

THE BIG JOURNEY

from Creation
to New Creation



twelve ► The Acts of the Apostles



The Appian Way within the ancient city of Minturno, about 80 miles south-east of Rome – Paul may well have walked on this stretch of road on his way to Rome.

The Day of Pentecost

The coming kingdom

During a period of 40 wonderful days following His resurrection, our risen Lord appears to His disciples. He tells them to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. He says, *“you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”* (Acts 1.4-5) and tells them that they will be *“clothed with power from on high”* (Luke 24.49). He explains the Old Testament Scriptures to them (Luke 24.44-47), and tells them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1.3).

His disciples ask Him: *“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1.6). They, like many Jews, were expecting God to redeem and restore Israel as a sovereign nation in order to fulfil His purposes for the world (compare Luke 2.25,38). They were expecting Jewish exiles and many

Gentiles to be drawn to Jerusalem and to share in the blessings of restored Israel (compare Isaiah 2.2-4, Micah 4.1-8, Zechariah 8.20-23). And they wanted to know if Jesus was going to do this *“at this time”* – that is, presumably, when the Holy Spirit came *“not many days from now”*.

Jesus didn't deny their expectations. After all, it was God Himself Who, through His prophets, promised these things centuries before. And hadn't there been recent prophecy about these things, too? Hadn't Zechariah prophesied after John the Baptist's birth that God had *“raised up a horn of salvation”* for His people *“in the house of his servant David”* – that is, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David. Hadn't he prophesied that Jesus would save Israel from her enemies and enable them to serve God in holiness (Luke 1.67-79)? And hadn't the archangel Gabriel told Jesus's mother Mary that God would give David's throne to Jesus (Luke 1.32-33)?

The hoped-for restoration of the kingdom was indeed to begin very soon - when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, God would begin to bring salvation to many in Israel and throughout the whole world. The Kingdom's restoration would be completed at Jesus's second coming.

So the kingdom would indeed be restored to Israel - but, as David Peterson explains, “not in nationalistic or political terms, nor immediately in the full and final sense outlined in biblical prophecy . . .” God would fulfil His promises - but in His timing, and in a worldwide, universal way that they doubtless couldn't yet fully grasp.

Accordingly, Jesus responds to their question about the Kingdom with these words “. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8, and see Matthew 24.14, 28.18-20, Luke 24.47). These words set the scene for the Book of Acts. Through this book we see how God's gospel blessing goes out, like a great wave, from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, and on through the Roman Empire. By the end of the Book of Acts we find Christians in many places across the Roman Empire, even in Rome itself (see Acts 28.14-15).

Foot Note God's kingdom commission

Right at the beginning, mankind lived in God's garden - the Garden of Eden. As Adam and Eve's descendants grew ever more numerous, God intended them to push that garden's boundaries out to the farthest corners of the earth. Gregory Beale comments, “This meant the presence of God which was limited to Eden was to be extended throughout the whole earth.”

God planned that His Kingdom should be extended across the world by mankind. That is still His plan. Because of sin, Adam and Eve and their descendants were unable to fulfil God's plan. But now God is creating a new mankind - His Church. They are fulfilling mankind's original mandate to extend God's Kingdom throughout the Earth. They began on the Day of Pentecost.



View of David's Street in the Old City of Jerusalem - an early photograph (taken around 1920-1933) that gives us an idea of what ancient Jerusalem was like, with its narrow streets.

God's harvest begins

For around ten days after His ascension, Jesus's disciples and many others pray and wait (Acts 1.12-14). There are about 120 in all (Acts 1.15). (There were, of course, other believers elsewhere; in 1 Corinthians 15.6 we read about Jesus appearing to “more than five hundred brothers at one time” before His ascension.)

