

Sermons in Acts to Ephesians

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Acts 1:12-26. The Calling of Matthias

Read Psalm 109:1-20

In Acts 1:1-11, the eleven remaining disciples, now without Judas, were with the risen Lord on the Mount of Olives. He gave them some final instructions, then ascended to heaven in a cloud. And, although He'd given them a promise that one day He'd come back again in a similar way, that's the last they ever saw of Him in their lifetimes.

After His death on the cross they had been sad. Even though He'd told them several times before He died that He would be raised again, they still didn't believe, and thought everything was all finished. But that sadness only lasted 3 days. Christ had said:

John 16:22

And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Forty days later, this ascension was different. Knowing they'd never see Him again on earth, we'd think they'd be even sadder. But, unlike after His death, this time they had an underlying joy and hope in their hearts. Because during those forty days, they'd seen Him, they'd spoken with Him in His resurrection body, and now knew for sure He was the prophesied Messiah. So certain were they of this, they'd be prepared to die for that truth. Even though Christ was no longer physically present, they knew they had a Saviour nobody could take away from them, no matter what the world did to them. And so have we. So, what was their response? The same as ours should be. They obeyed Christ:

Acts 1:4

And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father...

They were told to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. They weren't told how long they were to wait for. "*Not many days hence.*" It turned out to be ten days, but they didn't know that. The Christian life isn't all busy, busy. Quite often we're simply called on to wait. Can we do that? Waiting teaches us the very important grace of patience:

James 5:7

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

[12] Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey.

So they returned to Jerusalem. And we're told here it was a Sabbath day's journey. This is the only verse in the Bible where we find this phrase. It was the maximum distance Jews were allowed to travel on the Sabbath. This wasn't a Sabbath, it was forty days after Passover, so probably Thursday. There's nothing in the Mosaic law about a "*Sabbath day's journey.*" Later Jewish leaders had invented it. The law says:

Exodus 20:8

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

“Sabbath” simply means “rest.” And it’s in the Ten Commandments, so everybody is called to rest one day a week, just as everybody is called not to murder. To the Jews, that was the seventh day of the week, the day God rested after creating the world. But notice it says, “Remember the **sabbath** day,” not “Remember the seventh day”. There’s nothing sacred about Saturday. Christians began to meet on the first day of the week instead, the day of resurrection, that’s now become our “Sabbath.” We’re not to buy, sell or work on the Sabbath day, except in cases of necessity or mercy. That’s easier said than done if we live in a country where Sunday is an ordinary working day – as indeed it was for the disciples. We worship the Lord on that day as we are able, but it’s still important to have one day in seven to rest from our ordinary work. We’re created for that. We need that. Otherwise we’d just burn ourselves out.

We’re called to rest on the Sabbath, but Moses gave no instructions how far to travel. Men, like the Jewish leaders here, often want to control other people, so they invent extra rules, but we should never feel pressurised. If it’s not in the Bible, we are free to ignore it.

Matthew 15:9

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

[13] And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James....

The eleven disciples go to an upper room, and we’re told they “**abode**” there, they were staying there. They were all from Galilee, so didn’t have a permanent address in Jerusalem. They’d found this room, which was a secure, safe meeting place to base themselves. So that’s where they waited. Waiting doesn’t mean just doing nothing:

[14] These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication,....

Prayer is the fundamental life of the Christian. We’re called to pray continually:

Ephesians 6:18

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit....

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Pray without ceasing.

Prayer is our communion with the Lord. We’ve got a real, ongoing relationship with the God who created us. That’s quite amazing to think about. We never used to have that. The world knows nothing about this. The world worries about many things, because they don’t know the God who’s in control of everything. But we do. And that He cares for us:

Philippians 4:6,7

Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The eleven apostles aren't the only ones meeting there. Others visit this upper room:

....with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

"The women." We don't read much about these, but a group of them were at the cross:

Luke 23:49

And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.

We read plenty about the male disciples who followed Christ, but there was also a group of women too. And they stood with Him to the very end, which is more than the men did. Apart from John, we don't read of any male disciples at the cross. After Gethsemane:

Matthew 26:56

Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.

"and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." This is quite remarkable. Mary and Joseph were godly people. We know after Christ was born by the Holy Spirit, they had at least six other children together, maybe more. Four brothers and more than one sister:

Matthew 13:55,56

Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?

But we're also told that during His lifetime, Christ's brothers didn't believe in Him:

John 7:5

For neither did his brethren believe in him.

Mary married a godly husband. Their first child would've been a delight. He was a good little boy. He never got into trouble, or threw a tantrum. Scripture says He was sinless:

Hebrews 7:26

For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners....

But then Mary and Joseph started having children of their own. That must have been such a shock for them. Just like the rest of us, they'd have been naughty children, born with a sinful nature. They grew up to adulthood with all the problems of youth. They didn't believe who their elder brother truly was, even though they'd grown up with Him. Jesus would have been the best possible witness to them. But they just couldn't see it.

We might think our life is difficult because our family are unbelievers and don't understand us. But Christ was also from a split family. We're told in Scripture this is how it will be:

Matthew 10:35,36

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

It's just going to be like this. The Christian's real family now are the people of God.

We read nothing of Joseph after Christ started His ministry. I suggest he had died by that time. Matthew's genealogy shows that if the monarchy had continued (which it didn't), Joseph would have been the king of Judah. I think his death was the signal for Christ to start His ministry, because now, He had become the king. Mary lost both Joseph to death, and her eldest Son to start His public ministry, and she was left on her own in a house full of unbelievers. What a joy it must have been when, after the resurrection, her children finally believed, and identified themselves with the believers in this upper room.

[15] And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)

Altogether, there were 120 believers in this fellowship, so this upper room must've been quite large to hold them all. 1 Corinthians 15:6 tells us that Christ once appeared to more than 500 people at once. What happened to them? We don't know. Maybe there were other congregations outside Jerusalem, we don't know. Then Peter had something to say:

[16] Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. [17] For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry.

Peter had been reading the Scriptures. Maybe they had one copy between them in the fellowship. He saw in the Scriptures that there was a prophecy regards replacing Judas. Before we look at that, there's a couple of verses about Judas, so let's look at those first:

[18] Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. [19] And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.

We're told Judas purchased a field with "***the reward of iniquity,***" which presumably was the thirty pieces of silver he was paid to betray Christ. Then he fell headlong and burst open. The only other account of what happened to Judas is in Matthew, and it's different:

Matthew 27:3-10

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and

said, It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value; And gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me.

Here in Acts it seems to suggest Judas had the cash and purchased the land himself. But actually Matthew tells us Judas threw the cash back at the priests, and they purchased the field. Matthew also tells us Judas hanged himself there. An extra detail, which could explain where he fell headlong from. If we've got two accounts in Scripture, they never contradict one another. The Bible is the Word of God and it's completely trustworthy. There are no "mistakes" in it. Any apparent contradictions can always be reconciled.

The Lord often gives us more than one account in Scripture for us to think through it for ourselves. We should think prayerfully, guided of the Holy Spirit, and He'll always lead us into the truth. We never blindly accept whatever we're told, or what we first think of.

Did Judas truly repent? He threw the money back. He said, "*I have sinned*" "*I have betrayed the innocent blood.*" And He was so distraught. Compare that with king Saul:

1 Samuel 15:24

And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord.

That wasn't real repentance. He asked Samuel to forgive him, not the Lord, and it's so light. There's no heartfelt brokenness about it. He thought just saying a few words would do. But Judas was heartbroken. He couldn't forgive himself. So much so he ended up hanging himself. But we're not to go to ourselves for forgiveness. We must go to the Lord:

Psalms 130:4

But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

Mark 2:7

Who can forgive sins but God only?

All men everywhere are called to repent of their sin. And Judas did:

Matthew 4:17

Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

But we're also called to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from that sin:

Acts 16:31

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

Judas should've known better. He'd been with Christ for three years. He ought to have known where to find forgiveness. God is a merciful God, and He sent a Saviour into the world to save people from their sins. But Judas never brought himself to truly call on Him for mercy. Even if we think our situation is hopeless, there is always hope in Jesus Christ.

No matter what we've done, there's always a way back. Christ can save the worst of sinners. He saved king Manasseh, the most wicked king Judah ever had. He saved the apostle Paul, who had Christians killed, threw them in jail, compelled them to blaspheme. If He can save such sinners as these, He can save us. But we must put our trust in Him.

"The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."

We should never take sin lightly, like Saul. God wants us to take our sin deadly seriously, like Judas. But, rather than driving us to despair, as it did Judas, it should drive us to Christ for forgiveness, and His salvation.

Now back to Peter. He'd been reading the Scriptures, specifically a Psalm:

[20] For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take.

It could be argued that these quotes are from two Psalms:

Psalm 69:25

Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents.

Psalm 109:8

Let his days be few; and let another take his office.

I don't think Peter would have been reading from two Psalms at the same time. There is a verse in Psalm 109 similar to, but not identical to the one in Psalm 69:

Psalm 109:13

Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

I think Peter was just reading from Psalm 109. The reason I say that is, first of all, Psalm 69 speaks in the plural, "*Let **their** habitation be desolate...*" It would be difficult to refer that to an individual, Judas. On the other hand, Psalm 109 starts in the plural, but vv.6-20 suddenly switches to the singular, before switching back to plural again. That's unusual. And the Holy Spirit showed Peter this was a prophecy indicating Judas must be replaced.

Now, the rest of this chapter gives us instructions as to how Christians should make decisions. Every decision we make, as churches or individuals, must be guided by the Lord. We're finished living for ourselves. But how do we know what the Lord's will is?

Most churches get this wrong. The way most churches make decisions is that they get everybody together, have a really good discussion on the subject, then they vote, and the majority gets it. That's not the Biblical way. What's wrong with it?

If we make all our decisions by majority vote, think of the problems. The most powerful, persuasive people get their way all the time. Minorities will begin to feel marginalised. Maybe they'd get annoyed. Maybe some of them would eventually leave. Churches would split. Majority vote is a terrible way of running a church. Where is the Lord in any of that?

In making decisions, we need to make sure we know the Lord's will, and never man's. This here is our guide as to how we should make decisions. And it involves four stages, four principles. We've already seen the first – **Scripture**. We must behave biblically.

Peter's situation was different from our use of Scripture today. Peter saw in Scripture a direct prophecy about Judas. We don't have direct prophecies like that. Also, we should never have a "promise box" mentality – just pick a verse at random and think it's speaking to us. In our decision-making, we simply must make sure we're being Scriptural:

2 Timothy 3:16,17

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

For example, if we've got two ways to choose from, one breaks one of the Ten Commandments and the other doesn't, we've got an answer. We don't need to go to the other three stages.

So, Peter finds out from Scripture that they need to replace Judas, but he's not told exactly who the replacement should be. So he needs to go on to the second stage:

[21] Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, [22] Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

The function of an apostle was to be a "**witness of His resurrection.**" God has provided two witnesses to His truth. The apostles and prophets (Scripture) and the Holy Ghost:

Acts 5:32

And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

To be a suitable witness, it was important for Judas' replacement to have been with the other apostles all along, from John's baptism all the way through to the ascension.

When we think of Christ choosing His disciples, we think of Him on the beach saying, "*Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*" We assume He'd never met them before, and they just dropped everything to follow a total stranger. But that wasn't the case. They had all met Him before – at John's baptism. John chapter 1 speaks about some of them. On that beach, the fishermen were already His disciples and were expecting Him when He called them. We also find out here, that there were others at the ascension.

So, they practically made a shortlist of suitable candidates. This is the second principle. **Providence**. Who in the Lord's providence is suitable. If we're choosing elders for example, make a shortlist of suitable candidates using the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3. If we're making a decision about our future, make a shortlist of suitable possibilities.

The shortlist shouldn't be biased in any way, only choosing who or what we want. And notice, they're not looking for natural talents. "He'd be a good one for this job," or "He

can speak well, let's choose him." No. They were simply finding witnesses, those who fulfilled the qualifications.

[23] And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.

If there'd been nobody, they couldn't go any further. If they'd only found one witness, the Lord's providence would end the search here. There'd be no need to go any further. But they found two. There was absolutely nothing to separate them as suitable candidates.

"Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias." Why did Joseph have three names? It wasn't unusual for people to have more than one name. But why are we told in Scripture of a man with three names, who didn't get chosen and who we never hear of again, and a man with only one name who did get chosen? I think there must be more to it than that.

Both were believers. Both had exactly the same qualifications. But I suggest ***"Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus"*** had some status in the society round about. He'd acquired three names. But Matthias was just plain old Matthias. He'd got just as much right to be on the shortlist, but from a worldly perspective, he was a nobody.

Then we come to the third stage. ***Prayer***. This should be overarching all our decision-making anyway. All we do should be accompanied by real, earnest, heartfelt prayer:

[24] And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.

The important thing here is that they weren't to trust themselves for the decision. Earnest prayer in most cases would sort this out. But here, it didn't. So they needed to go to the fourth stage, probably the most controversial, but it's here in Scripture. ***Casting lots***:

[26] And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Proverbs 16:33

The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.

What this means is that there's no such thing as random chance. The Lord is in control of everything. There is never anything outside of His control. We talk about there being a fifty-fifty chance of either result, but God always determines the outcome, not chance.

So, does this mean that if we want to know the Lord's will, we cast lots? No. It's a last resort. We always use the other three means first: Scripture, providence and prayer. Most of the time, the Lord's will is usually made clear through these, without resorting to the lot.

We only cast lots if God in prayer has led us to it. We'd normally now say, let's just have a vote on it. But they don't want to do that. They'd rather cast lots than vote. And there's an obvious reason. Casting lots is an end of all dispute. With the lot, there's no marginalised minority, and no human influence on the outcome, such as one had more friends than the other. The decision's made and nobody can complain. The lot was in use in the Old Testament. The high priest made use of the Urim and Thummim to determine God's will.

I've heard the idea that, because we don't hear about Matthias again in Scripture, he was man's choice, and it was a mistake. God later chose Paul as the twelfth apostle instead. But that's not true. Matthias was God's choice. There was nothing of man in the decision. In Acts 6:2 they're called "*the twelve*," long before Paul came on the scene. So Matthias was fully accepted by God as an apostle. Paul was also chosen by God as an extra thirteenth apostle, an apostle particularly to the Gentiles. And there is a precedent for this:

In the book of Revelation, we've got the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven:

Revelation 21:12,14

....and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel.... And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

We've got twelve apostles and twelve tribes of Israel here. But were there twelve tribes of Israel? No. God split Joseph in two, Ephraim and Manasseh. With both the tribes and the apostles, God chose one extra. Why? He just did. But we can't say Matthias wasn't God's choice, because the will of man was totally excluded in the decision-making process.

Matthias was chosen. Plain old Matthias. If they'd have voted, the one with more status in society would probably have got the job. But he wouldn't have been the Lord's choice. And God often calls the weaker. Jacob not Esau. Moses not Aaron, David not his seven elder brothers. Judah, not Israel. Nazareth, not the bright lights of Jerusalem.

It's so important that we should find out the Lord's will in any decision, and not our own. There's a very important principle at stake here. The Lord's ways are not our ways:

1 Corinthians 1:25

the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

It's so easy for us to choose the strong, the one who seems to be somebody, the more charismatic. All decisions made by natural means. And we miss out the Lord's choice.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

That's why the Lord chooses who He does. "*That no flesh should glory in his presence.*" So, if we choose somebody for a job, don't necessarily choose the popular one, or the one who seems to have many natural talents. If we make a decision about our future,

don't necessarily choose the way that seems to have more worldly prospects. Let's make sure our decisions are the Lord's, so we don't glory in anything, apart from Him:

Galatians 6:14

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

Acts 2:37-40. The Gospel

Jesus Christ told us:

Mark 16:15

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

And we're told that this gospel will be preached to the whole world before Christ returns:

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

But what is the gospel? The word “*gospel*” means “good news.” And Christians have very good news to give to the world. But there's a lot of confusion today about what this good news actually is. Many people are very keen to spread the gospel, and that's good. But, whether they realise it or not, the message they preach isn't actually the gospel Jesus Christ gave to us. And I just want to mention several modern-day examples:

– Jesus Christ can give you a sense of self-worth, self-esteem and self-confidence. That's not the gospel. That's humanist psychology in Christian clothing. The only difference being that humanists say we can produce these things in ourselves, whereas the Christianised version says we receive them through Christ. In fact the whole thing is the exact opposite of Christianity. Christianity teaches self-abasement. And what the humanist calls self-esteem, the Bible has another word for it – “*pride*.” And the Bible says:

Proverbs 16:18

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5

God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

– Jesus Christ has dealt with sin, so don't let it bother you any more. Just think positive thoughts about yourself. That's not the gospel either, that's Positive Thinking. There was a popular book in the 1950s called “The Power of Positive Thinking,” and it was written by a supposed Christian minister. But “positive thinking” is not facing reality. It's like if you fall down a well. Positive thinking says, “It's not dark and I'm not down here.” You can say that as much as you like, but it **is** dark and you **are** down there.

– God's got a wonderful purpose for your life. All you have to do is find out what it is and do it. Well, that's “The Purpose Driven Life,” and that's another very popular book. But that's not the gospel either. There's nothing whatsoever in it about sin, forgiveness, repentance, Christ dying on the cross. Nothing.

– Jesus Christ can give you health, wealth and prosperity in this world. That's not the gospel either. But it's all over the so-called “Christian” television channels. Have you noticed that everybody who teaches this will tell you that, before you can get anything, you've got to, as they say, “sow a seed” first. In other words, give them money first, then wait for the blessing. Of course, the blessing never comes. The only ones who become prosperous are the ones that get your cash. What do we call that? A scam. Jesus said:

Matthew 6:24

Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

John 12:25

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

– Jesus loves you. All you need to do is realise that and be happy about it. But if Jesus loves us the way we are, there's no incentive to change in any way. People walk out of the service in exactly the same condition as they went in. They might be a bit happier, now knowing Jesus loves them, but they go out to live their lives in exactly the same worldly, self-centred way they did before. In fact, this message encourages us to carry on with the life we're living, in case, if we do change, He might stop loving us.

– Say sorry for your sins, then make a decision to follow Christ. That's not the gospel either. It's far more than merely making a mental decision. If the gospel is simply to get people to make a decision for Christ, there's always the possibility that at sometime in the future they might decide not to follow Christ any more, and follow somebody else.

The gospel isn't any of these. But I've heard all these from modern-day preachers. So what I want to do is to go through the book of Acts to see how the apostles preached the gospel. What message did they have? What good news did they have for the world? That's the good news we should have as well. That's the message we should be preaching. And we shouldn't be sidetracked or deceived into preaching anything else.

Acts 2:37-40

[37] Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

What had the people heard that troubled them so much? We find that out in verse 36:

Acts 2:36

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.

