground, and he heard a voice telling him (in Hebrew) ***'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'*** When Paul asked ***"Who are You Lord?"*** Christ answered ***"I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting."***

Verse 16:

The Lord reassured Paul in his vision, telling him that he was chosen to evangelize and witness for Christ - as Ananias told him eventually.

Verse 17:

The Lord sent Paul to the Gentiles, whom the Jews hated. The Lord said, ***"I now send you,"*** thus confirming that Paul was Christ's emissary. The Lord also promised to protect Paul against both Jews and Gentiles, so that he would fulfill his mission up till his martyrdom.

Verse 18:

The Lord told Paul that his mission to the Gentiles would ***"open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."***

Verses 19 & 20:

Paul asserted to Agrippa that he obeyed the heavenly vision and evangelized ***"in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."***

Verse 21:

The Jews seized Paul in the temple and tried to kill him because of his evangelizing message to the Gentiles which, among other things, emphasized that judaization was unnecessary to convert to Christianity.

Verses 22 & 23:

Christ was the first to raise Himself from the dead and go to paradise and His kingdom. All who had died before Him went to hades because Christ had not yet fulfilled redemption.

God protected Paul according to His promise, thus enabling him to witness ***"both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."***

+ *Paul constantly remembered Christ's call to serve Him. Likewise, never forget your life's purpose, namely, to live for God, prepare for your eternity, witness for Christ through your love, and call everyone to a godly life.*

3. The session's conclusion - verses 24 - 32:

"Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains." When he had said these

things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."" (Acts 26:24 - 32)

Verses 24 & 25:

Festus accused Paul of madness - which is typical of Satan's tactics against God's children to impede evangelizing. Even the Jews accused Christ of having a demon (see John 8:48). However, Paul responded, with much respect, saying, **"I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason."**

Verse 26 & 27:

Paul informed Festus that Agrippa, as a Jew, was familiar with all those things, all the prophecies, as well as Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Furthermore, Paul asked Agrippa, **"do you believe the prophets?"** Without waiting for an answer, he went on, **"I know that you do believe."**

Verse 28:

Agrippa's response to Paul, **"You almost persuade me to become a Christian"** may seem like an evasive answer in an attempt to sidestep the logical conclusion of converting to Christianity.

Verse 29:

Paul's enthusiasm was evident from his answer: **"I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."**

Verses 30 - 32:

The session ended, and everybody left, being convinced of Paul's innocence. Agrippa also emphasized that conviction but, since Paul had appealed to Caesar, the rulers were obliged to send him to Rome.

+ Christians yearn to attract others to the knowledge of Christ, Who loved them, and in Whom they believe, as Paul did according to the Psalmist, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good..." (Psalm 34:8) A Christian's circumstances pale, when compared to success of his mission and testimony.



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Chapter 27

Paul's journey from Caesarea to Malta

1. The journey's beginning - verses 1 - 13:

"And when it was decided that we [it is understood that Luke accompanied Paul during that trip] should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly [this could have been due to Festus' instructions] and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care. When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board. When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone. Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast [this refers to the Jewish atoning fast which occurs during the Fall] was already over, Paul advised them, saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives." Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete opening toward the southwest and northwest, and winter there. When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete." (Acts 27:1 - 13)

Verse 1:

"Augustan regiment" - Historians and commentators have offered different interpretations: some believe this refers to the ancient city of

"Augusta" while others believe those were members of an elite squad of bodyguards that Nero had created. Paul was detained two years in Caesarea. Festus subsequently handed him over, along with other prisoners, to a centurion named "Julius," for the trip to Rome, Italy.

Verse 2:

The ship in which Paul embarked belonged to a city of Asia Minor, on the coast of Mysia, named Adramyttium. They would eventually be transferred to another ship bound for Rome. Paul was accompanied by Luke and Aristarchus, the Macedonian from Thessalonica - each of whom was a source of comfort for him.

Verse 3:

The next day the ship docked at Sidon (a port in Lebanon), about 100 kilometres north of Caesarea. Julius permitted Paul to visit his friends (likely Christians) and receive care (likely financial sustenance).