Then the Day of Pentecost comes. The name ‘Pentecost’ is derived from the Greek *pentēkostos*, meaning ‘fiftieth’. It occurred 50 days after the offering of the firstfruits of the grain harvest, during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23.11,15). It is also called “the Feast of Harvest” (Exodus 23.16). Pentecost was a harvest festival; it celebrated the end of the grain harvest. On this Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus's resurrection, God begins to reap the greatest harvest the world will ever see. The Holy Spirit is the Reaper, and He starts to gather a great harvest of people into God's Kingdom.

Pentecost was the second of the three feasts that all Israelite men had to attend (Deuteronomy 16.16). Jerusalem was heaving with pilgrims from across the nation and beyond (see Acts 2.9-11). To anyone threading their way through the cramped and crowded streets of Jerusalem, it must have seemed as if the whole world had come to town.

Luke tells us what happened on that amazing day: “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2.1-4). Jesus, now exalted and seated at God's right hand, sends the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2.33).

On this Day of Pentecost, God's Kingdom comes with power. Jesus Himself told His disciples “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” (Mark 9.1). Like many prophecies, this may well have more than one fulfilment. But at the forefront must be the Spirit's coming at Pentecost and the subsequent amazing expansion of the church in the apostolic age.

Where was the ‘house’ where this happened? The wording suggests a private house. If so, it may have been the upper room where Jesus's disciples and followers met after His ascension and probably continued to meet until Pentecost (Acts 1.13). Or it may possibly have been the Temple precincts - perhaps one of the areas within the Temple used for study.

But if the 120 were in a house when the Spirit came, it's clear that the scene shifts to a more public arena - doubtless the Temple areas - by the time Peter preaches to the crowd. A “multitude” gathers when they hear the disciples praising God in many languages (Acts 2.6); this crowd eventually numbers thousands when Peter addresses them. Only the Temple precincts afforded a large enough space for such a crowd. And Jewish worship centred on the Temple. On this harvest festival, that's where the crowds would have congregated.



Model of Herod's Temple with the city beyond, facing west. The left-most building in the Temple complex is the 'Royal Porch'. Outside the Temple wall that adjoins this building (and out of view in this photograph) are the wide stairways and terrace giving access to two sets of gates into the Temple through its southern wall. Part of one of these stairways and part of one of these sets of gates are shown in the picture on page 4. In the period after the giving of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles and other believers gathered in the colonnade along the Temple's eastern wall, called Solomon's Colonnade (Acts 5.12 and compare Acts 3.11). This colonnade is along the wall facing you in the foreground.

God fulfils His promises

What happened on that Day of Pentecost fulfils three Old Testament prophecies:

It fulfils God's promise of a New Covenant

Despite their deep-rooted rebellion (see 2 Kings 17.13-23, 2 Kings 23.26-27, John 12.37-40), God doesn't reject His people Israel (see Romans 11.1-5). There are about 120 people waiting for the coming of God's Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 1.15). That number is surely significant. 120 is 12 times 10. 12 is associated with God's people (Israel was divided into 12 tribes and Jesus chose 12 disciples). The number 10 represents totality. These 120 seem to represent all the faithful remnant of God's people.

To this small company, God fulfils what He foretold through the Old Testament prophets. On that Day of Pentecost people begin to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant that Jesus spoke about to His eleven disciples at the Last Supper (Luke 22.20, see Hebrews 8.6-13, 12.24). On that Day, God begins to give people a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36.26, and see also Ezekiel 11.19-20). He comes to live within them by His Spirit (see Ezekiel 36.27, 37.14). Now at last they're able to keep God's covenant (Ezekiel 36.27, 37.24). And soon their numbers will be swelled by thousands of repentant and believing Israelites (Acts 2.37-41, 4.4, 6.7). At the very beginning, the Church is Jewish. God keeps His promise to His chosen people!