The people Peter was talking to, had agreed with putting Christ to death. They may not have actually performed the deed itself. Maybe they'd been in the crowd crying, "*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*" But now, Peter tells them that they'd put to death the One who was both Lord and Christ, the Saviour that had been prophesied throughout their Old Testament scriptures. And as they listened to Peter, they suddenly realised what they'd done, and were mortified and cried out, "***Men and brethren, what shall we do?***"

But we say, surely that doesn't apply to us. We weren't there in Christ's day, so we're not responsible for His death. But in a sense, it does apply to us. If we had been there, we would probably have done exactly the same. We're very good at following a crowd. The crowd was calling for Christ's death. If we'd have been there, we'd have gone along with them. And, anyway, Jesus is not the sort of leader we naturally want. To us, He's weak and powerless. If we're going to follow somebody, we'd rather have a strong leader. A powerful, forceful man. So we'd say:

Luke 19:14

We will not have this man to reign over us.

So, naturally, we don't really think much of Him at all. What use is He to anybody today? He's just an irrelevant figure from many years ago. So, really, we're no different from the men Peter was speaking to. But He's the Lord of glory. He's God in human flesh:

John 1:14

The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.

John 7:46

Never man spake like this man .

So we ought to be troubled in our hearts, just like the people here, for what we've thought about Jesus Christ in the past. All He used to be to us was a swear word. How badly we've treated Him! Aren't we now ashamed in any way for that? We should be desperately asking the same question as these people: **"What shall we do?"** Well, the good news, the "gospel," is that we can do something. God hasn't left us alone. He could've done if He'd wanted to, and we couldn't complain about any punishment He would want to inflict on us. But He's a merciful God. So what is it that we can do?

[38] Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost....

This is the gospel in a nutshell. A lot of people call John 3:16 "the gospel in a nutshell," but I'm not so sure it is. It's a good verse to know, but I don't think it deserves that title:

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

The call here is to believe in Christ, which is good as far as it goes, but there's no mention whatsoever of repentance. So really it's only half a gospel at best. Acts 2:38, here, is the true "gospel in a nutshell." This is the one we should be using as our template.

And the first thing we must do is *repent*. That's far more than simply being sorry for something we've done. It also involves a firm resolve to change our ways. It's quite common for people to be sorry for something and they might even say they won't do it again, especially if there's a possible punishment involved. But there's no real commitment about it. Given the same circumstances, they probably would do it again.

Judas was sorry for what he did, but he ended up seeing no hope and hanging himself:

Matthew 27:3-5

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is

that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

And we're told about Esau:

Hebrews 12:17

For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

Both Judas and Esau wanted to repent, but in their hearts, they also didn't really want to change. True repentance can only be found if we truly, seriously want to leave our sin. If we still love it in our hearts, even just a little, we'll never be able to truly repent before God. We really need to hate ourselves for what we've done in the past. And, more than that, hate ourselves for what we're like by nature, because we're always doing it. That's the beginning of true repentance. And we all need to come to that point.

So we're told to repent. And then we're told we must be baptised. Now when we normally think of baptism, we think of an outward ceremony using water. But we have to be careful here. It can't be true that an outward ceremony performed by men is the only gateway into heaven. Otherwise men make the final decision who gets in and who doesn't. That's what the Roman Catholic church actually believes. So if a baby is dying, they have to quickly get the priest to baptise it with water before it dies. But that's not right. Men don't have the keys to heaven like that. The thief on the cross was never baptised in water, yet he got to heaven. What we're talking about here is a spiritual baptism. A baptism of the Holy Spirit. Christ told the disciples about this as He ascended to heaven:

Acts 1:5

For John truly baptised with water; but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

If we become a Christian, we should get baptised with water. But it's only ever an outward sign. It doesn't do anything in itself. It's simply a witness to the world of an inner spiritual baptism that has already happened to us. True baptism is invisible, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. We can't see it. But we can experience it. And that's what's meant here. Christ once said something very important:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And this is the most fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We must be born again, changed from within by God, otherwise, no matter how much we call ourselves Christian, we've never actually seen the kingdom of God at all.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

So we must be finished living for ourselves and want to be changed by God. And the good news is that this is possible. We can have a new start. And it's free of charge.

Isaiah 55:1,6,7

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.... Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Continuing in v.38, we're to:

....be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

We must come to Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. No other religious leader can forgive sins. They're just men. The pope, Mohammed, Buddha, they're all powerless.

Mark 2:7

Who can forgive sins but God only?

Jesus Christ is God. He died on the cross to take the punishment for the sins of all those who would come to Him. That's the very purpose He came into this world. It's Him we must approach for forgiveness of sins, because He's the only one who's paid the price, who gave Himself for us. He's the only one who can offer forgiveness for all our sins.

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

And we're told that if we do come to Him, we "***shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.***" That's the new birth. That's Christ changing our heart, and giving us a new heart. Then the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside us, and we become completely new creatures. The Holy Spirit is a Comforter and a guide to us. He's always there, inside us, showing us the way we should live. That's the confidence we can have. Not confidence in ourselves, but confidence in the Lord showing us the way, through the Holy Spirit living within us.

That is the gospel message we have to give the world. The opportunity to be born again, to be changed in our hearts by the Lord, to become new creatures. But to receive this new life, we must first acknowledge we can't change ourselves. Then we can ask God to change us from the heart, by truly repenting of our sins and calling on Him. If we do this, Christ promised:

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

[39] For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

This gospel, good news, is for everyone. No race or nation is excepted.

Colossians 3:9-11

Ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

It's a promise from God, which cannot be broken, and it's free, we don't need to do anything to receive it. Just ask God for it. But very few people do. Why is that? Why should anyone not want to have forgiveness for their sins free of charge? Well, first of all, we can't see God. Forgiveness of sins, a new heart, the Holy Spirit living within us – it's all invisible. So why should we believe any of it? I can understand why people think that way. But even though we can't see these things, it is possible to personally experience them. Millions of lives have been changed for ever by Jesus Christ. Christians aren't anywhere near perfect, but they've been changed from the inside.

Another reason we don't want this free gift, is that it requires us to leave our sin. We find true repentance difficult, because we don't want to change. Don't be like Judas or Esau.

And there's an incentive too why we should do this:

[40] And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

By nature we're sinful creatures. God is perfectly holy. He won't accept anyone into His presence who is not holy, who hasn't truly repented of their sin. That's why there's going to be a judgment coming on the whole world. And all of us need to be saved from it.

That's why the gospel is so important. It's good news to all men because through it, by having our sins freely forgiven, we can escape the judgment to come. We must save ourselves from this untoward generation. Or we perish with them. Let's make sure we're not so attached to our sin, that we can't escape the judgment.

Now, I want to look at a few other occasions in the book of Acts when the gospel is presented, to show that this is the true gospel message that we have.

Acts 3:19

[19] Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

Here's the call again to repent, and be converted, be changed. Notice the passive tense, "**be converted.**" Only God can do this. We can't change ourselves. It's so important to acknowledge our inability, before asking the Lord to change us. We'd rather reject the gospel message altogether, than acknowledge we can't do something. We're so proud in ourselves! The gospel message is so simple, a child could respond to it. But on the other hand, it's so difficult to respond to, because of the pride of our hearts. We don't have to be clever to understand it. We just have to acknowledge we can't respond to it ourselves, unless God changes us. And that's what we find so difficult.

And again, we see here that if we do respond to Christ's call, our sins will be blotted out, and "*times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.*" Exactly the same gospel message as in chapter 2. Our sins blotted out by Christ's death on the cross, and times of refreshing coming from the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell inside the believer.

Acts 17:30,31

[30] And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: [31] Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

God "*winked at*" our ignorance. That doesn't mean He sweeps sin under the carpet, God can never do that. But He does allow us to go on in our ignorance for a very long time, before He reveals His message of salvation to us.

But, what about people who die without hearing the gospel message at all? They're still guilty of sin, because we're all born in sin. So they must still be judged. We might say, that's unfair, but it isn't. If God doesn't send the gospel to some people, it's because He knows they wouldn't respond. God doesn't waste His resources. If He has some of His people in a place where the gospel has never been, He'll make sure the gospel gets there. He'll send a missionary or use some other means. Which is why it's so important for us to go and spread the gospel to every creature. We are the ordinary means God uses to bring people to Himself. And if He calls us to go to a certain place, we can have confidence that our witness there won't be a waste of time.

And again, we see that God now commands all men everywhere to repent, because there's a day of judgment coming when the world will be judged in righteousness by Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the evidence that this is all true.

In the previous two examples, the Holy Spirit was mentioned, but He isn't here. But repentance and judgment are. That doesn't mean this is a different gospel. It's the same gospel. But we've got an important principle here. We aren't hawking Christ. We're not salesmen trying to close a sale. We don't have a sales technique that we have to use. Like going door to door selling toilet brushes. Jehovah's Witnesses do that. They have their pat sales technique which, given the opportunity, they go through, their sole purpose being to make converts for themselves. We don't do that. We're not salesmen trying to hit a monthly sales target. The gospel should never be treated like that. We care about souls. And that's why Paul has changed the way he presented his message here, to fit in with the particular circumstances in Athens. The message still includes a need to repent, and a need to call on Christ to be saved from the judgment to come. The gospel message will always have those elements in it, but we may have to present it differently depending on circumstances. And here's another example to show this more clearly:

Acts 24:24,25

[24] And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. [25] And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled,

and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.

This is Paul now in front of Felix, the Roman governor. And look what he is talking with him about: faith in Christ, righteousness, temperance and judgment to come. These are all the elements of the gospel message. But notice Paul is reasoning with him. Having a real, genuine two-way conversation. *Reasoning, disputing, persuading, beseeching*, these are the words used in the Bible to describe the way we should bring the gospel to others. Not using a sales technique, with no real concern for the one we're speaking to. And, once we've done all we can, we must leave it with the Lord. We can't convert anybody. Only God can change hearts. Our job is to present the message as best we can, then we must leave the rest with the Lord. It is possible to be too aggressive in our evangelism as though we're trying to change hearts ourselves. No, we don't do that.

In this case, Felix trembled at the message. He wasn't converted but it affected him. And that's what the gospel should do. It leaves the hearer with less excuse for his sins. But salvation is of the Lord. We leave the actual conversion of the sinner in God's hands.

Acts 26:20

[20] But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

And finally in this verse we see that the call is to repent and turn to God, and "***do works meet for repentance.***" We're calling people to a permanent change of life. Only God can permanently change hearts. We're calling people to be willing to be changed by Him. To hate their own lives so much, they don't want to live that way any more. But instead want to become like Christ in everything they do. We are saved by grace. But we're saved in order to do good works:

Ephesians 2:10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

No true Christian would ever think that now they've become a Christian, they can sin as much as they like, and still get to heaven. No. If we've been truly changed, we now hate sin, and we want to get away from it. We now want to please God and keep His commandments. Anybody can say they believe in Christ, but if it hasn't resulted in a complete change of nature, then they don't really believe in Him at all.

This complete change of nature is the only hope for the problems of mankind. No outward political change can ever do this. No religious movement can do it. Only a change of heart in each individual can solve mankind's fundamental problem – selfishness. And only Jesus Christ can change our hearts. When we're called to preach the gospel to every creature, we've got such an important job to do. We should never be ashamed of the gospel, because:

Romans 1:16

it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth

By preaching the gospel, we're the means by which God changes the world one individual at a time. That's the only way the world can be changed. Every other way doesn't address the real problem, the human heart:

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

The cause of all the problems in the world is the human heart. It needs to change. But we can't do it ourselves. Elsewhere, Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

We need the Lord to change us. And we have just such a wonderful message to give the world: It is possible to be changed. How can anyone ignore such a message?

Acts 3:19

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord

May the Lord help us to truly repent and come to the Saviour of the world.

Acts 3. A Lame Man Healed

At the end of Mark's gospel, we read this:

Mark 16:17-20

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

Occasionally we read in the news of someone, somewhere in the world, Bible in hand, jumping into a lion enclosure, or stepping into a tank of poisonous snakes, or something similar, because they read this and think with enough faith they won't be harmed. And they find out the hard way it doesn't work. Mark's prophecy was fulfilled in the apostles.

They spoke with new tongues in Acts 2:4. We'll go on to see them casting out devils. In Acts 28:3-5, Paul gets bitten by a viper in Malta without harm, and here there's a miraculous healing. There's no record of men drinking poison in the Bible, but it doesn't mean it didn't happen. In Hebrews 11:37 we read of men being sawn in two, and that's not recorded either.

After Christ had ascended, the power He had to perform "*signs and wonders*" was given to the apostles and a few others. The whole purpose being to point to Christ. To authenticate their witness of Him. To "*confirm the word.*" "*Signs and wonders*" are completely different from spiritual gifts. Believers still have spiritual gifts given to them today. But "*signs and wonders*" are completely different, and are no longer with us:

Acts 2:43

*And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done **by the apostles.***

And the Bible specifically calls these miracles "*the signs of an apostle*":

2 Corinthians 12:12

*Truly **the signs of an apostle** were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.*

So let's look at this first recorded miracle after Christ's ascension:

[1] Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.

The ninth hour would be 3pm when the evening sacrifice was made. Peter and John went to the Temple to worship God. And that should be our normal life. Like Anna:

Luke 2:37

And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

Regular attendance at the means of grace, the church, not out of duty, but because we love it. There's something wrong if we're forcing ourselves to go to church. Either we're in the wrong frame of mind, or, sadly, that's what some churches do to people. It shouldn't be like that. Church should be a delight, because God is a delight and we love Him.

[2] 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 of them that entered into the temple;

This man had never walked, and he was carried here daily by family or friends. If we want to beg, one of the best places to go is outside a church. The congregation will have been stirred up to love those "less fortunate" than themselves, so they'd be more likely to give.

[3] Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms.

I have to say, if somebody came up to me outside church begging, I wouldn't normally give them anything. Is that terrible? Maybe it is. We're told that, as Christians, we should:

Matthew 5:42

Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

So should we give to all who ask? Even if by giving to one, we'll draw a crowd thinking we're easy pickings. Even if we're fully aware there are so many professional beggars around, who've got more money than I have. Even if we know most of these beggars have no interest in the things of God. Should we give to them all anyway. Is that right?

This man had been lame from his birth. He couldn't work, so he was in genuine need. And he approaches Peter and John. But they don't quite give him the answer he expected:

[4] And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. [5] And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. [6] Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.

Peter and John genuinely didn't have anything to give. So they hadn't become Christians for the money. And neither should we. We're Christians because we love the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts more than anything. Why did Peter say what he said? He must've been prompted by the Holy Spirit. Why didn't he heal anyone else? This is the answer to our giving. We can't heal, but we can be guided by the Holy Spirit who to give to, and who not to.

[7] And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. [8] And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.

This proves the man was genuine. He wasn't begging because it was a good way to make money. If so, he'd be disappointed, because his way of making easy money had

just disappeared. No. He was so delighted, the first thing he did was go into the Temple with them to thank God. Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one came back to give thanks. The others were unthankful. They only wanted healing to carry on their lives as before.

We see not only that the man was genuine, but that the miracle was genuine too.

[9] And all the people saw him walking and praising God: [10] And they knew that it was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him.

He'd been begging outside the Temple for so long, he would have been well known. So when the people saw him walking, they knew a real miracle had taken place:

[11] And as the lame man which was healed held Peter and John, all the people ran together unto them in the porch that is called Solomon's, greatly wondering.

The healed man was holding on to Peter and John, not because he still couldn't walk, but in sheer joy and thankfulness. But the people thought Peter and John had healed this man, not Christ. They would've known about Christ's miracles. He'd been around for three years. But He's gone now, and suddenly here's a miracle done by apostles without Him. Was this something new – free healing and miracles on demand? What's going on? Peter tells them. He's speaking here outside the Temple. Right under the noses of the chief priests. He must've known he'd get into trouble. Which he does in the next chapter. But he had to say something. He had no option. He had to correct the crowd. They were in danger of worshipping them, when the whole point of miracles was to point to Christ:

[12] And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? [13] The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus....

This miracle was done by the apostles, in Christ's name, to establish them as Christ's witnesses. To "*confirm the word.*" There's no point the apostles doing any miracle at all if it wasn't going to point to Jesus Christ. Peter now has to correct them. But in order to do that, in order to point them to Christ, he first of all had to tell them an uncomfortable truth:

....whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. [14] But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; [15] And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.

They're so excited about this miracle, but it was essential they woke up to what they'd done. They hadn't thought they'd done anything wrong. But they'd gone and put this miracle worker to death, or at least were culpable. They couldn't just get excited about the miracle without understanding what they'd done. They needed to face their sin. That's uncomfortable. We don't like being told we've done wrong. We'd rather be told how good

we are, what nice people we are. But underneath everything, we're not. If we're going to have any hope, any favour from God, we first need to face reality.

These people had been in the crowd calling for the release of Barabbas, and shouting for Christ to be crucified. Why had they done that? Why did they get a murderer released, and put an innocent man to death? It doesn't make sense. We're told:

Matthew 27:20

*But the chief priests and elders **persuaded** the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus.*

We're so easily persuaded. We really need to understand the power of persuasion. How easily led we can be. What power men can have over others. Adolf Hitler rose to power because people voted for him. Or think of a domestic abuse situation. We hear of people whose partners regularly abuse them, yet they always go back. Why? Or what about persuasive religious leaders. The Jonestown massacre. In 1978, over 900 people died when a religious cult leader told them to drink poison. They knew it was poison, but they drank it anyway. Crazy. But that's what we do. We're so easily prone to persuasion. These here were persuaded by their religious leaders to release Barabbas, and crucify Christ, the one whose miracle they're now getting so excited about. It's irrational. Why do we do such things? Because we're in bondage to sin by nature. And we need to be set free.

[16] And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.

We've got to face the truth about ourselves. Peter tells them it was through faith in the name of Jesus Christ that healed this man. And they've just put Him to death. We'll never understand a solution to any problem unless we see and accept there is a problem first.

[17] And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.

Peter accepts they were only partly to blame, their rulers did the actual deed. Peter also accepts both they and their rulers were ignorant in their wrongdoing. We think, if we're ignorant about something being wrong, we can't be guilty. But that's not true. The apostle Paul admitted he acted ignorantly before his conversion, but he still needed mercy:

1 Timothy 1:13

Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

Ignorance of the law is no excuse. I've heard it explained like this. I don't like this explanation, and I'll tell you why in a minute. Say I'm driving a car at 100kph in a 50kph limit. When the police pull me over, if I say that I didn't know the speed limit, they'll still give me a ticket. I've still broken the law, whether I realised it or not.

I don't like that example because it's possible I genuinely didn't know the speed limit. Maybe the sign was covered by a branch, or was broken off. I've still broken the law, but I

may've genuinely not known. We can't compare that with men being ignorant of God's law, because we all know something of it. Firstly, we've all got a conscience with something of God's law written on it, albeit it may be seared or deformed in some way:

Romans 2:14,15

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another...