Verses 4 - 6:

Due to the prevailing head-wind, the ship sailed towards Cyprus, then docked at **"Myra, a city of Lycia."** They subsequently transferred to an Alexandrian ship heading to Rome.

Verses 7 & 8:

Due to strong head winds, they were forced to sail **"slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus..."** The wind did not permit them to proceed, so they arrived with difficulty **"to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea** [on the south coast of Crete].

Verses 9 - 11:

Drawing on his experience, and being guided by God, **"Paul advised them, saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives.""** However, the centurion and the ship's captain disregarded his advice.

Verses 12 & 13:

"And because the harbor [this refers to the harbour at Fair havens] **was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix** [about 60 kilometers westward], **a harbor of Crete opening toward the southwest and northwest, and winter there. When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete."**

+ Quite often, the Lord sends us indications of His will, but we tend to take them lightly and, subsequently, suffer severe consequences, proving our faulty decisions. Let us neither challenge nor thwart God's voice that

we hear in Church or through our confessor and spiritual guides. Rather than make impetuous decisions, leading to dire consequences, let us consistently seek Divine guidance.

2. The storms - lost at sea - verses 14 - 26:

"But not long after, a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon [a north-east tempestuous wind] So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. And running under the shelter of an island called Clauda, we secured the skiff [a flat-bottomed row boat] with difficulty. When they had taken it on board, they used cables to undergird [to secure the ship's bottom] the ship; and fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands, they struck sail and so were driven. And because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship. On the third day we threw the ship's tackle [this refers to everything that could be removed from the ship] overboard with our own hands. Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up. But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. However, we must run aground on a certain island." (Acts 27:14 - 26)



Paul's shipwreck

Verses 14 & 15:

Shortly after setting sail, hoping to reach Phoenix, a north-east tempestuous wind started blowing, and the crew lost control of their ship - so they simply let it be blown by the wind.

Verses 16 & 17:

They passed by the island of Clauda, and continued to be tossed by the wind. They managed to secure the ship's lifeboat, and they strengthened the ship's hull using cables, fearing to run aground on the "**Syrtis Sands.**" Syrtis was a treacherous area off the coast of North Africa in which ships could flounder in shallow seas choked by seaweed.

Verses 18 & 19:

They everything possible into the sea in order to lighten the ship's load.

Verse 20:

With neither sun nor stars to guide them, and with the tempest tossing the ship out of control, they gave up all hope of being saved: "**....when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us** [the stormy wind was quite violent], **all hope that we would be saved was finally given up.**"

Verses 21 & 22:

The crew had not eaten for several days, likely due to fear and seasickness. Paul then rebuked them for ignoring his advice earlier, namely, not to set sail, given the impending storm. Paul subsequently promised them that they would be saved: "**And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship** [only the ship would be lost to the storm, with no loss of life]".

Verses 23 - 26:

In response to Paul's prayer, the Lord had sent His angel to tell him, "**Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.**" Paul relayed the Lord's message to the others, and reassured them that none would perish. Obedience to Paul thus saved their lives. It is worth comparing Paul's obedience, which led to deliverance of all the ship's occupants, to Jonah's rebellion which caused much grief to his ship's occupants (see Jonah 1:12).

+ *The more we obey God, the more He protects and shields us from harm. Therefore, let us obey God's commandments and the Church's guidance, even if they seemed contrary to our will - because God loves*

us more than we love ourselves, and He knows what is beneficial for us. We act in accordance with our convictions, but obedience means executing what is contrary to our convictions. Thus, obedience transcends other emotions, and is motivated by love and faith in God.

3. Deliverance after the shipwreck - verses 27 - 44:

"Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land. And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms [about 37 metres]; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms [about 27 metres]. Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow, Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off. And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, "Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for your survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you." And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat. Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea. When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves. And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape. But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship. And so it was that they all escaped safely to land." (Acts 27:27 - 44)

Verses 27 - 29:

Fourteen days had passed since they had set sail from Crete; during that period, the ship was being buffeted by stormy weather in the Adriatic Sea. Somehow, the sailors sensed that they were approaching land. The decreasing sea depth confirmed their expectation, and they dropped anchor for fear of running aground.