Secondly, Creation gives us no excuse to not believe in the existence of God. It shows all men there's an all powerful Creator God with whom we have to do:

Romans 1:20,21

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Psalms 19:1

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

God's "eternal power and Godhead" is clearly seen, so we've all got no excuse. We might be ignorant of many things about the one true living God, but we do know He's there and we're responsible to Him. Whether we're brought up in a Buddhist home, or an atheist family. We're not responsible to men, a nation, a religion, or even our families, but to God.

But even though these people had participated in the death of Christ, there was still hope. But Peter had to make them admit their sin first, before showing them their real need.

[18] But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.

The amazing thing is that Christ's death, which they were responsible for, was in God's plan of redemption all along. Killing Him was still sin, because they didn't know that:

1 Corinthians 2:8

...had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

So their responsibility for the death of Christ was real, but, it's thanks to this very plan of God in the death of His Son, their sin, and all our sins too, can be forgiven:

[19] Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

"that your sins may be blotted out." That, whether we think so or not, is the most wonderful message we could ever hear. God alone can forgive sin. Or, put it this way, His forgiveness is the only forgiveness we should be concerned with. Men may still hold

grudges against us, and we can't do anything about it, but that's nothing compared to having our sins forgiven by God. And God Himself created a way that this can be done.

These people had crucified the Lord of glory. What a sin! But, if we'd been alive then, we'd have done exactly the same. We'd have followed the crowd. We'd have been so easily persuaded by the religious leaders of the day. So we must ask ourselves: What are we like? What have we done? Who have we been easily persuaded by? Whatever it is, the good news is **"our sins may be blotted out."** How do we receive forgiveness of sins?

"Repent ...and be converted." ESV *"turn back."* There is a difference. *"turn back"* is active, something we do. **"be converted"** is passive, something we allow God to do in us. That's a more accurate description. Having said that, we may think it means we just sit back and wait for God to work. It's true we can't change ourselves, we need God to change us. But we need to ask Him. It's like the man with the withered hand. He was told *"stretch forth thine hand,"* but he couldn't, it was withered. But as he tried to stretch it, he found he could, because the Lord was working in him. We're called to repent, something we can't do by nature, but as we try, we find we can do it as God grants us repentance.

"when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." What are these times of refreshing? We need to repent, but we also need to come to Jesus Christ:

[20] And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:

He is the one who will refresh us. If we call on Him, He'll change our heart from the inside, so we become new creatures. No longer in bondage to our selfish natures, being so easily persuaded by men and movements, but we'll be free from that bondage once and for all:

John 8:34-36

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Because of Christ's death on the cross, if we call on Him to save us, He places our sins on Himself. He takes the punishment we deserve. And His puts His righteousness to our account, so God can declare us righteous, which we don't deserve, because we're not:

1 Peter 2:24,25

Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

We'll still sin, but now we'll hate it. We'll hate ourselves for it. But the wonderful thing is that we'll know our sins won't condemn us any more, all thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

But Jesus is no longer around. How can He help us now? He's very much alive in heaven:

[21] Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things....

Remember, Christ ascended into heaven and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And two angels promised He'd come back again in a similar way. That's going to be at the end of time, at the "***restitution of all things.***" A "***restitution***" implies things have gone wrong and need restoring. Which indeed is the case. We live in a fallen world. In bondage to death and decay. But the good news is Christ is coming again to restore all things:

2 Peter 3:13

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

This is the sure hope of the Christian. The apostle Paul could say near the end of his life:

2 Timothy 4:8

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

And God had this plan of restoration all along, even from the creation of the world:

....which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

God's plan was revealed through His holy prophets, who all came, in time, to one people, the Jews. All nations had their own local gods. The one true living God, the only one that's real, chose to reveal Himself to the Jews. The Jews had so many privileges. He sent prophets. He led them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. He gave them the Scriptures:

Romans 3:1,2

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

And above all that, when God came to earth as a man, He came as a Jew, to fulfil the law He'd given them. If we want to know about the one true living God, we must go to the Jewish Scriptures. Moses prophesied that Christ would come in Deuteronomy 18:15-19, part of which is quoted here:

[22] For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. [23] And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

And throughout history, other prophets came to the Jews to speak of Christ's day. All of whose prophecies are in the Scriptures. This is the book we need:

[24] Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days.

And the people Peter speaks to here, are all Jews. The very ones the prophets came to:

[25] Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

God chose Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob, to be a people, the Jews, to receive His special privileges. But right at the beginning, He made a covenant with Abraham. That was the promise: "*in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.*" So, the Saviour God sent was never just for the Jews, but for all nations.

Jehovah was never just a local "god" like other nations had. He is the real God. The One true living God. All of us are His creatures. God gave the Jews privileges, but that didn't make them His chosen people. All who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are:

Romans 3:29,30

Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

But it was right that Christ and the apostles went first to the Jews:

[26] Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.

Sadly, most of the Jews rejected their message. They put their own Saviour to death:

John 1:11

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

Is that the end of the Jews altogether? No. Their rejection opens the door to the Gentiles:

Romans 11:11

I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.

Jesus Christ came into the world not just for Jews, but as a universal solution to a universal problem. All of us are born sinful creatures. Self-centred, selfish, only living for ourselves by nature. We all need to be changed from that condition. We need to have our sins forgiven. That's what Jesus Christ came to do. So it's important we make sure we stick to this message of forgiveness of sins and not get side-tracked. It's so easy to do.

Many today think Jesus Christ came to give us success and prosperity, but Peter said "***Silver and gold have I none.***"

Many today think Jesus Christ came to give us physical healing. If so, why didn't Peter tell the crowd that, and heal others? No. Instead, he put his finger on the real problem, their sin: "**Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.**"

And Jesus Christ never came as a political leader. We're not here to change governments. If Christianity was a political movement, Christ would have fought to try to change the Romans. But He didn't. He said to Pilate:

John 18:36

My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

Christianity is not about any of these things. It's purely and only about forgiveness of sins. Never forget that real message, because that's the only real hope we have:

Acts 26:18

To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Acts 5:12-42. The Unstoppable Gospel

In vv.1-11, Ananias and Sapphira sold land and gave the money to the apostles, but lied about the price. Men think they can lie and deceive, and get away with it, but they can't with God:

Matthew 12:36

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

They professed Christianity, yet they still thought they could live the way they used to. But Christians are changed people. We're finished with living a deceitful way of life. We don't want to live like that any more. So God struck them dead. And look what happened:

Acts 5:11

And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

[12] And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.

We'll look at signs and wonders in v.15. They met in Solomon's Porch, where the lame man in Acts 3 was healed. It seems to have become a convenient place to meet. And ***"they were all with one accord."*** Christians have all got one thing in common. We love the Lord Jesus Christ, and are so thankful to Him for forgiving us our sins and setting us free from our natural bondage to it. Yet in so many churches a spirit of unity is missing, for many reasons, a personality clash, or disagreement with the church's dealings, or differences in doctrine. But even that shouldn't affect our unity. We're all learning and growing in grace and the knowledge of Christ at different rates, so we're never going to agree with each other on everything. But we all love the Lord. That's our common bond.

[13] And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.

There's something about this group that made them so different that no one dare join them. The fear of the Lord. Unbelievers can't understand that. God isn't in their minds:

Psalms 36:1

....there is no fear of God before his eyes.

This fear isn't being frightened God might throw us into hell fire. Unbelievers ought to have that kind of fear, but they don't. That's where we all deserve to go, but if we've repented of our sins and put our trust in Christ, we needn't fear God in that way any more, His wrath has been turned away, we're free from the punishment we deserve. The fear that Christians have is a reverential fear. God loves His people and reveals Himself to them. We now live our lives in the light of the fact He's there. We have a real, living relationship with Him. He is our Heavenly Father. He loves us, we now love Him and want to please Him. But He's not just a mate, a buddy. He's still a consuming fire:

Psalms 130:4

But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom....

Psalms 25:14

The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him....

Jacob had a dream of a ladder from heaven to earth with angels going up and down on it:

Genesis 28:17

And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful [fearful] is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

The people daren't join them, **"but the people magnified them."** They held them in high esteem. That's unusual, isn't it. They're not laughing at them, or dismissing and ignoring them. That's what we get today. They took them seriously, respecting them. We'll only be taken seriously if we're serious with our faith, and fear the Lord. And look what happened:

[14] And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)

This group was growing. For a lot of churches, numbers are everything. So they introduce all sorts of gimmicks to try to attract people. And it works, but it just fills the church with unbelievers. They don't come to hear about Christ, or forgiveness of sins. They're not interested. They come because of the lively music, or the social scene, or the free coffee, or positive thinking message, or something else that attracts them in a worldly way.

But this is different. Despite people not daring to join them, they grew at a tremendous rate. Notice it's believers that are being added, not unbelievers. This is how a church should be. The fear of the Lord being present will fill a church with believers. Worldly things will fill a church with unbelievers. The division between the two is made clearer.

[12] And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people;... [15] Inasmuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them.

Do you think that worked? I think that was just superstition. Like at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1-9. An angel was supposed to stir the water and the first one to get in was healed. Really? Is that how the Lord works, survival of the fittest? No. The paralytic man who just couldn't get in in time, was the one Christ healed. The others were left to their superstition. Having said that, many real miracles did take place here, but by the hands of the apostles (v.12).

[16] There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one.

So there were physical healings and also unclean spirits being cast out by the apostles. That couldn't go on for very long without attracting attention:

[17] Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, [18] And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.

In chapter 4, they'd already been threatened by the Council:

Acts 4:18

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

But the Council let them go then, because they feared the reaction of the people. And that was just on account of one man being healed by two apostles. Now, many miracles are taking place, and twelve apostles are performing them. So the situation's got a lot more difficult for the Council. What do they do now? The Pharisees on the Council still seem undecided, because we're told here that these, including the high priest, were all Sadducees, who are now really angry. The Sadducees didn't believe in the miraculous:

Acts 23:8

For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

So, despite a possible public outcry, and not waiting for the Pharisees' opinion, they put them in prison, hoping to convene the Council the next day. However:

[19] But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, [20] Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.

"all the words of this life." The apostles have the words of a completely new life to tell the world about. And so have we. Christianity isn't just another religion, one of many. It's an altogether new life, which nobody will understand unless they experience it. If anyone puts their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save them from their sins, He will change them from inside. Everything will become new. They're no longer what they used to be:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

So, they were obedient to the heavenly vision:

[21] And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught....

At the moment, the high priest is unaware of this, because he calls his Council meeting:

....But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

This meeting was of the whole Council, including the Pharisees, and **“all the senate of the children of Israel.”** We don't read about these elsewhere, maybe a special council of elders. The high priest gathered a wider body than just the Council, to have more authority and to get more ideas what to do. The apostles were to be brought to appear.

[22] But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, [23] Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within.

In v.19, the Lord opened the prison doors, but here the prison is **“shut with all safety”** and the keepers unaware of any escape. The Lord must've shut the doors afterwards and blinded the guards. Only the next day, when men came to fetch them, did they find it empty. It's amazing how the Lord works. The Lord can blind people, and open their eyes.

When Lot was in Sodom, two angels came to tell him to flee, but while they were with him the men of the city came to the door to abuse them. But God struck them with blindness:

Genesis 19:11

And they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness, both small and great: so that they wearied themselves to find the door.

Elisha had a servant who only saw the enemy, so he prayed to God to open his eyes to see the Lord's army, then he blinded the enemy so they couldn't tell where they were:

2 Kings 6:17-20

And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha. And Elisha said unto them, This is not the way, neither is this the city: follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek. But he led them to Samaria. And it came to pass, when they were come into Samaria, that Elisha said, Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see. And the Lord opened their eyes, and they saw; and, behold, they were in the midst of Samaria.

[24] Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow.

So far they've just found an empty cell. But it worries them. **“they doubted of them whereunto this would grow.”** They realised something odd had happened. Another odd

thing happened not so long ago. Christ was dead, buried in a tomb. They put a guard on it. Three days later He's not there. But rather than believe the truth, they made up a story:

Matthew 28:11-15

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

They bribed the guards and made sure that what they knew was a lie was spread as widely as possible. If enough people believe the lie, it becomes truth to them. And here, something odd has again happened. They recognised that, and were again worried where it'd lead. But before they could think what to do about this, the apostles were found:

[25] Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people.

They're no longer concerned about how they got out of jail. They just want them stopped.

[26] Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned.

The captain and his officers brought them to the Council, but they had to be careful. They thought that if they were violent with them they would've been stoned by the crowd. They're really scared of the situation now. They're rapidly losing control over the people.

[27] And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, [28] Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

The Council aren't used to people disobeying their commands. But since Christ came, their authority had been crumbling. The apostles did intend to fill Jerusalem with the teaching that repentance and forgiveness of sins can be had in Jesus Christ. But they weren't deliberately trying to show the Council's guilt, But, it was inevitable truth would come out. Christ's blood was on their hands. They'd incited the people before Pilate:

Matthew 27:25

Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.

Notice, "***this name,***" "***this man.***" They don't even want to mention Christ's name.

[29] Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

This was now a direct threat to their authority. We've had this before in the last chapter:

Acts 4:19,20

But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

This begs the question, when can we say that? When should we obey God rather than men? We're called to obey all those that are in authority over us, whoever they are:

Romans 13:1,2

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

Before we think this just means secular leaders, Christ applied it to religious leaders too:

Matthew 23:1-3

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

As soon as the apostle Paul found out he'd unwittingly abused the high priest, he immediately apologised:

Acts 23:3-5

Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

So, when do we disobey those over us? The answer is, when they force us to sin. Daniel refused to worship a statue of King Nebuchadnezzar, and he got thrown into a den of lions. And his three friends got thrown into a fiery furnace for not bowing down to one:

Daniel 3:17,18

....our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

And here, God had told the apostles to speak all the words of this life. They could not but speak the things they had seen and heard. And it's the same with us. We've been called to preach the gospel to every creature. We should be circumspect, but that's our calling:

Matthew 28:19,20

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

[30] The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

Yes, that's His name, Jesus, not "**that man**":

Matthew 1:21

....thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

And Jesus, whom they'd killed, had come from God:

[31] Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

Now Jesus has been raised from the dead, He's been exalted to God's right hand to give two things: repentance and forgiveness of sins. That's exactly what every one of us needs to be saved from the judgment to come, and they can only be found in Jesus Christ.

And notice, it's "**to Israel.**" Not the nation, because most of them would never believe Him. But the true Israel of God. All those, from whatever nation, who put their trust in Him.

[32] And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

God has provided two witnesses to His truth: the witness of the apostles and prophets in Scripture, and the Holy Spirit. We need both. Many people say they've got the Holy Spirit, but never read their Bibles. Others, like the Pharisees, know their Bibles backwards, but don't have the Holy Spirit, guiding them into the truth. The Sadducees had neither.

[33] When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.

The Council had never been spoken to like this before. The apostles had told them they'd crucified their own prophesied Messiah. And they could not, would not believe that. They were enraged. They still wanted to justify themselves, and had to be in charge. So they tried to get agreement in the Council to kill them. But they didn't have the power to do that. They had to get the Romans' approval, which they had done with Christ. But that was just one man. Now they've got twelve apostles, all healing people, to deal with.

And then one man in the Council stands up and gives them some advice:

[34] Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space;

Gamaliel was a Pharisee, not a hardline Sadducee. He's a respected lawyer. He's in one other place in Scripture as the tutor of Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul:

Acts 22:3

I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

And Gamaliel was **“had in reputation among all the people.”** In any group, whether it’s a council like this, or a political party, it’s going to be full of people loving their own status. But there’s always one or two who are genuinely liked by the people, because they’re more sensible, they always try to look for reasonable solutions to things. And Gamaliel was one of these. So he puts the apostles outside while he tells the rest of the Council his idea. The apostles must’ve been wondering what on earth was going to happen to them.

[35] And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.

“Take heed to yourselves.” His only concern was the continued existence of the Council. The Romans just wanted peace in their Empire. So they allowed an amount of autonomy in each region. If the Council asked them for more people to be crucified, it would destabilise the situation. The Council had already lost the people’s trust. The Romans could shut them down and impose direct rule at any time. So Gamaliel’s brilliant solution was.... do nothing. That would ensure their existence for a bit longer at least. But he doesn’t just say “do nothing.” The Council wouldn’t agree to that directly. So he recalls some recent events:

[36] For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought.

This man, Theudas, had four hundred followers, not just twelve like we’ve got now. But he was killed and his movement petered out to nothing. And there’s another example:

[37] After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.

The same happened to Judas of Galilee. When he died, his movement also petered out.

Notice **“in the days of the taxing.”** This taxing forced Joseph and a heavily pregnant Mary to go to Bethlehem for the birth of Christ, so that the prophecy of Micah would be fulfilled. Now, thirty or so years later, it was still called **“the days of the taxing.”** So it must’ve been a huge, unique event. It’s remarkable Caesar Augustus in Rome decided to hold a one-off taxing just so Mary would be in Bethlehem for the birth. That’s the Lord’s providence.

[38] And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: [39] But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

That's a very clever argument. It's not right, but it's clever and they all agreed with it.

If something is of God, it's true we can't overthrow it, neither should we want to. But if it's of men, will it really come to nothing? Lots of heresies have been with us for centuries. God allows them to continue for His own purposes. Just because something is of men doesn't mean it's going to peter out any time soon. Islam and Buddhism are still with us.

But the argument was good enough for the Council, and they agreed with it.

[40] And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

So, apart from beating the apostles, they've just done exactly the same as before, they've told them not to speak about Christ then let them go. The apostles are happy with that.

[41] And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.

They rejoiced "***that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.***" We don't look for suffering, but it's going to be an integral part of the Christian life. We're different from the world. They won't understand us, so we'll inevitably be persecuted:

Philippians 3:10

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

So, did they stop preaching and do as they were told, scared of another beating? Did they go undercover, and start meeting away from the Temple, to be less conspicuous?

[42] And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

They started meeting in houses. But they also continued preaching in the Temple, daily. Why? Because they knew for sure Christ was risen, He'd changed them permanently in their hearts, and everything Christ taught was true. If they weren't sure about any of this, they would've stopped preaching at the first sign of suffering. James is killed by Herod in Acts 12:2. Tradition says most of the rest of the apostles were put to death for the cause of Christ. Are we prepared to suffer shame for the name of Christ? maybe die for it? We pray it will never come to that, but may God give us the grace to help in time of need.

Acts 8:1-25. Simon the Sorcerer

At the end of the last chapter, Stephen was stoned to death. He was the first Christian to die for his faith, and this was the first time the Council had killed somebody of their own accord. They didn't wait for the Romans' permission. They're so angry, they didn't care.

[2] And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

Stephen was well loved by the believers, there was a big, open funeral. That was very brave in the light of impending persecution. A young man who didn't take part in the stoning but just looked after the coats, Saul of Tarsus, became the persecution's leader.

[1] And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.... [3] As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

The persecution scattered the believers throughout Judea and Samaria. But the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. Isn't that strange? Surely they would've been the most persecuted of all, yet they stayed while the others fled. Saul was "***entering into every house,***" so it wasn't easy for them to stay. Yet they seemed to be free to come and go from Jerusalem as they pleased, because in verse 14 they visit Philip in Samaria. So the fact they'd stayed, must've been voluntary, caring for those who remained, who maybe couldn't flee.

[4] Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

Just before Christ's ascension, He had told the remaining eleven apostles:

Acts 1:8

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

So, being scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria was the start of going in to all the world with the gospel. But, up to now they haven't moved from Jerusalem. Were they reluctant? I don't know, but the Lord sent this persecution which forced them to go. Sometimes the Lord has to push us to do what we should've been doing in the first place. This persecution turned into a great opportunity to spread the gospel. As the Christians were scattered, they went everywhere "***preaching the word.***" When something unpleasant happens to us, like being thrown out of our home, or being forced to flee, we shouldn't complain to the Lord about it, but realise He's in control and knows what He's doing, even if we don't at the time. We must preach the word wherever the Lord sends us.

[5] Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.

There was an apostle called Philip, but the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, so this must be the other Philip, one of the seven in chapter 6:5, known as Philip the Evangelist later on in chapter 21:6. He went to the city of Samaria and preached Christ there. Up to this point:

John 4:9

the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

There's no record of Christ ever going to the city of Samaria. The region of Samaria was between Galilee and Judah, so He'd have passed through the area often, at least three times a year to the festivals. But He never stayed long there because while He was on earth, His ministry was mainly, though not exclusively, to the Jews first. He said Himself:

Matthew 15:24

I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

On one occasion, on His way to Jerusalem, He came to a Samaritan village. He:

Luke 9:52,53

....sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.

In John 4, He met a woman of Samaria at Jacob's well, but that was in the city of Sychar, not the city of Samaria. However, it was the start of a harvest there, because we're told:

John 4:39

And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that ever I did.

It was also there that Christ prophesied:

John 4:35

Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.

The Lord led Philip to go to the city of Samaria, because that harvest was now come:

[6] And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

They were "**hearing,**" and they "**gave heed unto those things which Philip spake.**" So they didn't just hear the message with their ears, but they "**gave heed**" to it, they responded. When Philip told them to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls, that's what they did. They didn't just hear and go away indifferently, with no response, which is what we often get. But the harvest was now ready. The Samaritans of that city called on the Lord and He heard their cry. And He'll hear us too if we cry to Him:

Psalm 145:18

The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.

At the same time as receiving the message, they also saw **“the miracles which he did:”**

[7] For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them : and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

We’ve got physical healings and unclean spirits being cast out. After Christ’s ascension, these are the first recorded miracles outside of Jerusalem. And it’s also the first record of someone other than an apostle performing miracles. We’re told Stephen did them too:

Acts 6:8

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

So what were usually regarded as the “*signs of an apostle*” were also done by some others during this early period, as the Lord willed. And the people’s hearts were stirred:

[8] And there was great joy in that city.

If we’ve been healed miraculously, we’d be joyful as well. But it’s more than that. I’m sure they were thankful for the healings, but as we read on, the rest of the chapter doesn’t really say much more about the miracles. It’s not the miracles that were the most important thing to them, but the message. And that’s how it should be. The miracles were only ever meant to point to Jesus Christ. But Philip has got a rival:

[9] But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: [10] To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. [11] And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.

Before Philip’s arrival, the entire city of Samaria had been completely deceived by this man Simon. They’d all given heed to Simon **“from the least to the greatest.”** He’d **“used sorcery, and bewitched”** them into believing him. Sorcery and witchcraft are evil:

Deuteronomy 18:10-12

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.

Simon had been **“giving out that himself was some great one.”** What pride and arrogance! And by his sorcery, by some kind of deceit, the people became convinced he was **“the great power of God.”** So they all blindly believed his every word and followed

him. It's so easy for us to be taken in by proud people full of themselves. Compare that attitude with Philip's. He didn't strut into town claiming to be some great one from God. Far from it. His message really was from God, but he humbled himself, he never put himself forward. And that's how we should be. Not exalting ourselves. Let God work through His own message.

2 Corinthians 4:7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

So we'd think the city of Samaria would be rock hard ground as a mission field. But one man, Philip, came preaching the truth, and the city "**with one accord**" turned from Simon's lies and believed the gospel instead. The Lord opened their hearts. Wherever the truth is, the Lord can work. Simon's message was always a lie. He only bound the people to his every word by sorcery, by deceit. Now, that no longer worked. His power had gone. There was no comparison between his false teaching and false miracles, and the truth and real miracles. One was darkness, the other light. No wonder there was great joy in the city. They've been freed from bondage to a false religion to the freedom that there is in Christ. We shouldn't think that anywhere is too hard for the Lord to change.

[12] But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Philip preached two things: "***the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ.***" And that's all we've got to say as well. We shouldn't try to expand on the message, or include new things in it. Just preach the gospel of eternal salvation:

Matthew 4:17

Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Romans 10:13

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

And Christ doesn't just save us from judgment in the next world, He also changes us now, and gives us new life here, so we can live for Him here, now, and not for self any more.

The people of Samaria believed Philip's message, and professed their faith in baptism. Baptism is an outward ceremony using water as a symbol of our entry into the Christian faith. We don't need it. We can get to heaven without it. True religion is inward, in our souls. No outward ceremonies are necessary. But it's good to profess our faith outwardly. In the Old Testament, the outward ceremony of entry into the people of God was by male circumcision. Females took no part in any ceremony. But of course that didn't mean they couldn't become one of the Lord's people inwardly. Which proves outward ceremonies aren't necessary for salvation. It's the inward change that counts. And it's also why it says "***both men and women.***" The outward ceremony's changed, and now includes both.

[13] Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.

Simon said he believed too, and asked for baptism. Why? He realised his power over the people had gone. Everybody else was doing it. Had he really been changed in his heart by Christ? We'll soon find out he hadn't. We can't see the heart, so we can never tell who's a genuine Christian and who isn't. Only God knows. All we can do is administer an outward religion. Philip had to take Simon's word for it, until it appeared clearly otherwise.

And it's already becoming obvious. Simon "**continued with Philip, and wondered.**" This word "**wondered**" is the same Greek word as "*bewitched*." He was amazed. Rather than people being "*bewitched*" or "amazed" at him like they used to be, he'd ended up being "amazed" at the man Philip. Notice, he followed Philip, not Christ, or His message. And he's "**beholding the miracles and signs which were done.**" Once they'd trusted in Christ, the people never really mentioned the miracles. And here's Simon getting all excited about them, rather than salvation. So he's not really trusting in Christ at all.

And the news of what's been happening in the city of Samaria soon spreads:

[14] Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John:

News travels fast. How, in time of persecution, I don't know. The apostles heard the Samaritans "**received the word of God.**" That would shock a Jew, but the apostles knew Christ at His ascension specifically mentioned Samaria. So they sent Peter and John.

[15] Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: [16] (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) [17] Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.

These verses have been totally misunderstood by two huge sections of the church. And we need to mention these. Many, just like Simon, think the apostles had some kind of magical power to impart the Holy Spirit at will. The recipients in turn inherit this power to pass on to the next generation, who pass it on to the next, and so on, and so on, right down to the present day. They call this apostolic succession. So churches that believe this contain two levels of Christian: the clergy, who have these powers, and the laity, who haven't. The clergy are the only ones with power to properly administer spiritual things, so the laity become totally dependent on them. Baptism, marriage, funerals all require a priest, otherwise they're regarded as invalid. And they've got the magic power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. They take Christ literally, when He said:

John 6:53

Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

So for the laity to enter heaven at all, they must have a priest to change the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, or they can't get in. That whole system is utterly ridiculous. The apostles here are not imparting the Holy Spirit by a kind of magic.

There's a second misunderstanding of these verses. The people of Samaria believed the gospel when Philip preached it, but the Holy Spirit is given here at a later date, when the

apostles came. So some again believe in two levels of Christian: the first who just believe the gospel. They've got eternal life and get to heaven, but there's also a second, higher level of Christian who receives a second blessing, a baptism in the Holy Spirit. They can do exciting things like speak in tongues and perform miracles. That's nonsense too.

There's no such thing as two-tier Christianity. We're all one in Christ Jesus. If we repent and believe the gospel, we receive the Holy Spirit straight away. He doesn't come later:

Ezekiel 36:26,27

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Ephesians 1:13,14

In whom [Christ] ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

The Holy Spirit comes to all believers when they trust in Christ. The Samaritans had their hearts changed as soon as they accepted Peter's message, in contrast to Simon, whose heart wasn't changed. So they already had the Holy Spirit, because they were Christians.

So why then do the apostles here pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit, if they'd already received Him? V.16 says "**as yet he** [the Holy Spirit] **was fallen upon none of them.**" There are two other occasions we come across the Holy Spirit "falling":

Acts 10:44

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.

Acts 11:13-15

And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved. And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.

In both examples, the Holy Spirit "falls" straight after hearing the word preached, which is what we'd expect. The Holy Spirit comes as soon as we accept the message. But it says: "*the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.*" That must be a reference to Pentecost in chapter 2, when they all spoke with tongues and prophesied. All involved on that occasion were believers already. They'd already received the Holy Spirit previously, when they first came to Christ. The apostles possibly in John 20, when Christ:

John 20:22

....breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost....

At Pentecost, tongues of fire fell, and we're told:

Acts 2:4

*And they were all **filled** with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

I suggest the apostles here were not praying for the people of Samaria to receive the Holy Spirit for the first time, but that that they may be **filled** with the Holy Spirit to do the Lord's work. We've got this idea of being filled with the Spirit elsewhere in Scripture:

Ephesians 5:18,19

*And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be **filled** with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;*

Acts 4:31

*And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all **filled** with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.*

All too often we Christians seem to run along almost empty. We need to be continually filled with the Spirit to do the Lord's work. That might include receiving spiritual gifts, or giving us boldness to speak. Whatever the Lord has for us. But we need to pray for it.

I think that's what the apostles were doing, simply praying with the believers to be filled with the Spirit. Not as a group, but by laying hands on each individual. Laying on of hands doesn't magically convey the Holy Spirit, but that's what Simon thought:

[18] And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, [19] Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.

He saw the believers had changed as they were filled with the Spirit, but he doesn't want to change to be like them, he just wanted power to control them, like he had before.

I said earlier there's no such thing as two-tier Christianity, and there isn't. But there are two types of people in the church: Those who repent, believe the gospel and receive the Holy Spirit. That's the true church, they're the people of God, the ones who'll receive eternal life and escape the judgment to come. And then there are hypocrites, those who profess to believe, like Simon, who get baptised, like Simon, maybe get into high places in the church, like Simon wanted and was prepared to pay money for, but they're not real Christians at all. The church will always be a mixture of wheat and tares. Christ had most of His opposition from hypocrites within the church. He had nothing good to say to them:

Matthew 23:29,33

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

There's very strong words from Christ. And Peter here is no less kind to Simon:

[20] But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. [21] Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.

On the one hand, we can't see other people's hearts, so we should never judge anyone, but on the other hand, we're warned about false prophets, and therefore hypocrites too:

Matthew 7:15,16,21

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.... Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

Because of his words and actions, by his fruit, it was clear to Peter that Simon's heart was **"not right in the sight of God."** We shouldn't judge, but we should discern.

The Holy Spirit is the free **"gift of God"** given to all who love Him. Nothing that comes from God can be purchased with money. The things of God are all free. Yet Christendom throughout history has been a money-making industry. Paying a priest to say a Mass for the dead. To get a dead relative out of purgatory. Paying someone to learn how to cast out demons and do spiritual warfare. Persuasive people on television who've convinced you that giving to them is the same as giving to God. None of this is right. They're all crooks. Don't waste our hard-earned money. *"Ye cannot serve God and money."*

So what did Simon have to do, if he couldn't buy this power? Peter told him, it's simple:

[22] Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. [23] For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.

It's evil to desire power over others. Simon needed to repent of the very idea of controlling others. It's **"the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity."** Always wanting to be in charge. Rather, he should've wanted to become like the Christians he saw all around him.

But, it's not that there was no hope for him. If he repented and prayed to God, perhaps the thought of his heart might be forgiven him. The word **"perhaps"** sounds like it's not very sure. To seek God's forgiveness, we must, as it says, repent and pray to God. If we're genuine, the Lord will hear, forgive our sins and change us. That's Christianity. The word **"perhaps"** here, is telling us that there's no prerogative on His part to do so. If we get thrown into hell-fire for ever, what has God done wrong? Nothing. We can say "please forgive me, please forgive me" as much as we like, but He doesn't have to listen:

Psalms 18:41

They cried, but there was none to save them: even unto the Lord, but he answered them not.

All we can cry is:

Luke 18:13

God be merciful to me a sinner.

And it's up to God whether He saves us or not. But, having said that, we can have confidence He'll answer us if we're genuine, because we're also told:

Psalm 103:8

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

And Christ promised:

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

[24] Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

We don't know what happened to Simon. This still isn't the right attitude. He's asking the apostles to pray for him. But we've got to come to the Lord ourselves, as individuals. The apostles can pray for him, but they're not greater Christians than the rest of us, they're not on a higher level, whose prayers are more likely to be answered. No! Simon must learn to pray to the Lord for Himself, that's the only way the Lord is going to deal with us.

And he's still doesn't repent or ask for his sins to be forgiven at all. He just wants to avoid punishment. What are the things the apostles have spoken he wants to avoid? They must be ***"the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity."*** But Peter had said he was already in that, now. It's not future. But he didn't understand that. People find it so difficult to see their own sin and self-centredness. They think everything's fine. But it isn't. We're all born with this sinful nature. And that includes us. One of the best ways to help others understand the situation is by giving our own testimony. And that's what the apostles do:

[25] And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.

After the apostles had prayed with the new believers, they testified, (Peter's testimony would've been good to listen to – he denied Christ three times, cut off a man's ear, and still the Lord never gave up on him). And they preached the word, before returning to Jerusalem. On the way back they preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

So the gospel had come to the Samaritans. And the same message has come to all our countries too. Let's make sure we preach it faithfully. And we always need to pray we may be kept filled with the Holy Spirit, that we may be effective in what we do.

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

Acts 9:1-31. The Conversion of Paul

We're going to look at this terrible man Saul. He tells us about himself in chapter 22:

Acts 22:3

I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

We first met him as Stephen was stoned to death for being a Christian. Saul was a young man who didn't do any stoning, but held the coats of those who did, and consented to his death. It must have affected him, because the next thing we read about him is that:

Acts 8:3

As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

Looking back, he said of himself later:

Acts 26:10,11

....many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

And we start chapter 9 here with Saul going to one of those strange cities, Damascus:

[1] And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, [2] And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

What made him so violent against Christians? It went against everything he'd ever known, everything he'd ever been taught, the religious establishment he'd been brought up with.

We'll have to endure this kind of irrational hatred too. People will get angry when they're told everything they've ever known has been wrong. We automatically assume what we've been taught, what we've grown up believing, what our families believe, must be true. Whether evolution, Buddhism, Islam or whatever. Christians are going to bring a different world view, and they won't want to know. On top of that, we've got quite an offensive message. We tell people they're sinners before a holy God who'll judge them if they don't repent. That's not going to go down too well. We then tell them the good news that God sent a Saviour into the world to forgive the sins of all who call on Him. But if they won't believe the problem, the solution's going to mean nothing. We must be gentle and harmless as doves. Yet we'll have to put up with many who'll hate us for no reason.

When people are so zealous and irrational like Saul, I don't think it's primarily to convince others to believe them, as much as to convince themselves. They know in their hearts deep down something's missing. If they don't believe us, why not just leave us alone? Most people do. What's the problem? But they won't. They'll keep on and on about it.

And Saul goes to the high priest to ask him to sign letters to take to the synagogues in Damascus that if any Christians are found, they're to be tied up, taken to Jerusalem and imprisoned. And the high priest is all too willing to do this for him. Which is not surprising because the high priest was Annas. Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, were the very same high priests who successfully gave Christ over to the Romans to be crucified.

He set off to Damascus determined to persecute Christians. But God had a different idea:

[3] And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: [4] And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

He'd nearly reached Damascus, and God stopped him in his tracks. A great light from heaven shined round about. When Saul recalls this later, he tells us it was about noon. The light was greater than the noonday sun. And Saul is thoroughly changed.

And **"he fell to the earth."** Whenever anybody meets with God, or Christ, or one of His angels in the Bible, they fall to earth. It's never a light thing to meet with the living God.

And the voice from heaven says, **"Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"** Saul had been persecuting Christ. Yet all the time Saul thought he was doing God's will. And we're told some of our enemies will think they are too. But, like Saul, they don't know God at all:

John 16:2

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.

[5] And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

He calls Him **"Lord."** When we meet with God, we'll know it's a real encounter. There'll be no doubt about it. And Christ responds, **"I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."** Saul knew that, but he now saw who Jesus really was. When we meet God, we'll come to see both Him and ourselves in a completely different light. He immediately saw how wrong he'd been all along. Meeting God is the only way that'll show us how bad we really are.

"it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." The picture is one of an ox ploughing, with pricks or goads to keep it obedient. If the ox kicks against them, all it does is hurt itself more. Saul knew of Christ's miracles, he saw the face of Stephen as the face of an angel when he died. By rejecting such obvious signs, all he was doing was hurting himself more. And that's what we do, when we reject God. Only God can save us from ourselves.

When Saul recalls this, he tells us the Lord also gave him some details of his calling too:

Acts 26:15-18

And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a

minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

[6] And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.

He knew straight away he'd met with God. And he knew this was exactly what had been missing from his life. All his zealous shouting and screaming against Christians hiding all that emptiness in his heart, had now been filled. He's "**trembling and astonished.**" And so should we be before the living God. And he accepts God's call straight away. "**What wilt thou have me to do?**" He'll do anything for the Lord now. A complete turn-about.

After meeting Christ, he just knew that to follow Him was now his heart's only desire. He didn't know the suffering he'd have to endure as a Christian. There's a parable in Luke 14:25-35 about counting the cost. First there's a foolish man who tries to build a tower and doesn't count the cost. Then there's a king who does counts the cost, realises he can't win the battle, so seeks for peace instead. Most think that parable teaches that we should count the cost before deciding to follow Christ. But if we really knew how much living for Christ would cost before we commit ourselves to Him, none of us would choose it. It's not asking us to count the cost to see if we can do it, but showing us we can't do it, so we need to seek peace with God, seek His mercy. Here, Saul already knew the choice he had – carry on the empty way of life he had before, or live for Christ. No contest.

So the Lord tells him to go to Damascus and there he'll be told what to do.

[7] And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.

Saul's colleagues would've been angry men, just as zealous as he was about persecuting Christians. And we're told they "**stood speechless.**" Every one of us, no matter how bold we are before men, will be speechless when we come before the Lord on judgment day.