Verses 30 - 32:

Intending to escape from the ship, the sailors let down the lifeboat, pretending to cast anchor from the front of the ship. However, Paul warned the centurion and his soldiers, whereupon they cut the lifeboat loose from the ship and let it drift away, thus thwarting the sailors' attempt to escape.

Verses 33 & 34:

Even though he was their prisoner, Paul spoke kindly to the soldiers, urging them to eat to build strength necessary for their survival, and promising **"not a hair will fall from the head of any of you."** That was the fourth time that Paul cared for the survival of those with him (see verses 10, 21 and 31.)

Verses 35 - 37:

Paul encouraged them by giving thanks and eating. **"Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves.** There was a total of **"two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship."**

+ *The presence of God's children anywhere is always a source of comfort and joy for those present. The Coptic Orthodox Church's history records that the presence of St. Paul, the first anchorite, caused dew and rain to fall on Egyptian land. Rest assured that God desires to bless those around you for your sake, given that you lead a godly lifestyle. God awaits your prayers for others, in order to be merciful to them, since you are His cherished child.*

Verse 38:

Despite their full knowledge that the ship would sink, everybody ate and was satiated, then made a last attempt to lighten the ship's load by throwing overboard all the wheat.

Verse 39:

"When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible." According to Ch.28:1, they had arrived at the island of Malta.

Verse 40:

"And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore."

Verse 41:

"But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves." There were two opposing sea currents which led to the formation of a sandbank in which the ship's front part was stuck. Thus, the waves buffeting the ship's rear led to its disintegration.

Verse 42:

"And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape." Roman law stipulated that a soldier would be sentenced to death if his prisoner escaped.

Verse 43:

"But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land...."

Verse 44:

"....the rest [who were unable to swim], some on boards and some on parts of the ship....they all escaped safely to land."

That was the fourth time that Paul was saved from drowning (see 2 Corinthians 11:25).

+ *A servant with a clear vision will persist in his service regardless of any obstacles, as demonstrated by Paul, whose mission and choices remained constant. Let us not be perturbed by obstacles - they do not mean that God has abandoned us. Rather, let us persist in our service and spiritual struggle, fully trusting the power of our God to deliver us, and confident that our sins are not a hindrance, as long as we lead a life of repentance.*



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Chapter 28

Paul's journey from Malta to Rome

1. In Malta - verses 1 - 10:

"Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him. So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary." (Acts 28:1 - 10)

Verses 1 & 2:

Everybody finally made it to shore on the island of Malta, south of Italy. The inhabitants of Malta were called "barbaroi" meaning that they spoke neither Latin nor Greek, rather, Punic. They were known for their generosity, and ***"the natives showed....unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire....because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold."*** They made everybody welcome.

Verses 3 - 6:

As Paul was gathering some dry sticks to fuel the fire, a viper emerged from the sticks and fastened itself on Paul's hand. The natives then

concluded that Paul must have been a murderer, and that he would not escape justice. However, Paul shook the viper off and it fell into the fire. Seeing that Paul remained unharmed, the natives concluded that he was an immortal god.

+ People's views change from one extreme to another; we risk losing our discipleship to Christ by being fixated on people's shifting opinions. Let us not sacrifice truth for the sake of pleasing others. Let us remain guided by the Church's teaching, unperturbed by their accusations. Our focus should be on winning souls for God.

Verses 7 & 8:

"In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days. And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him."

Verses 9 & 10:

The news of Paul's healing of Publius' father spread far and wide. ***"So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed."*** The natives finally honoured Paul and the rest and, as they were leaving (three months later - see below) they provided them with all their needs.

+ God will always provide an outlet for our hardships. Following several days of being lost at sea with feelings of despair, the Lord provided relief, and they were treated with much honour; Paul, the prisoner, was exalted, and was a source of joy and comfort for those around him. Let us persevere in our prayers, and our omnipotent God will not only deliver us, but will also convert hardships into blessings. If the extent of abuse against you were to increase significantly - even unto death, as was the case with Paul - God is capable of delivering you, and rendering you a source of blessings to your abusers, as was the case with the soldiers who intended to kill Paul. The most important thing is to retain your love for those who abuse you, and maintain your steadfast faith in God.