When Paul recalls this event later, he says:

Acts 22:9

And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

Here it says they heard a voice, there it says they "*heard not the voice.*" Here it says they saw "**no man,**" there it says they saw "*the light.*" I suggest the men heard a sound, but only Saul heard the actual words, and the men saw a light, but only Saul saw the form of a man. We're told no more about the men with Saul. But the persecution never happened.

[8] And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. [9] And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink.

He opened his eyes and couldn't see. He'd been blinded because of the glory of the light:

Acts 22:11

And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus.

The others who were with him led him to Damascus. And he was blind for three days. The Lord didn't tell him how long he had to wait before receiving instructions, so he wouldn't have known how long he was going to be in that condition. And he neither ate nor drank. Presumably that was a voluntary fast. But the Lord was working elsewhere in the city:

[10] And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.

A believer in the city called Ananias had a vision from the Lord. We don't have visions any more. Daniel 9:24 says God has sealed up vision and prophecy, and Hebrews says that:

Hebrews 1:1,2

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son....

So we don't need dreams and visions any more, we've got everything we need in this book. But if we do have a particularly vivid dream, and we're asking ourselves, "Is this dream from God or not?" then it isn't. The dreams and visions God used to speak in, weren't like normal dreams. They knew they were from the Lord, there was no doubt.

The Lord just called his name, "**Ananias.**" That's all He has to do. He deals with each one of us personally like that. And like Ananias, we ought to be ready to respond to Him.

[11] And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,

The Lord gave Saul's address and told him to go there. What's the difference between Saul before conversion, and Saul now? "**Behold he prayeth.**" The man who thought he was doing God service persecuting Christians, can't possibly have been doing the Lord's will. Why? Because he never had a real relationship with Him. The difference between true believers and false is, true believers pray. We're in continual communion with our Lord.

[12] And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.

Saul also had a vision. He saw Ananias coming and restoring his sight. So two separate people with the same instruction from the Lord is a pretty good indication it's of Him. This is one way we can discern whether something is of the Lord or not. Do we think God has called us to be a great preacher? Well, it's odd that a church hasn't had the same idea!

[13] Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: [14] And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.

Ananias had heard of Saul's reputation in Jerusalem, and he knew what he was on his way to Damascus to do. The Christians must've been expecting it. Do we trust the Lord when He tells us to do something difficult? Ananias was still understandably apprehensive of going, so he pours out everything on his mind to the Lord. And we can do that too.

[15] But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

The Lord confirms his instruction. He calls Saul a "**chosen vessel.**" Saul said:

Galatians 1:15,16

....God.... separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen....

Saul was separated from his mother's womb. God already had His hand on him from his conception. He was allowed to live such an evil life, persecuting Christians, but only for so long. In time, on that road to Damascus, God called him. God's Son was revealed in him. But there's another sense in which God's choice goes back even beyond the womb:

Ephesians 1:4

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love....

If we're Christians, we're all chosen by God from eternity. God had His plan for us from before the foundation of the world. He brought us into this world at a fixed time, and allowed us to live the life we lived before we became Christians. Then, at a point in time He revealed Himself to us, and changed us permanently. But why did God wait so long? Why didn't He make us Christians from birth? Some people He does. We're all different. But our calling as Christians wouldn't be possible without our past experience. We can relate to unbelievers, because we were once just like them. In those days we were no use to anyone, but now we're Christians, we can live the useful life God had planned for us all along. This Christian life we now have, as individuals, is exactly what God wants us to be.

[16] For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

Saul didn't know yet, but he was going to suffer heavily in his new life. We can read of his beatings and shipwrecks in 2 Corinthians 11:21-30. Our Christian life is going to be one of suffering. We don't look for it, but it's going to happen because the world will hate us:

John 15:19

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Romans 8:18

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

That hope is what kept Saul going for the rest of his life. He wasn't going back. His old life was comfortable. He was liked by the chief priests, the establishment. But, like Moses, he'd rather esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of this world.

[17] And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Ananias went. He knew what had happened to Saul on the road, because the Lord must have revealed it to him. Saul received his sight again, and was filled with the Holy Spirit.

[18] And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. [19] And when he had received meat, he was strengthened....

After he received his sight back, he professed his new faith in baptism. And he ate again.

....Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. [20] And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.

The disciples in Damascus accepted him. And he spent the next three years based there:

Galatians 1:16-18

....immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

And he started preaching straight away. But surely a preacher should be qualified? Surely we shouldn't put new, immature believers into the pulpit straight away? Surely he needed to go to Bible college for several years and be accepted by the church first?

But Saul made a particular point of saying he didn't confer with flesh and blood, and didn't go to the apostles, but instead went to Arabia. Why Arabia? I suggest he went there with the Scriptures to re-learn all he'd been taught in light of the fact it all pointed to Christ. He was filled with the Holy Spirit to teach him, so he had no need of a college or church. With Scripture and the Holy Spirit he had all the qualifications needed to preach.

And he preached in the synagogues. They were expecting him to hand them letters to arrest Christians, and he starts preaching that Jesus Christ is the Son of God instead.

[21] But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?

Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, so his preaching had power. That would've amazed them in itself. But what was more amazing was the fact that they knew exactly why he'd originally come. And his message was completely opposite to what they were expecting.

[22] But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.

The Jews didn't know what to make of him. But the more Saul grew in strength, the more he could prove Jesus was the Christ. So it is possible to prove absolutely from the Bible, using simple rules of logic, that Jesus is the Christ. We shouldn't need any more proof:

Luke 16:31

If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

The Scriptures are all-sufficient. If people don't believe, it's their own fault:

2 Corinthians 4:3,4

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

[23] And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: [24] But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him.

After three years in Damascus, the tables were turned. Rather than Saul wanting to imprison Christians, the unconverted Jews now wanted to kill him. When we become Christians, maybe at first, our unconverted friends think we're just going through a phase, "He'll get over it." And they'll try enticing us back to their empty way of life. But after a while, when they see we're not going back, they'll give up, or worse, like here, turn on us. But thankfully, Saul found out about their plans beforehand and managed to escape:

[25] Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.

We get some more detail about this in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 11:32,33

In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.

The Jews had got the governor and his troops on their side, so Saul had no choice but to flee quickly. He went to Jerusalem, thinking the Christians there would readily accept him, like those of Damascus, but he was, probably understandably, to be disappointed:

[26] And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

Do you blame them? In Jerusalem, they knew exactly who he was more than anyone else. Imagine a government official coming here and saying, “I’m a Christian now, can I join you?” would we believe him? But one believer had heard of his boldness in Damascus:

[27] But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

We came across Barnabas in chapter 4:36,37, where he sold some land and brought the money to the apostles. He knew of Saul’s testimony and his good work in Damascus, so maybe he met him there. So he was able to introduce him to the apostles.

[28] And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

But he only stayed fifteen days in Jerusalem:

Galatians 1:18

Then after three years [in Damascus] I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

[29] And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.

His bold speaking, in the place where people knew him too well, quickly got him into trouble. But, surprisingly, it wasn’t the Jews who tried to kill him, it was Greeks, whom he’d been disputing with. We can be on the look out for those we expect to cause us trouble, but here, trouble came from an unexpected quarter.

[30] Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

So the brethren quickly got him away to the port of Caesarea, and sent him away to his home city of Tarsus. He wasn’t to go back to Jerusalem again for fourteen years:

Galatians 1:21-2:1

Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me. Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also.

Saul became the apostle chiefly to Gentiles. He'd be fairly safe in his home town. But Christ had a word to say about our home town being the most difficult place to witness:

Matthew 13:57,58

And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house. And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

He probably didn't stay long in Tarsus. He later settled in Antioch, which became a great Christian centre. Believers were first called Christians in Antioch. Galatians tells us Peter and James visited him there. He set off on most of his missionary journeys from there.

[31] Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

Saul's conversion had stopped the immediate threat in Damascus, but the persecution carried on until he left the area three years later. After we're converted, the consequences of our past sins may well continue, but we're not to worry about them. We must leave them to God to control in His providence, and just be thankful we've been saved from it all. The church finally got rest, was edified, walked in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost. And it grew. That's unusual, because today, lack of persecution tends to put the church to sleep. We shouldn't sleep, we've got a message of life and death.

What can we learn from the conversion of Saul?

(1.) No sinner is too great for God to work in and change. cf. Manasseh, Nebuchadnezzar.

(2.) The change God makes in our hearts is complete and permanent:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

(3.) God came into Saul's life suddenly, when he least expected it. Salvation is of the Lord:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Saul was converted without hearing the gospel. So should we just sit back and wait for God to work in us? No. God normally uses means. The means God normally uses is the preaching of the gospel. If we repent of our sins and call on Jesus Christ to save us from the consequences of those sins, He will permanently change us just like He did Saul.

Even though Saul wasn't converted through responding to the gospel, he spent the rest of his life preaching that message, and that's the message we must preach too.

Acts 17:16-34. Paul in Athens

I thought we'd look for a short time at the apostle Paul's visit to Athens. I want to first of all look at the spiritual state of Athens. Secondly, I want to look at Paul's message, and how he applied it to the situation in Athens, and thirdly, I want to briefly look at the results.

[16] Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

Paul was alone in Athens. We see in v.15 that he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, but in the meantime he was alone for a few days with nothing to do.

Now, if we had some time to spare in a city we'd never been to before, what would we do? See the sights? Visit the museums? Sit in a café? Sadly, I really think that's what we'd have done. Given the opportunity, we too easily fill ourselves with worldly things.

But Paul wasn't interested in sightseeing. His first concern was the religious nature of the city. We're told that, "***his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.***" When we become a Christian, we have new priorities. We're not here to please ourselves any more. We've got higher things to think about now.

We too ought to be concerned at the spiritual state of anywhere the Lord puts us, whether we're visiting, or whether we live there. There are so many people out there who know nothing about God, or Jesus Christ, or forgiveness of sins freely available through Him.

So what did Paul do? How did he spend his time while he was waiting for his friends?

[17] Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

First, he went to the synagogue. Whenever Christ or the apostles entered a new city, they always went to the Jews first, then afterwards to the Gentiles. And the reason for that is that the Jews had the Scriptures. The Messiah came from the Jews. Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of their law, the One to whom the whole of their Scriptures pointed to. So Paul could bring the message of Christ to them through the prophecies of their own Scriptures.

But the gospel is to go to the whole world, not just to Jews. So Paul also disputed with the "***devout persons.***" These were Gentiles who loved God. People like, for example, Cornelius, or the Ethiopian eunuch. They would probably have attended the synagogues too. But Paul also spoke about Christ daily with anybody in the market who would listen. That wasn't standing on a soap box and shouting at people who didn't want to hear. We're told it was "***with them that met with him,***" which implies they wanted to hear.

These wouldn't necessarily know anything about the Scriptures, so Paul had to find another way to get them to understand the message he had for them.

This is the situation we find ourselves in today. Most people out there, don't know the first thing about the Bible. So we have to communicate to them with what they do know. And

that's why Paul's speech here in Athens is so useful for us. He speaks to people with no background in spiritual things. Just like the people we meet every day.

And we're told that Paul did this "**daily.**" No break. No day off (maybe apart from the Sabbath). Are we as devoted as Paul to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ?

In the course of his discussions in the market, two groups of people encountered him:

[18] Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

Now, if we want to, we can read all sorts of commentaries about what these two groups believed. But I'm not going to go into that, because it doesn't matter. I don't like taking information from outside the Bible to try to explain the Bible. Information we get from outside the Bible might be true. But then again, it might not. All of the Bible is always true. So I'd rather stick to Scripture alone. Epicureans and Stoics don't occur, by name, anywhere else in Scripture, so we should just leave it at that. All we *need* to know is that they were two groups of people with their own particular philosophies. But one thing they both had in common was that they both wanted to listen to what Paul had to say.

They didn't actually understand what he was saying, because they thought he was introducing two new gods, "**Jesus**" and "**the resurrection.**" Isn't that dumb? But they were in a culture which did that. New gods we're being introduced all the time. They didn't understand this was something completely different, they weren't new gods at all. We Christians have got our peculiar vocabulary which we have to educate people in, and we must be so, so careful not to confuse those we speak to in how we say things.

[19] And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, [20] For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. [21] (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

Athens was a city full of people who "**spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.**" Now, we might say that that's far more than we get from most people today. We try speaking about God to people, and nobody's bothered. Most seem only to be interested in their own little lives and what they can get for themselves.

But, especially in a cultured society like Athens, there are more people than we realise who want more than that. Many people are open to finding out new teachings or strange ideas, just like the Athenians. But the problem is, any new teaching they encounter is only regarded as one new teaching out of many. The world is full of religions and philosophies. And such diversity is seen as a good thing. It makes society such a rich tapestry of many beliefs. But the problem is, only one of them can be right. They're all mutually exclusive.

Christianity is one of many religions that claims to be the only true religion. We regard all other religions as false. Jesus Christ Himself said:

John 14:6

I am the way, the truth, and the life; No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Do we think that's arrogant, claiming to be the only true religion? A multicultural, diverse society like Athens would. Well, let's allow Paul to explain it to us. And here we come now to Paul's message. Look how Paul dealt with this.

[22] Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

He firstly told them their own society was **“too superstitious.”** There were many religions being practised in the city, but they were just superstition. A superstitious religion has its own set of rituals. If we perform the ritual, we've performed our duty to the appropriate god. He's pleased with us, and that's all we have to do. But the true Christian religion, is completely different. We worship the only true God. He's real. He's not impressed with ritual. He wants a living, real relationship with us. We're guided by Him. We communicate with Him. He communicates with us. All other religions have no idea about a God in a real living relationship with His followers. And that's important to understand.

And, Paul then told them why he thought they were **“too superstitious”**:

[23] For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, to the unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

Paul had seen an altar inscribed **“to the unknown God.”** He used that, to tell them that there *is* a God they didn't yet know about. A God, unknown to them at that time.

We don't have any altars to unknown gods around today. But the point is, we need to start from where the people are, to try to make a connection with them. For example, most people today are materialistic, so we need to show them what Solomon had found:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

What are we chasing after? Everything here is **“vanity and vexation of spirit.”** It's temporary, it passes away, it's pointless. We need something eternal to cling on to.

After making a connection with the people, Paul then told them about the true God, who he equated with this unknown God they didn't know about yet. And he did this by starting with the nature of God. God is far greater and more powerful than we can ever imagine.

[24] God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

The Greeks thought of gods as creatures more powerful than us, but otherwise very similar. They fought, they became jealous, and so on. But Paul declares that there's only one God, and He's all-powerful. By definition, there can only be one God. If there were two or more, neither of them could be God, because both couldn't be all-powerful.

He "**made the world and all things therein.**" He created everything.

Psalm 19:1

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

Not only did God create the world and all things therein, but "**He is Lord of heaven and earth.**" He upholds all things in His providence. There's nobody else in charge. Absolutely everything is under His control.

Matthew 10:29,30

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

There's a common view, which is totally wrong, which says that God is only in control of part of the world and Satan is in control of the rest. A territorial battle is going on between them, but God wins in the end. That's not true at all. Everything, absolutely everything, is under God's control. He ordains and upholds all things in His providential control.

But we might say, "What about all the evil in the world?" That can't be of God. Well, Satan wanted to do all sorts of things to Job, but he couldn't do anything unless God gave him permission in the first place. So, whether it's the temptations of Satan, or earthquakes, famine or wars – all things are under God's overall control. We might often wonder what God's doing, but we live by faith, not by sight. He knows what He's doing, despite what it seems like, and everything is ordained to His greatest glory in the end.

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

And he "**dwelleth not in temples made with hands.**" The Greek gods had their own temples, all built by men. But our God is present everywhere. We don't need a special place to approach and worship Him.

John 4:21,23,24

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

[25] Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

And He isn't "**worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing.**" The gods of all the other religions need something from us. They at least require our devotion. They often require sacrifices or good works. But our God doesn't need any of that. In fact He doesn't actually *need* us at all.

He "**giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.**" Everything we have comes from Him. Even our very lives, and every breath.

Genesis 2:7

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Our bodies are just dust of the ground, but our spirit, our soul, our life is from the Lord. He gives us life and breath and everything else, for a time on this earth, until that day the Lord has ordained when we shall return to Him again.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

And we should be thankful to Him for all of this. Sadly, unless we've ever been near to death or in terrible problems, we don't think on these things and take them all for granted.

[26] And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

We all came from "**one blood,**" the same ancestor, Adam. And all nations, wherever they are, regardless of whether they acknowledge God or not, and regardless of how evil they are, have come into being and been placed where they are by God. Especially after the Tower of Babel, when God confused their languages and scattered them abroad upon the face of the earth. But not only then. Throughout history, God raises up nations, and He takes them away again as it pleases Him. And there's a purpose behind all of this:

[27] That they should seek the Lord....

That's why God ordains things the way they are. In order that men would seek Him. We don't naturally seek God at all. As long as everything is going along smoothly in our lives, we'll forget God. We just will. That's why there are far more mature Christians in places of persecution than somewhere like here, where we're all quite comfortable. It's sad that often the only way God can wake us up to reality, is by giving us trials in our lives.

But that's our purpose in life, that we "**should seek the Lord.**" We're not here for our own benefit. "*Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.*"

....if haply they might feel after him, and find him....

This implies that it *is* possible to find Him. God would never have said this, if it was impossible to find Him. Have we come to a point in our life yet, where we don't want to carry on living for ourselves any more? We're fed up with it. We maybe want to reach out to God, but we don't know where to start. Well, we're told here that it is possible to find Him. It is possible to have a relationship with Him.

But how do we find God? And why has God made it so difficult? Well, it's not that difficult at all, because:

....though he be not far from every one of us: [28] For in him we live, and move, and have our being....

The problem is that men are looking in the wrong place.

Naturally we think that, if there is a God, He's out there somewhere, far away. But He's not a distant god at all. No. He's not far from every one of us. He knows our every thought, our every desire, our every motive for everything we do. He knows everything about us.

Psalm 139:1,2

O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.

Psalm 139:14

I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

If we want to know God, we must look within ourselves. There's nothing we can hide from Him. So, we communicate with Him, not by outward rituals or great religious works, but by simply talking to Him. We can have a relationship with Him as a man does with his friend. We don't have to go anywhere, or do anything. On the one hand, the one true living God controls the whole universe in His providence, and on the other, He's as near as being right within us, caring about every detail of our lives:

1 Peter 5:7

Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

I really don't think we understand how big God really is, He's altogether different from any other god men have invented. The true God is far greater than anyone can ever imagine.

....as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

Paul then went on to show the Greeks that even some of their poets have understood the idea of one all-powerful Creator God and written about it.

Where did these poets get this understanding from? It could have been from their own imaginations. Poets are creative people. But I don't think so.

Parts of this Bible are getting on for 4,000 years old, particularly the book of Job, which is considered the oldest book. But of course, our Bibles have been especially providentially preserved by God throughout the generations. But what about secular literature?

There was a Greek poet called Homer. He lived about 2,800 years ago, and we still have his works preserved for us today. Now, if poetry can be preserved for 2,800 years for us today, why couldn't literature have been preserved for that long in Paul's day? If Paul was talking about a Greek poet from about 2,500 years before *his* day, that's significant. 2,500 years before Paul's day, there was a worldwide flood. And Noah built an ark to escape it.

All of us are descended from Noah's family. Everyone else died in the flood. And Noah worshipped the one true God. After the flood, especially after the Tower of Babel, men spread throughout the world, and the Greeks ended up where they are today. In the process of moving, most of them rejected the true religion and invented their own gods instead. But in many of these societies something of the true religion remained.

Greek poets from about 2,500 years before Paul, would have still known about an all-powerful Creator God from Noah. The Greeks subsequently abandoned the true religion, but the witness to the truth was always there in the writings of these old poets.

Now Paul had spent a long time telling the Athenians about the nature of God, and describing His attributes. That was a very important starting point. Once that had been established, he can then go on to explain the gospel message:

[29] Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. [30] And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: [31] Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

That's the gospel message. The gospel is not "Come to Jesus and you'll be happy." Or "Jesus has a wonderful plan for your life," although He may have. Neither is it, "Jesus loves you," although that may be true.

I went to a funeral once. A consultant at the hospital where I worked was killed in a car accident. I knew him because he was an elder in the local Baptist church. The funeral was full of people who worked at the hospital, who otherwise would never go to church. So it was a wonderful opportunity to get the Christian message across, especially because the person who died was a Christian, and had a sure hope for the next world.

Now, I know you have to be sensitive at funerals, but I think the minister was being too sensitive, because all he said in his message was, "God loves us all." That's it. No call to follow Christ. He just kept saying, "God loves us all."

On the way out, I met my boss from work. He's not a Christian, but he knew I was, so he came over to tell me that he had really enjoyed the funeral service. The point is that before he went to the service, he was a drinker and a swearer. After going to the service, he's still a drinker and a swearer, but he now thinks God loves him. So, it's now a lot harder to convince him that God is not pleased with his life, and that he needs to change. Read through the four gospels and the book of Acts. The main message is always "*repent.*" "*Repent and believe.*" Because there's a Day of Judgment coming when God will judge the world by Jesus Christ. And that's exactly what Paul tells the Athenians here.

He said that their past ignorance God **“winked at.”** We’ve got to make it clear straight away that God never “winks at” sin, in the sense of ignoring it, pretending it doesn’t exist. God takes sin seriously. Sin took Christ to the cross. God never takes sin lightly.

What it really means here is that God is *longsuffering*. He puts up with things He doesn’t approve of for a long time. He punishes it eventually, because He’s a righteous and holy God. But He puts up with it, He allows it to exist, to give us all plenty of time to repent.

God **“commandeth all men everywhere to repent.”** God commands us all, even today, to turn from our empty, meaningless lives, to turn from our sins and sinful nature, and to turn to Jesus Christ for salvation.

If anyone ignores this call, eventually God will judge them. Their time will run out. And they can’t complain about it, because they’ve had plenty of time. God has **“appointed a day”** in the future in which He will judge the world.

And He’ll judge it **“in righteousness.”** God’s punishment will be perfectly just, because He can see our hearts. We can’t see others hearts, so we can’t judge them. But God can.

And God will judge the world **“by that man whom he hath ordained,”** Jesus Christ.

The first time Christ came into the world, He came to save the world:

John 3:17

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

But one day in the future, Christ is going to come as our judge. Nothing else will matter except what we thought of Christ when He came the first time.

So, what do we think of Him? Do we ignore Him completely? Do we think of Him as irrelevant? Do we think He’s just another moral teacher, one of many? Or do we love Him, cry to Him for mercy, and ask Him to save us from our sinful nature? It’s what we think of Christ that will count on the Day of Judgment, not how good we are. We can never be good enough. We need a Saviour to save us, because we can’t save ourselves. And that’s exactly why Christ came into the world, to *“save His people from their sins.”*

And God has **“hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”** The resurrection is our assurance that Christ’s death was accepted by God as a satisfaction for the sins of all who come to Him. What each one of us must do now is repent of our sins personally, and turn to Him for salvation. That’s the gospel message.

So now we come to see the results of this gospel message. The gospel separates all those who hear it into two groups:

[32] And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

When the gospel is preached, there's always a division. Some people will want to hear more about the salvation of their souls, while others will just laugh and walk away. So what did Paul do about that? Nothing. He just left it there.

[33] So Paul departed from among them.

Paul had said and done all he could. He told them the true message of salvation from the one true living God. That's it. That's all we can do. Our duty is to deliver the message in the best way we can, and then we must leave it with God to change hearts. We can't change hearts, only God can.

A lot of Christians today think that the burden's on their shoulders to persuade men into the kingdom of heaven. So they use smooth talking, persuasive sales techniques, like a salesman trying to get you to buy something. That's a terrible witness for Christ. We're called simply to give the message. We can't do anything else. We can't push people into the kingdom of God. We must leave it to God to work in people's hearts. We should never pressure anyone into accepting Christ. If we do that, we'd end up with a church full of false believers – people who are really following the smooth-talking speaker, rather than Christ. We don't want that. We want them to sincerely, genuinely come to know the Lord.

And look what happened. Some may have mocked, but others believed:

[34] Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Those who wanted to know more, followed Paul and believed. The church will be gathered by the Lord, we don't need to use worldly methods and techniques. We just simply explain the message. Christ said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Well I hope this passage gives us some insight into what the true Christian message is, and how we should present this message to the world. A world ignorant of the Scriptures, ignorant of the need of salvation from their sins, ignorant of Jesus Christ who is the only One who can save us from our sins. We need to speak of the greatness of the one true living God. Speak of the Day of Judgment to come. Call all men to repent and turn to the God through Jesus Christ. Once we've presented this message, we must leave everything else to God. That was Paul's way of doing things, and it should be ours.

Well, these are a few thoughts on this passage. May all of us come to the knowledge of the truth, and embrace the Saviour of the world.

Acts 26. Paul before Festus and Agrippa

After spending several years on various missionary journeys in the eastern Mediterranean, the Apostle Paul made plans to go on a longer journey, to Rome, then to Spain:

Romans 15:24

Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company.

I'm sure Paul had prayed about all this, and he truly thought at the time that the Lord wanted him to make this journey. But at the same time he would have been aware:

James 4:15

For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

I say that, because we don't know if he ever got to Spain. He reached Rome, but in a way he could never have imagined – as a prisoner. And that's the last record we've got of him.

It's not wrong to plan things, but we don't know what the Lord's got in store for us. We've got to trust in Him whatever He brings our way, knowing He's in control of everything.

Paul, at this point, had been imprisoned by the Romans for at least two years. They didn't have anything to charge him with. But they knew the Jews were out to kill him, so they'd kept him in jail to keep the peace, and for his own safety. Here, he gets the opportunity to speak to Festus, the governor, and King Agrippa and his wife Bernice, who were visiting.

Paul's Testimony

[1] Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. Then Paul stretched forth the hand, and answered for himself:

Paul had been given permission to speak before such distinguished people. Whenever we get the chance to speak about Christ to anybody, we ought to realise: (1.) it may be our last opportunity, and (2.) we never know who's listening. After he got to Rome we read:

Philippians 4:22

All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

Even some of Caesar's household became Christians as a result of Paul's witness. Which would probably never have been possible if he wasn't a prisoner appealing to Caesar. So:

1 Peter 3:15

Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:

[2] I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews: [3] Especially

because I know thee to be expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews: wherefore I beseech thee to hear me patiently.

Festus and Agrippa were Gentiles. But whereas Agrippa was “***expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews,***” Festus thought Judaism was mere superstition:

Acts 25:18,19

Against whom when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed: But had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.

So, even before Paul began speaking, there was already a difference in mindset between Festus and Agrippa. And that’s often the case. There’s often bias in people’s minds even before we’ve said anything. That’ll be seen in their responses later on. Paul continued:

[4] My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; [5] Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Many of Paul’s old Jewish colleagues were present. They knew Paul’s background – he used to be one of them. They wanted him dead, which is why they brought him to court, but they didn’t seem too keen on testifying against him themselves. They’d rather believe he’d never been one of them at all. I met a lady once, who was brought up in an orthodox Jewish family. When she became a Christian, she was thrown out of the house and her parents held a funeral for her. That’s how much they didn’t want to face the truth. And these Jews didn’t want to face the truth. But Paul had renounced that old life of his. And his conscience was now clear, so he had no problem speaking freely about it:

Philippians 3:5-7

Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.

[6] And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: [7] Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews.

He knew King Agrippa was familiar with the Jewish religion, so he spoke about the great hope of the Jews – the promise, throughout Scripture, of resurrection from the dead.

Job 19:25,26

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

Psalms 49:15

But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me.

Hosea 13:14

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes.

Resurrection from the dead was the great hope of the Jews throughout Scripture. And Paul had come to realise that the hope of resurrection is actually fulfilled in Christ.

[8] Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

The Jews didn't want to believe Christ had risen from the dead, because if so, they'd have to accept He fulfils their great hope. So rather than accept truth they generated a lie:

Matthew 28:12,13

And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.

And so they persecuted Christians, thinking it was God's will. We'll get opposition too:

John 16:2

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.

[9] I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. [10] Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them .

Paul's not ashamed of telling the truth about his old life, because his conscience is now clear. He knows his sins, which were many, have all been forgiven. Have we had a terrible past? We've all messed up, haven't we. But the wonderful news is that our consciences can be cleared of all that guilt, that sin, simply by repenting and turning to the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't have to do anything. Just accept the truth. And it gets worse:

[11] And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

Paul punished Christians in every place of worship. He compelled them to blaspheme, how awful! And he admits he was "***exceedingly mad against them.***" It was madness. It was far more than a rational response to a disagreement. And he persecuted them far and wide, "***even unto strange cities,***" long distances from Jerusalem.

Why would anyone behave with irrational hatred like that? We should be aware of our enemies, and how irrational people can become. We should never respond in kind. We need the Lord for wisdom. What would the Roman authorities think about such disorderly

behaviour? At the time he was doing it, Paul didn't care. But now, admitting he was terribly wrong must have embarrassed the Jews, because they're still doing these things.

[12] Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,

His trip to Damascus was “***with authority and commission from the chief priests.***” The very same chief priests who were there accusing him before the Roman court.

[13] At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me.

Paul had a life-changing experience. What had Paul done to earn it? Was God particularly pleased with him? No! He was the chief of sinners. He'd done nothing to deserve it at all.

[14] And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

Everybody in Paul's party saw the light and fell to earth. But only Paul heard the voice. Who were the others in the party? They were going to Damascus to persecute Christians, so they must've been just as hateful against them as Paul was. Were they converted too? We're not told. All we know is that Paul was converted, and the proposed persecution never happened. God is in control of all things, including the hearts of wicked men.

[15] And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.

Paul didn't know who was speaking to him at first, but he knew he had to call Him “***Lord.***” When we meet with God, it may not be an audible voice like this, but we'll know it. We'll bow the knee. And Paul's now bowing the knee to the one he's been persecuting. In fact everybody will bow the knee to Christ eventually. To escape the judgment, we must do it in this life. We'll be doing it in the next world anyway, whether we like it or not:

Philippians 2:10,11

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

[16] But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;

Paul was immediately given his calling. All Christians are called of God for a purpose. We don't become Christians and then just carry on living for ourselves like before. We're

finished with that. And if we don't know what our calling is, ask Him. We can now communicate with Him. He'll direct us and keep us in all that we do.

Paul's particular calling was to be a witness. Christ's witnesses were the twelve apostles:

Acts 10:40,41

Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead.

Paul wasn't one of the original twelve. He became an apostle, as "born out of due time."

1 Corinthians 15:8

And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

[17] Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee,

He was told to flee from Jerusalem, because the Jews wouldn't accept his testimony:

Acts 22:18

And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.

Paul, the great Jewish scholar, found out his calling was to be mainly to the Gentiles. Isn't that strange? We'd have thought he'd be the ideal person to be sent to the Jews. Surely, if anybody could convince them that Jesus Christ was the Messiah promised throughout the Scriptures, it was him. But, no, God knew they wouldn't receive his testimony, they'd just want to kill him, like they do here. So God sent him far away to the Gentiles.

Isaiah 55:8,9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

[18] To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

The work he'd been given to do among the Gentiles was "***To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.***" He can't do that, but God can. God here gives Paul a message to give to the people, the gospel. This is the ordinary means God uses to save people from their sins. God uses it, to open spiritual eyes and turn them "***from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God.***"

And look at the results. Those who accept the gospel will be renewed by God in their hearts, and will receive "***forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me*** [Christ]." The freedom of knowing all our sins have been forgiven is so wonderful. Knowing we can never be punished for them. And to stop us

thinking we can now live how we want and still get to heaven, at the same time we also receive the inheritance of being one of God's children, sanctified, separated from the world. with a new heart that won't ever want to live the way we used to any more.

So, what is the actual gospel message that God had given him to proclaim?

**[19] Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision:
[20] But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.**

The gospel message is this: **“that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.”** That's the only message we've got to give to people, we haven't got anything else. And we must be faithful with this message. All we can do is present this message. We can't change hearts, only God can give the increase. Of course, God is completely free to bypass the use of the gospel if He so wishes, as he did in Paul's case.

Paul started fulfilling his calling as soon as he got to Damascus. He didn't wait to be accepted by the church or trained in seminary, he just went. We don't need formal training. Don't get me wrong. We shouldn't just set up shop and start preaching with no knowledge at all. Too many people do that today. Paul received his training soon enough:

Galatians 1:15-18

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.

Paul went to Arabia for up to three years, no doubt with his Bible, to relearn everything he'd been taught at the feet of Gamaliel in Jewish Bible school. He needed to relearn it in the light of the fact Jesus Christ fulfilled it all. But notice, he learned on his own, with the Holy Spirit alone guiding him, not a church trying to force him into their way of thinking.

**[21] For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.
[22] Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come:**

The Jews were out to kill him, but God protected him by putting him in jail. Wherever he was moved, he witnessed to small and great. What did he witness? **“saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come.”** He stuck to the Bible. Nothing else is necessary. We don't need anecdotes, funny stories, or to go off at a tangent. Just stick to this book. And what does this book teach?

[23] That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

They only had what we call the Old Testament at that time, but it all points to Jesus Christ. It talks of His sufferings, and that He should be the first to rise from the dead, to give us that great Jewish hope, the resurrection from the dead. And that hope was never just for Jews. It was always for everybody, **“light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.”**

The Responses

[24] And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.

Festus, who called the Jewish religion superstition, just thought Paul was mad. Fed up with the whole thing, especially arguments with regards a religion he never believed, he gave his opinion **“with a loud voice.”** And that’s what people do when they don’t understand something and aren’t interested anyway. And that’s what Festus does.

He thought **“much learning”** was making Paul **“mad.”** Actually, that’s a true statement. His **“much learning”** at the feet of Gamaliel had indeed made him **“exceedingly mad”** against the Christians, haling them to prison and compelling them to blaspheme. It’s a good job **“much learning”** isn’t the way to become a Christian. Look at Paul’s response:

[25] But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Paul’s response is not in the words of a madman:

- He’s not shouting back **“with a loud voice”** as Festus had been.
- He’s courteous. He still uses the title **“most noble Festus.”**
- He’s **“sober.”** The response is calm, measured, gentle and peaceable. And that’s how we should respond to any false accusations. We don’t need to respond in like manner.
- And he’s speaking **“truth.”** If we’ve got the truth, we don’t need to shout, like modern preachers do. The truth is all we need to present. We don’t need to expand it, or add flourishing touches to it. The truth spoken in a peaceable way is always the best witness.

Festus isn’t going to respond. Paul wasn’t going to cast his pearls before swine, so he turns to king Agrippa. We must just leave unresponsive people to the Lord for Him to deal with and not waste our time. Agrippa, however, was **“expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews.”** So Paul could at least have a useful conversation with him:

[26] For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

Agrippa knew all about what Paul had done, nothing had been hidden from him. So he knew Paul was telling the truth. And he believed the Scriptures were the truth as well:

[27] King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

Agrippa believed the prophets. Does that mean he was a Christian now? No:

[28] Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

He was only “**almost**” persuaded to become a Christian. He didn’t think the Scriptures were rubbish, he believed them to be truth. But he never became a Christian.

[29] And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

Agrippa thought becoming a Christian was all about being “**persuaded**” with the mind. But Paul doesn’t speak in those terms. He wanted everybody who heard him to be “**altogether such as I am,**” apart from the bonds. He spoke of Christianity as a state we’re in, rather than a belief embraced in the mind. And that’s what it is. But so many people don’t see that. They’re looking for intellectual persuasion that it’s the truth. Agrippa had that. Christianity is the truth. It is rational. It can stand up to intellectual enquiry. But to believe truth with the mind doesn’t make anyone a Christian. It’s about a change of state.

John 3:3

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

And that’s exactly what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Finally, I want to contrast Paul with Agrippa. Agrippa heard the gospel, from Paul, but wasn’t converted. Paul was converted without hearing the gospel at all. What made the difference? Ultimately, all we can say is God chose one and not the other. Paul was one of God’s elect, Agrippa wasn’t. Ultimately the reason some believe and some don’t is purely down to God’s eternal good pleasure, which we don’t understand. We must leave it there.

Ephesians 1:5,6

Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

But whenever we talk like that, we must immediately say that we can never, ever use that as an excuse, and say that it’s God’s fault that someone never comes to Christ. “I don’t believe because God hasn’t chosen me. It’s His fault.” No. We can never say that.

So was there a difference which contributed towards Paul believing but not Agrippa?

– Paul was a Jew, Agrippa was a Gentile. But their background wasn't the difference. Both equally were **“expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews.”**

– Paul received a direct communication from God, Agrippa didn't. But that wasn't the difference either. Agrippa had heard the gospel, via Paul. The gospel is God's ordinary means of salvation. The gospel is just as much from God as any direct experience. In fact, a lot of people say they've had an experience of God and they've had no such thing. I know we can't see the heart, but a response to hearing the gospel is usually a more reliable indication someone has become a Christian than any mystical experience.

– So what made the difference between Paul and Agrippa? There was one. Christ said:

John 12:25

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

The reason Agrippa was **“almost persuaded”** but not quite, was that he loved his life in this world too much. How do we know? In Acts 25:23 we're told, he came into the place of hearing with *“great pomp”* and the *“principal men of the city.”* He loved it all. And after hearing the gospel and being **“almost persuaded”** to become a Christian, what did he do? Renounce his old life, release Paul and join him on his missionary journeys? No.

[30] And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them: [31] And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds. [32] Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

Sadly, Agrippa never became a Christian. Instead, he conferred with Festus. He was far more interested in his relationship with a man who thought true religion was superstition. They both knew Paul had done nothing wrong. But, to wash their hand of the whole affair, they sent him to Rome, still as a prisoner, and carried on the life in this world they loved so much. Paul wanted to go to Rome anyway, so he wasn't complaining at a free ticket.