2. From Malta to Rome - verses 11 - 16:

"After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers [those were the "twin gods" Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of the gods Zeus and Leda whom sailors believed to be their protectors at sea], which had wintered at the island. And landing at Syracuse [a Greek/Roman city on the southern portion

of the east coast of sicily], *we stayed three days. From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Appii Forum [a small market town about 64 kilometres south of Rome] and Three Inns [about 16 kilometres from Rome]. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.*" (Acts 28:11 - 16)



Paul's journey to Rome

Verses 11 & 12:

After spending three months in Malta, Paul and his companions boarded an Alexandrian ship. The ship docked at Syracuse (181 kilometres from Malta), where they spent three days. Taking advantage of the changing wind direction, the sailors sailed the ship to Rhegium, on Italy's south coast, then they proceeded to Puteoli (a harbour city, 8 kilometres west of Naples, 225 kilometres southeast of Rome) on Italy's west coast.

Verses 13 & 14:

Puteoli's Christians hosted the travellers for seven days. Subsequently, they proceeded to Rome.

Verses 15 & 16:

"When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage." Upon their arrival in Rome, "the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him." At that time, prisoners' guards shifts were four hours - hence, every four hours a different soldier was assigned to guard Paul.

+ *God is capable of granting you grace in the eyes of those around you, thus enabling you to complete your service and spiritual struggle. Thank God at all times, and capitalize on His abundant blessings, to draw closer to Him.*

3. Evangelizing in captivity - verses 17 - 31:

"And it came to pass after three days [of his arrival in Rome] that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: "Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans, who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death. But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere." So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their

ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them." ' "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves. Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him." (Acts 28:17 - 31)

Verse 17:

Paul wasted no time before starting to evangelize in Rome. In those days, there were about sixty thousand Jews in Rome, who had seven synagogues assigned to them in a special area in Rome. **"Paul called the leaders of the Jews together"** and told them, **"Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans...."**

Verses 18 - 20:

Paul continued to say that, after the Romans had examined him, they wanted to release him, since they had found no reason for putting him to death. However, **"when the Jews spoke against it, I [Paul] was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation. For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain."**

Verses 21 & 22:

"Then they said to him, "We neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you. But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect [Christianity], we know that it is spoken against everywhere.""

Verses 23 - 29:

"So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after

Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them." ' "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves."

Verses 30 & 31:

"Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him."

Paul continued to evangelize in Rome for two years (61 & 62), at his rented house. During that period he preached to both Jews and Gentiles, including Philemon's slave Onesimus (Philemon 10), who had run away from his master in Colosse. During that period Paul also sent his letters to the Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. He was accompanied at that time by Timothy, Luke the evangelist, Tychicus, Aristarchus, Jesus Justus, Epaphras, Demas, Archippus, and John Mark. These names are mentioned in his epistles.

Paul continued his evangelizing activities unimpeded by the Romans, since they considered Christianity to be a subset of Judaism. Two years later, in the year 64, the Romans started persecuting Christians, following Nero's burning of Rome - since Christians were blamed for it.

Throughout the period awaiting his trial, Paul neither complained nor lost hope. Although God permitted Paul's imprisonment and hardships, He never abandoned him. Thus, Paul continued to evangelize, up till and including his sojourn in Rome.

Thus, the Book of Acts has ended, and Paul fulfilled Christ's commandment: ***"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*** (Acts 1:8)

After Paul's release from his first imprisonment in Rome, mentioned in this chapter, he spent five years evangelizing in several places. He was subsequently arrested and imprisoned in Rome for the second time, at which point he sent his second epistle to Timothy. He was martyred in the year 68.

+ Do not waste your time in preoccupations that steer you away from Christ. Do not be impeded by others' disagreements with you. Persist in your love and in witnessing for Christ, through your deeds and lifestyle. God will support you, and will attract to you those who are ready to believe and to lead a spiritual life, because of you.