What about Paul? His conversion was the last thing he ever expected. God burst into his life from nowhere. Suddenly, the one he'd been persecuting he called “Lord.” He accepted it straight away, “I want this. This is what I've been looking for all my life.”

Why did Paul take out all that fury and hatred on Christians? It was an irrational hatred. I reckon deep down in his heart he knew something was missing but he'd no idea what. There was a deep dissatisfaction with this world, and he filled his life with hatred of Christians to cover his emptiness inside. In other words, he hated his life in this world.

When Christ said *“he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal,”* it doesn't mean everybody who hates their life will be saved. There are plenty who hate their lives and they try to end it or use alcohol and drugs to blot it out. The point is that if we love our lives here too much, like Agrippa, we'll never respond to the gospel. But if we just recognise a black hole in our hearts, even if we don't know what it is or what we want, there's hope. The only thing that can truly satisfy the human heart is the Lord Jesus Christ. We're never going to accept Christ's message if we're too comfortable here. But if

we can just spot this emptiness, a dissatisfaction with the world, there's hope. Then if we call on the Lord Jesus Christ to change us, He will come into our lives and do just that.

May all that hear me this day, be both almost, and altogether such as I am, except the bonds of this sin that still clings to me.

Romans 8:31-39. More than Conquerors

Chapter 8 is a summary of the previous seven chapters. And these verses, vv.31-39 are a summary of chapter 8. Chapter 9 starts a completely different subject, which we're not going to go in to. So the first question to ask is, Why do we need these last 9 verses in chapter 8? Why didn't Paul finish the chapter at v.30. All the information would be there.

And the answer is that the Holy Spirit is being good to us. The Holy Spirit is the real author of Scripture. He inspires every word of It. He inspired Paul to write this extra summary. And that's the Holy Spirit being good to us, because we're all prone to unbelief.

When we get some wonderful news, how do we react? Let's suppose we had a brother who for some reason got separated from the family, and because we hadn't heard from him for a long time, we assume he'd died. And then many, many years later someone comes along and tells us he's alive. What would be the first words out of our lips? "I don't believe it." We're just prone to having that reaction. And we still won't really believe it until we see him fit and alive for ourselves. We've got a similar situation here.

We have been given some wonderful news. Far more wonderful than anything we could think. Our sins have been forgiven by God. We no longer need to be punished for them:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

If we don't think that's good news, just think of all those sins we've committed in the past. Those selfish decisions we've made. Those selfish actions. Things we can't undo. They've happened. We can't do anything about the consequences now, it's too late. Yet:

John 3:17

God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

If we come to Jesus Christ, put our trust in Him for our salvation, personally, stop any kind of trusting in ourselves for anything, then we too can know for sure in our hearts the forgiveness of sins for ourselves. That's good news. And before we think that means that now we've been forgiven for everything, we can sin all we like and still get to heaven, the Lord changes our hearts so we just wouldn't think that way any more.

And no matter how many times we're told this is true, we still find it difficult to believe. So, the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures keeps repeating Himself, and that's for our benefit. In vv.31-35 we've some quick-fire questions, possible objections we might come up with.

[31] What shall we then say to these things?....

What things? Everything in Romans so far, especially chapter 8. There was no hope for us. We, by nature, even now if we just give in to our human nature, cannot please God:

Romans 8:7,8

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

That's the state we're born in. But Christians have the Holy Spirit, to keep them from sin:

Romans 8:9,10

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

Although we suffer in this world, and must go through many trials (because the Lord has ordained them all for our good), the Lord is always with us. The Holy Spirit even prays for us when we don't know what to pray, or what the Lord's will is:

Romans 8:26,27

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

And why does prayer work? (We might say "my prayers don't work," but maybe we're not praying in the will of God). Prayer can only work because God is in control of all things. There's nothing outside of His control. If that wasn't the case, we could argue that God might want to help us, but maybe He couldn't do anything about it. That's not God:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Because of all these things, we can be confident every aspect of our salvation is assured:

Romans 8:30

Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

So, what shall we say to these things? What is there that could possibly still concern us?

....If God be for us, who can be against us?

These are all rhetorical questions. They're not there to try to get information because the writer doesn't know the answer. The answer is meant to be obvious – nobody.

And if God is in control of all things, nothing and nobody can be against us, not even Satan. But what about when things "go wrong"? Earthquakes, famines, illnesses, the loss of loved ones. These things occur, but it doesn't mean God has lost control. Joseph was sold by his brethren. He was imprisoned unjustly for 3 years. But he became a leader in Egypt, and saved Israel and Egypt from famine. He said to his brethren afterwards:

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

God works through all the difficulties, and works all things together for good. And what was the greatest thing the Lord has ever done in the history of the world?

[32] He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

God's own Son was put to death by wicked men. But it was all in God's plan:

Acts 2:23

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain....

Men hated Christ so much, they put Him to death. That was a wicked act, and those who did it will be punished eternally for it, unless they repented. They didn't know it, but without Christ's death on the cross, there would be no salvation for any of His people:

John 3:16

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If the most wicked act to have ever occurred on earth was turned around for good by the Lord, how much more shall He not freely give us all things? Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If He gave us such a precious gift as His only Son, especially for us who don't deserve it, all other things are so much smaller, of course He'll give them to us. The "**all things**" being, not everything we want, but everything we need:

2 Peter 1:3

*According as his divine power hath given unto us **all things that pertain unto life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue....*

[33] Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

Even though we know we've passed from death to life, we do still sin, and our continued sinning can still be a genuine concern to us. And so it ought to be. We read verses like:

1 John 3:6

Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

It's verses like this that can make us wonder sometimes if we're one of the Lord's people at all. I still sin. Yes, we do still sin. But the same writer, John, also said this, earlier:

1 John 1:8,9

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, John can't be saying Christians don't sin any more. What he is saying is that **if we abide in Him**, we won't sin. To the extent we abide in Him, we don't sin, but to the extent we rather follow our old selfish desires, yes, we do certainly sin. But we've an advocate:

1 John 2:1,2

...these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins....

So, because we continue to sin, we might think the Father can still bring charges against us. And Satan, the accuser of the brethren, knows this and tries to take advantage of it. But, **"it is God that justifieth."** Nobody, not even Satan, can lay any more charges against us because we've been freely forgiven by the One who matters, the Lord of Glory.

[34] Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

There are three things here: Christ's death, His resurrection and His intercession.

As we've been reconciled to God by Christ's death, nobody can condemn us any more:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

And the resurrection is proof of this. Without the resurrection, we wouldn't know whether God the Father had accepted Christ's atoning sacrifice or not. We'd still be in the dark. Nobody else has ever risen from the dead before. Christ did raise a few people from the dead in His lifetime to show that He was *"the resurrection and the life."* But they all died again later. Only Christ has been raised in His resurrection body. And that's important:

1 Corinthians 15:17

And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

And not only is He risen again, but He *"is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us."* We've already been told that the Spirit makes intercession for us:

Romans 8:26,27

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

We're told here that Christ also makes intercession for us. And this is also in Hebrews:

Hebrews 7:25

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

We've got the whole Trinity involved in our upkeep. That's remarkable. Why should a holy God, Creator of the universe, Lord of heaven and earth, be bothered with us? Jesus

Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit both know what we need more than we do, and both pray to the Father on our behalf. All we've got to do is to accept the Father's will, rather than seeking our own will all the time. That's the difficult bit.

[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?....

Again, a rhetorical question, the answer is nobody. Christ died for His people. If we were the only one who was going to be saved, He'd still have gone to the cross for us.

1 John 3:1

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

The last bit of that verse is interesting. Because we've received Christ's love, because we've now been changed in our hearts, the world is just not going to understand us. We might find that a problem, but it's such a small problem compared to Christ's love for us:

John 15:18,19

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

And then we've got a list of other possibilities which could separate us from Christ's love:

....shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

And of course the answer is that none of these can separate us from the love of Christ to us. Nothing can. The world won't understand why we put up with these things. They'll try to explain us away using their own ideas. They'll think we've just got some psychological problem, or we've been educated badly or brainwashed. And we've got to put up, not only with the persecutions, but also with these false accusations against us. The apostle Paul was told that he was mad by the Roman governor Festus. But Paul replied gently:

Acts 26:25

But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Often, when people come across something they don't understand, they'll react violently against it. Maybe we'll end up in prison unjustly, like Joseph, Paul, Silas and many others. Maybe we'll be killed, like Stephen, or our Saviour Himself. Whatever anyone does to us, our duty is to glorify God. That's easier said than done when we're stressed. We don't look for persecution, but if the Lord sees fit to send it, He'll also send grace to endure it:

1 Corinthians 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

That's the end of the quick-fire questions. And then we've got a quote from Psalm 44:

[36] As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Psalm 44:22

Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.

It's inevitable that we are going to be treated unfairly. Welcome to the Christian life. It's certainly completely different from the sort of life the prosperity teachers tell us. "God wants you rich, healthy, successful." He might do, if God thinks we can handle it and use it to His glory. But that's not the usual way the Lord deals with His people. We don't look for this, and it's certainly not something we should want, but the Lord often takes His people through the valley of the shadow of death, as the way He wants us to glorify Him.

Isaiah 24:15

Wherefore glorify ye the Lord in the fires, even the name of the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the sea.

Christ told Peter this:

John 21:18,19

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God.

We know we ought to glorify God in our good works:

Matthew 5:16

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

But we should also be prepared to glorify God in our sufferings too:

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

[37] Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

Whatever happens to us, whether pleasant or not, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Still difficult to believe? Christ once said to a father of a child with a dumb spirit:

Mark 9:23,24

If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

In the seven letters to the churches in Asia in the book of Revelation, to every one of them, the promises were given to the individuals within each church who overcome:

Revelation 2:7

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh

That doesn't mean we've got to make an effort ourselves to overcome all obstacles. We can't do that. We can't even forsake one sin, let alone anything else. No, but through Jesus Christ, we are more than conquerors. The only way we can overcome any obstacle, including the biggest one of all, our own sin, we need Jesus Christ. We're losers. Never trust in self, that would be a disaster. Christ alone is the one who can conquer all things.

And then, if that wasn't enough, we've got another list of possible objections:

[38] For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, [39] Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What's the difference between this list and the previous list in v.35? The previous list contained all things that could possibly happen to us in this world: ***"...tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"*** These are either what we call "natural disasters," or things men could do to us. All of which are under God's control. But here, this list goes beyond the things of this world:

"...death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature...." Even ***"death"*** can't separate us from the love of God in Christ. We're not to fear death:

Matthew 10:28

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Not even supernatural beings can separate us from the love of God: ***"angels, nor principalities, nor powers."*** And that includes Satan.

We're not told much about spiritual beings in the Bible, and that's a good thing, otherwise we might start worshipping them or taking an unhealthy interest in them. But we are told about their existence. We're told that angels serve God's people:

Hebrews 1:14

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

And we're told about ***"principalities and powers"*** which are against us:

Ephesians 6:12,13

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

And we're told Christ has already defeated these on the cross:

Colossians 2:15

And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

“nor things present, nor things to come.” If we're worried about anything now or in future, we cannot be separated from Christ. We can't lose our salvation. It's secure forever:

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ....

John 10:27,28

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

And then: **“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature.” “Any other creature.”** That includes our own worst enemy, ourselves.

Have we got it yet? What's missed out in this list? Either in this world or in heavenly places? Nothing. That's the point. Nothing **“shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Do we really believe all that? It's true because the Holy Spirit says it's true in the Scriptures. The only objection I can think of now is that we might say, “Maybe I'm not one of the Lord's people after all.” If that was the case, yes, I agree, none of these promises would apply. These promises are only for Christians. So we need to examine ourselves:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

Philippians 2:12,13

....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

2 Peter 1:10

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall....

Have we been changed in the heart? Do we no longer chase after the things we used to? Do we love God? Do we hate sin? – especially our own continued sinning – do we now

hate it? That wasn't there before, it didn't bother us then. Do we love the Lord Jesus Christ more than anything for what He has done for us? I can't answer these questions, and nobody other than each one of us as individuals can. If the answer's "No," or "I'm not sure," call on Him in prayer. He can make everything clear to us. If we want assurance, He is the only One who can give that to us. And He is willing to save all who come to Him:

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

And if we do know that we are His, then all these promises are ours. Why do we still think they're not? Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 14. Receiving the Weak in the Faith

This chapter is about how Christians should deal with one another. We've got two Christians, one weak in the faith and one strong. Both are true believers. We're not talking about unbelievers here. There's a similar passage in 1 Corinthians 8-10, but that's about meat offered to idols, and mainly refers to our relationship with unbelievers. This here is nothing to do with idols. It's about our dealings with each other in the church.

[1] Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

This is an instruction to every Christian, because there's always going to be somebody weaker in the faith than ourselves. It ought to be obvious we should welcome weak believers into our fellowship. Maybe they've just become a Christian. Of course we should receive and help them. Isaiah prophesied of Christ:

Isaiah 42:3

A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

But then we've immediately got a warning. "**But not to doubtful disputations.**" Why on earth should we want to engage in doubtful disputations with a poor, weak believer? Well, that's what we often do. We Christians have a tendency to look down on weaker brethren. We might not mean to do it, maybe we don't even realise we're doing it, but the tendency is there. I know my Bible a lot better than this weak Christian, so I'll try to teach him something. It's a natural tendency. The motivation is good. But it depends on our attitude. If we start bulldozing our views onto them, the poor weak Christian can be dumbfounded by it all. He simply might not understand, or he might not be ready to understand just yet. And that will alienate him. That's the first point. Then we're given an example:

[2] For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.

The strong Christian believes he can eat all things, but the weak believer believes he should only eat herbs. This weak believer isn't a Jew who's thinking the Jewish dietary laws are still in place for the Christian. Jews were allowed to eat meat, as long as it was ceremonially clean. And it's not about eating meat offered to idols either. That's what 1 Corinthians 8 is about. Idols aren't mentioned at all in this passage.

I once met a man who'd just become a Christian. He'd read Genesis 1:29 and Daniel 1:8-16 and concluded that all Christians should be vegetarians. If that's all we'd read of the Bible, we'd think so too. He obviously hadn't read Genesis 9:3 where God told Noah, after the flood, he was allowed to eat meat. Or Acts 10:11-15 where Peter is told that all animals are clean, as long as we give thanks:

1 Timothy 4:4,5

For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

We're very full of ourselves. We've only become a Christian for a few weeks and we think we know it all. The text tells us that it's the weak believer here that believes in only eating

herbs. Not that there's anything wrong with vegetarianism, but to say you're a vegetarian for religious reasons, is wrong. The Bible teaches no such thing. In an absolute sense, the weak Christian here is wrong, and the strong Christian is right. We can eat all things.

Surely, it's expected that a weaker Christian will be wrong most of the time. The Bible is our ultimate authority. The more we study it, the more we'll know what's right and wrong:

2 Timothy 3:16,17

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

A weak Christian won't know his Bible as much as a strong one, so we expect him to be wrong on many things. But he has been born again. He has come to know the Lord, and has a real living relationship with Him. We need to ask ourselves: What were we like when we first became a Christian? How much of the truth did we know then? We didn't know anything. Before we became a Christian, we had all sorts of crazy ideas. If we're from a church background, we might have some Biblical knowledge, via our unconverted minds. But as we grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we are continually being changed, as the Holy Spirit shows us what the Bible really teaches. The Christian life is a lifelong process of change. None of us will ever arrive at perfect doctrine. In fact:

1 Corinthians 8:2

And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

So, do we think of ourselves as a strong Christian? We're all weak Christians really. It's just that some are less weak than others. Then we've got a very important verse:

[3] Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

I said earlier that a strong Christian has a tendency to look down on weaker Christians. Here he's told not to have that attitude. But the weak Christian has a similar problem. He's got a tendency to judge stronger Christians. The weak Christian doesn't think he's weak. He thinks he's strong. He's only been a Christian for five minutes and he's already looking at the other Christians in church and judging them in his heart. But stronger Christians usually have different views, because they've grown in the faith. Remember, it's probably the weak Christian who's got it wrong. But he doesn't realise that. He might not mean to judge, he might not realise he's doing it, but that's his tendency. It's the tendency we all have in our sinful hearts. We shouldn't despise others and we shouldn't judge others. God has received both strong and weak. They are both believers, despite the differences.

Matthew 7:1

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

[4] Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

So, even though another believer is different from ourselves, either weaker or stronger, we shouldn't judge them. We all stand before God as individuals. We've all still got many wrong ideas, but some have more wrong ideas than others. Then another example:

[5] One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Holy days. Many people think of some days as more holy than others. Now the weekly Sabbath is more holy, because it's in the Ten Commandments. Stronger Christians would tend to observe the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. But other, weaker Christians would think nothing of working or going to the shops on that day. Should we despise them, look down on them? And what about Christmas? I personally don't think we should celebrate Christmas. It's not in the Bible, it's a Roman Catholic Mass day, it is only on December 25th because the pope decided to Christianise the pagan winter solstice festival. And it causes so much pain and trouble, the suicide rate goes up five times greater than normal. It's a terrible festival, and I think it should be banned. But there's a lot of people who wouldn't agree with me. Should I look down on all you weaker Christians believing in all that pagan superstition? Should you judge me for being weird because I don't celebrate it? No. If we're both born-again, we should accept each other as true believers in Christ, despite differences in what we believe. It's whether we know the Lord or not that counts.

We say, yes of course that's right. But some churches separate themselves from every other Christian church, on issues such as this. What do we think of that? I feel sad really. Many in them are truly converted, and it's such a shame we never even meet them.

But what's this, "***Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind***"? I'm fully persuaded I shouldn't celebrate Christmas. You're fully persuaded you should celebrate it. One of us has got to be wrong. You think it's me, I think it's you. Let's just get on with one another. That's the attitude we should have. To our own master, God, we stand or fall. We're not accountable to each other. And He is able to make us to stand.

[6] He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it . He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

So we're called to accept everyone who, as much as we can tell, has been born-again in their hearts. Even though in an absolute sense, many of them may be weak Christians and have plenty of wrong thinking. So, and this is a controversial point, should we ever split a church on matters of doctrine? Because every time we do, we're rejecting some true believers.

But before you think I'm opening the door to anybody and everybody with strange ideas coming into the church, there is one doctrine we must insist on:

John 3:7
Ye must be born again.

We're all being corrected by the Lord as we grow in the faith. But maybe, in some areas, He doesn't want us to be corrected before we die. Some people will never come to my point of view on Christmas, or even on the fact it's all right to eat meat. Some churches believe singing hymns is a sin. They only sing psalms. They'll never agree with us, and we'll probably never agree with them on the issue before we die. None of us will become anywhere near perfect before it's our time to go to be with the Lord.

So, here we're told to accept other believers who differ from us. People who celebrate Christmas are doing it to the Lord, just as much as those who don't. People who eat meat are doing it to the Lord, just as much as those who don't. People who sing hymns are doing it to the Lord, just as much as those who think we shouldn't. And there's a reason:

[7] For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.

Now we've become a Christian, we don't live to ourselves any more:

1 Corinthians 6:19,20

Ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

[8] For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

We live as individuals before the Lord. Not as churches. So we shouldn't think we ought to conform perfectly to our denominational beliefs. That means we might at some point come into conflict with our church's teaching. Choosing a church is like choosing a political party, we can't agree with everything, we just have to go for the one we agree with the most. We're not here to worship a church, we're here to worship our Saviour Jesus Christ. We should join ourselves to a church, but never worship it.

[9] For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

Christ is our Lord, not the church. He came to give us new life in Him:

John 10:10

I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

It's to Christ we live, not men or the organisations of men.

[10] But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. [11] For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. [12] So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

We're all going to have to give account of ourselves as individuals before God. So we shouldn't judge anybody else here in this world. And we shouldn't trust in the church to get us to heaven either. We're going to be standing before the judge of all the earth alone.

So, we should be searching for truth for ourselves. We should be reading our Bibles and growing

2 Peter 3:18

....in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

But we're all so terribly weak. When we get to heaven, we'll see Him as He is. We'll know true doctrine then, for sure. If we're His, our salvation is secure. But an awful lot of us, no, all of us, will be terribly surprised when we get there. It'll be nothing like what we think it's going to be.

[13] Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.

So, we should stop thinking about judging others in any way. But should we ever try to change others? Well, we should all live by what we understand to be the truth at the time. So I continue to not celebrate Christmas, someone else may continue to be a vegetarian, or refuse to sing hymns. And if someone asks us why we do or don't do things, we should be ready to give an answer. But in the end, our lives are the best witness. We must live what we believe. And the Lord will change people when He's ready. Maybe He'll use our witness to change others, or maybe He'll use somebody else's witness to change us.

And we should make sure "***no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.***" How can we do that? What is a "***stumbling-block***" or an "***occasion to fall***"? We don't argue. We just live what we believe according to the light given to us, and leave it to the Holy Spirit to convict others they're wrong, or convict us we're wrong.

[14] I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

To this weak believer, if he thinks something is unclean, it's unclean to him. Even though in an absolute sense, it's not. How can we change him? Do we just say, "You're talking rubbish, listen to me instead"? No, we need to be sensitive to this issue. The weak believer thinks he's right. We know in an absolute sense he isn't. So we don't follow him if he tries persuading us of his ways. We simply have to be gentle in the way we do things.

[15] But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.

When we try persuading our brother, we must make sure we don't grieve him. We don't deliberately eat a bacon sandwich in front of anyone who thinks we should only eat herbs. We can eat bacon sandwiches, but not in a deliberate way directly in front of his face, trying to make him seem foolish. It's not necessary to do that. We must walk charitably.

And then we're told, "**Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.**" Notice this person is a true believer, "**for whom Christ died.**" This passage is not about unbelievers. But does this mean our heavy-handedness in trying to persuade him out of his ideas can "**destroy**" his faith altogether? It can't mean that. Once we're saved we can never be lost:

Romans 8:38,39

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word "**destroy**" here means to destroy his peace. His conscience will be troubled by what we say to him, if we're not speaking charitably. We're going to conclude at the end of this chapter that everybody should live by what their conscience tells them, their conscience being instructed and led by the Holy Spirit. Our job is not to persuade people of anything because we say so, even if we're right. Our job is to persuade them because the Lord says so, and only the Holy Spirit acting on their consciences can do that.

[16] Let not then your good be evil spoken of:

We're persuaded ourselves that the way we think is right, and in this example it is right in an absolute sense, it's "**good.**" But if we don't act charitably with others, if we grieve our fellow-believer in any way, he could turn around and start speaking evil of us. Remember, he's weak, but his conscience tells him he's right. If we come along, in his view, trying to bulldoze our views on him, he's going to reject us, even if actually we're in the right. That will harden his heart against what is actually the truth, and it will, humanly speaking, become more difficult to persuade him of the truth later.

[17] For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

The kingdom of God is spiritual. We can argue all we like as to whether we should eat meat or not, or celebrate Christmas or not, or sing hymns or not, but actually, in the end, none of it matters. We won't have any of this in heaven. It's good to try to do things in a right way while we're here, but in the end none of it matters. It's whether we know the Lord or not that counts. Righteousness, peace, joy. These are gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are the things that should be really important to us, not earthly things.

[18] For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men.

And if we serve God in these things, spiritual things, getting our hearts right with him, rather than arguing all the time about outward observances, then this is what is acceptable before Him. And if we live our lives being acceptable before God, then we'll automatically be the witness we should be towards our fellow men.

When it says "**approved of men,**" it can't mean we'll be popular. God forbid. Christ said:

Luke 6:26

Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets.

The Christian will be hated of all men:

Luke 6:22,23

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

What “**approved of men**” means is that we’ll be the witness God wants us to be.

[19] Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

So, when we meet a Christian different from us, we should be peaceable, and try to edify. It’s right to witness for what we believe to be truth, but we must do it peaceably, or we run the risk of affecting his conscience against the truth we’re trying to teach him.

[20] For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.

Here’s that word “**destroy**” again. If we grow “*in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,*” we can only do so if God works in us. It is the “**work of God.**” We should never get in the way of that. Especially if it’s just “**for meat,**” for things of the world which pass away. It’s easy for us to offend others, hardening them against the truth.

We’re back to the example of whether we should eat meat or not. “**All things indeed are pure.**” That’s the opinion of the strong Christian, and he’s right in an absolute sense, we can eat all things as long as we give thanks. But if our eating things that other, weaker Christians, don’t believe we should eat, in front of them deliberately, it may be right in an absolute sense, but it’s being unnecessarily offensive. And here we’re told, that’s evil.

[21] It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

It’s better not to eat flesh, or drink wine, or do anything else that makes our brother either stumble, be offended or be made weak. Even though, when they’re not around, we can lawfully do these things acceptably before God. Notice this includes drinking wine.

And then we’ve got a really good definition of faith:

[22] Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

Faith is something the individual has before God. The individual's conscience is involved in the way the Lord teaches us the truth. But what about this verse?:

Jude 1:3

*Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for **the faith** which was once delivered unto the saints.*

And this:

Ephesians 4:4,5

*There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, **one faith**, one baptism....*

These verses seem to imply there is only one faith, and if we don't hold it we're heretics. And indeed, throughout church history, those who haven't toed the line behind orthodox creeds such as the Nicene Creed and so on, have been persecuted as heretics. Surely there is only one faith, which we should all hold to. It can't be up to the individual.

Yes, there's only one truth, in an absolute sense. That's the faith we should follow. That's the faith of the Bible. But we're all weak Christians. None of us know the whole truth. We should be heading towards knowing the truth, but we're all so far short. In practice, we all have our own individual faith, which is unique to ourselves. If we knew everything, we'd all have the same faith, the faith "*once delivered unto the saints.*" But we don't.

The church is full of those who think they're strong Christians, persecuting or looking down on those they see weaker than themselves. That's why we need this chapter.

Eating only herbs is not "*the faith.*" We can eat meat, as long as we give thanks. But if someone who eats only herbs, because he's weak, really thinks it's the Christian way, and his conscience doesn't condemn him, that's fine, let him carry on. It's his faith. "**Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.**" We don't come down heavy on him. After all, eating vegetables isn't actually sin. The Holy Spirit will convict him of the truth eventually. We all started far away from the truth when we became Christians.

But in everything we do, we've got to have a clear conscience.

[23] And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

If we're not sure about something, if we doubt as to whether something is right or not, don't do it. Until we, personally, are convinced by Scripture that something is right or not, we shouldn't do it. Because then we're not doing it "**of faith,**" we're doing it for some other reason, like our church teaches it, or to fit in. This is a definition of faith. Something we believe with all our heart and a clear conscience, is what we believe, that's our faith.

For example, some churches believe ladies should cover their heads in public worship. If we're visiting one of those churches and we know this, ladies, wear a hat, even if we don't

believe in it ourselves, just wear it so as not to cause offence. That's what's being taught in this passage. On the other hand it's wrong for a church to force all female members to cover their heads anyway. Because the ladies aren't then all doing it out of conviction, but because the church says so. Maybe secretly some don't really believe in it.

The point is, our consciences should be clear in all that we do. And, yes, as we grow in the faith, we'll change as the Holy Spirit convicts us of more and more truth. And what do we do if we really want to know the truth about anything? Ask the Lord:

James 1:5-8

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

So, to conclude:

Colossians 2:16,17

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

2 Corinthians 11. Glorifying in Our Infirmities

The nearer we get to the end of the New Testament, the more warnings we've got about false teachers. We can't ignore it. These people exist, and we need to be aware of them.

Paul is concerned about whether false teachers have come into the church in Corinth and led them astray. False teachers are very subtle enemies. They can be very clever. They can put on an outward show of godliness, but are really wolves in sheep's clothing.

[1] Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me.

These false teachers were boasting in themselves. I don't know what they were saying, maybe boasting about how many degrees in theology they'd got, what pedigree they had, how many people they'd brought to the Lord last week.... I don't know what they were boasting about, but the idea was to impress their listeners they were worth listening to. And they used worldly boasting to do that. On the other hand, Paul's calling was from the Lord. As soon as he had been converted and baptised by Ananias he began preaching:

Acts 9:20-25

And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.

Paul actually mentions this incident at the end of this chapter, as one of his trials:

[32] In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: [33] And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.

Paul's calling came from the Lord. Our individual calling comes from the Lord. How do you know what my calling is? How do I know what your calling is? But Paul was concerned the Corinthians wouldn't accept his calling, because they accepted these false teachers who impressed them by using worldly means. That's what people do to try to prove their authority. But Christians shouldn't do that. We've got nothing to boast of.

But what Paul was going to do, was use this concept of worldly boasting, to make his point. He was going to boast in rather different things than the false teachers did, and we'll come to that later on. The whole chapter builds up to Paul's boasting at the end. He makes it clear several times beforehand that boasting is folly, and that he's just using the technique to make his point. A Christian should never really boast, except in Christ:

Galatians 6:14

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

[2] For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

This was the real reason why Paul cared so much about the Corinthians. Godly jealousy. This is a mark of a true teacher. False teachers would never have this attitude. They'd just be out for what they can get for themselves. When we speak, we should be jealous of only one thing: to espouse other people to one husband, Jesus Christ. Nothing else.

[3] But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

False teachers work through subtlety. Deceit. We don't know it's happening, that's the terrible nature of it. Just as Eve was deceived by the subtilty of the serpent in the garden of Eden, so we should be very careful not to be taken in. Notice the warning is to our minds. ***“So your minds should be corrupted....”*** That's where it starts. We know that:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ....

So we're told:

1 Peter 1:13

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end....

We've got to make sure our minds are not corrupted ***“from the simplicity that is in Christ.”*** Christianity is simple. It's not complicated. Men are complicated. If a man wants us to follow him, he'll often try to impress us by appearing very complicated. So we end up being impressed by his education, or his insight or he'd say one thing and mean another. That's how men attract followers. But Christianity is simple. We're not like that.

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

So here's another mark of a true teacher, as opposed to a false one. We shouldn't be complicated. We should say what we mean and mean what we say. In other words we should be simple, like Nathanael:

John 1:47

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

Worldly people take simplicity for foolishness, and take advantage of us, so we should be:

Matthew 10:16

....wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

[4] For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him .

Here's a good three-point sermon. Another Jesus, another spirit, another gospel. Preach, receive, accept. Paul is concerned that false teachers are coming in to the church and they're happy to put up with them. But they're preaching another Jesus by another spirit, which leads them to accepting another gospel altogether. They are bearing with this man. He's not being stopped, nobody seems to realise the false teaching, they just accept it.

[5] For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles.

Paul is concerned they'll readily accept false teachers, but they might not accept him as an apostle. After all, he wasn't one of the original apostles. The qualifications for being an apostle are set out in Acts 1 when they were looking for a replacement for Judas:

Acts 1:21,22

Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

Paul didn't have these qualifications. He wasn't with Christ during His lifetime. So, why should people accept him as an apostle? He himself admits his case was slightly unusual:

1 Corinthians 15:8

And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

[6] But though I be rude in speech, yet not in knowledge; but we have been thoroughly made manifest among you in all things.

His apostleship had been made manifest, shown to the world, by God. He had the signs. Only apostles has the signs and wonders:

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

But now, the first mark of false teachers. They're after your money. That's why they do it.

[7] Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely? [8] I robbed other churches, taking wages of them , to do you service. [9] And when I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man: for that which was lacking to me the

brethren which came from Macedonia supplied: and in all things I have kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself.

Paul preached the gospel of God freely to the Corinthians. He made sure he was chargeable to no man. If there was a shortfall, the brethren who came with him from Macedonia supplied it. But that's not "***robbing other churches, taking wages of them,***" it was supply of a shortfall which he hadn't anticipated. He normally paid his way himself.

Paul made sure he preached the gospel free of charge. Now this is very important. One of the best things a church can ever do is stop the tradition of having a collection in the middle of the service. We can tell visitors not to be embarrassed about passing the plate by as much as we want, but however much we say it, it's still embarrassing really.

Jehovah's Witnesses make a big deal about the fact they never hold a collection, as though everyone else did. We've really got to make sure we're not after anyone's money.

But didn't Paul say something about not muzzling an ox as he treads out the corn?

1 Corinthians 9:14

Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

I knew a church where they insist the members tithe and that the pastor gets a salary equivalent to a headmaster's. I've seen on the internet a Christian speaker charging £300 per day. And this is the text they'd probably use to justify their actions. No. This is about giving a man reasonable expenses, not payment for preaching. We should read on:

1 Corinthians 9:15-18

But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.

Paul was a tent maker, that's how he made a living. The preaching of the gospel should be absolutely free of charge. We should never, ever, ever take money for preaching. This is so important in the day of the professional preacher or evangelist. Some of these people make millions, they have mansions and helicopters. But:

Matthew 6:24

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

[10] As the truth of Christ is in me, no man shall stop me of this boasting in the regions of Achaia.

Paul again prepares them for the fact he's going to use a boasting technique in a minute.

[11] Wherefore? because I love you not? God knoweth. [12] But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we.

He has to make sure they realise the reason he's going to do this is because he cares about them so much. He genuinely loves them. Another mark of false teachers is that they don't love you. They're out to get what they can for themselves. They're crooks.

Whatever these teachers glory in, Paul tells the Corinthians to ask the question, Do they really care about their listeners? Do they really love their followers?

[13] For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

These people are false apostles. Paul uses the word "**apostle**" here because he's comparing them with himself, a true apostle. They deceive. They transform themselves from what they really are (a crook) into what they think an apostle of Christ should be like. It's putting on a show. It's all fake. It's certainly not "*simplicity and godly sincerity.*"

[14] And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. [15] Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.

And of course, it's from Satan. That's how he works. He's the great deceiver. He can transform himself into an angel of light. In other words, he appears very reasonable:

Genesis 3:1,4-6

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

And here, we're shown the very real and frightening truth that there are many church leaders who outwardly seem to be "**ministers of righteousness**" but they're actually ministers of Satan. I'm not making this up. This is reality. They're of the devil. We need to be aware this is all around us. We must make sure we can tell the difference.

[16] I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may boast myself a little. [17] That which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. [18] Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also.

Paul is again preparing his readers for the boasting he's just about to do. "These false teachers glory after the flesh, glory in their achievements. So, all right, I'll do the same."

[19] For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise.

They "***suffer fools gladly.***" The Corinthians thought themselves so wise in accepting a false teacher, but they were actually putting up with a fool. The crazy thing is they were doing it gladly. And here's another important mark of false teachers. They're controlling. They not only love money, but they love power, and want to control their followers.

[20] For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face.

It's amazing what power people can have over others. It happens in every area of life. How did Adolf Hitler come to power? The people voted for him. Why do people in abusive relationships always go back to their abuser? This is all around us, and it's in the church too. Leaders with such persuasive powers, getting others to do exactly what they want.

Who would really want to be brought into bondage, be devoured, be stolen from, have someone exalt themselves over you, or be smitten on the face? Nobody in their right mind would put up with such a thing. But it's happening in the church, and people are happy with it. That's how we are. We need to wake up and get out of anything like this.

It's the way they rebuke their followers. We'll put up with all kinds of abuse if we think we need to be punished. Paul's rebukes in his first letter, seem weak in comparison:

[21] I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also.

In his first letter, Paul rebuked them for sin, and it indeed produced godly sorrow which led to repentance. But they now see the way the false teachers rebuke them, by abusing them, and they consequently thought of Paul as weak. So Paul now begins to use this worldly boasting, but he doesn't boast in the same things the false teachers boast in:

[22] Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

So far, so good. Paul's pedigree is beyond reproach. But in Philippians, he calls this dung:

Philippians 3:7,8

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.

He then goes on:

[23] Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more....

This is where his boasting departs from what anyone would expect. He doesn't tell them his qualifications from Bible college, although he could have done. He tells of his trials:

....in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. [24] Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. [25] Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; [26] In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; [27] In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

Instead of boasting in his achievements, or anything else you might expect, Paul gives them a long list of trials and persecutions he's been through since he became a Christian. This is the Christian life, not a life of ease and achievement, but a life of trials and tribulations. But the Lord delivers us from them all:

Psalm 34:19

Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.

[28] Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

On top of these trials, he also had the burden of caring for all the churches he'd been involved with. That's the mark of a true minister, a true apostle. He really cares about his flock. A false teacher will never do that. A false teacher uses and abuses his flock.

[29] Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?

Such trials and care left Paul weak. He's not strong and bold like the false teachers who just want to abuse their flock for their own advantage. But he was like that Himself once.

Back to verse 6 for a second, he was "***rude in speech.***" We know he had a thorn in the flesh, although we're not told what it was exactly. In the previous chapter we get a hint:

2 Corinthians 10:10

For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.

I imagine him to be a little hunchback with a squeaky voice. And it's hinted in Galatians he also had eyesight problems. Before he became a Christian, he compensated for his disability by being loud and aggressive, beating Christians and casting them into prison:

Acts 8:3

As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

He used to be just like these false teachers. But after he became a Christian, he didn't glory in his achievements any more, but in his weaknesses:

2 Corinthians 12:9

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[30] If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.

This is the Christian way. Not like the false teachers, boasting all the time. What have we really got to boast about? We're weak. Anything we have that's useful comes from the Lord anyway. We should glory in our infirmities in the sense that we must recognise how weak we are, that we've got nothing to boast of, and glory only in the Lord.

[31] The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not.

Let's be finished with self. If we let self get the upper hand, we'll either end up like these false teachers, boastful, proud, and arrogant, or we'll be led astray by them.

2 Corinthians 10:17,18

But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.