It fulfils God's promise to Abraham

As Peter explains to an astonished crowd, God is now pouring out His Holy Spirit *"on all flesh"*; *"everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"* (Acts 2.16-21, quoting Joel 2.28-32)! God is now fulfilling, in a wonderful new way, His promise that in Abraham *"all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12.3, see Galatians 3.14). In Stephen Dempster's words, Israel represented *"a new humanity . . . which is destined to restore creation blessing to the world."* Now that was beginning to happen in earnest!

It's a fulfilment of the Year of Jubilee

The Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25.8-55) was a Sabbath year, when people were released from toiling on their farms for a year. But in this special Jubilee year, too, they proclaimed

"liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants". Jewish bondslaves were set free, and family land that had been sold off was released back to its original owners. People who had lost land or liberty through poverty could return to their homes and families. The slate was wiped clean, and life could begin all over again.

The Jubilee was a kind of reversal of the Fall. It wasn't a complete reversal, of course – that won't come until God's people live with Him in the New Earth and Heaven. But the Jubilee did do something real and wonderful in people's lives. The curse and judgment called down by sin brought bondage, toil and broken relationships (Genesis 3.17-19). In contrast, the Jubilee brought freedom from bondage and toil. And it restored relationships – it enabled people to return to their family and home community.

Jesus's earthly ministry began to fulfil the Year of Jubilee (as we saw in Session 10) in a new and greater way. He released people from the bondage of guilt, from demonic possession, and from disease and infirmity – some of the key consequences of the Fall.

But even Jesus's ministry was just a foretaste; the Day of Pentecost fulfils the Jubilee in an even more wonderful way. God is now baptising people with His Spirit and giving them new, rich and satisfying life (see John 10.10):

- The Jubilee gave people a new start in life. The baptism of the Spirit brings a brand new beginning for people.
- The Jubilee liberated people from bondage. When people are baptised with the Spirit, they're released from the bondage of sin; God gives them new, obedient hearts (Ezekiel 11.19-20, 36.26-27, and Jeremiah 31.33, quoted in Hebrews 8.10 and 10.16).
- The Jubilee liberated people from toil. Now, through His Spirit, God is giving people true rest in their innermost beings (compare Matthew 11.28-30 and Hebrews 4.3, 9-11).
- The Jubilee enabled people to return to their family and home community. When we're born again, we're brought into a new family – God's family. He becomes our Father (John 1.12-13, Romans 8.14-17, Galatians 3.26, 4.4-7, Ephesians 1.5, 1 John 3.1-2, 9); God adopts us into His family. And all other believers become our brothers and sisters in Christ!

And it's interesting, and perhaps significant, that the Day of Pentecost and the Jubilee were both calculated in a similar way. This is perhaps God's way of showing the link between them. The Year of Jubilee was every 50th year - after 7

times 7 years from the previous Jubilee year (Leviticus 25.8); the Day of Pentecost was the 50th day – 7 times 7 days after the Feast of Firstfruits (Leviticus 23.15-16). These are the only places in the Bible where we find this particular timescale.

Foot Note Extending God's Kingdom

On the Day of Pentecost, God opens a new phase in the establishment of His Kingdom on Earth. The blessings of His Kingdom begin to reach out in earnest to all people. Jesus commissions His disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28.19-20). They would be His witnesses *“to the end of the earth”* (Acts 1.8). Today, the gospel is being preached across the entire Earth from Arctic wilderness to tropical forest, from crowded city to remotest mountain village. One day the Church – the community of God's Kingdom – will include members of every nation, tribe and language group (compare Revelation 7.9).

And this will be a foretaste of the glory of the age to come, when (as Habakkuk prophesied) the knowledge of God would cover the Earth as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2.14).



Flight of steps that originally gave access to a pair of gates in the southern wall of Herod's Temple (one of two sets of gates in that wall). Many of the steps are modern replacements, though the rougher ones in the foreground are original. The outline of half of the arch of the right-hand gate can still be traced. You can see it at the intersection of the walls in the centre of the picture (the wall to the left was built later, and conceals most of this pair of gates). These steps and gates would very probably have been one of the routes used by Jesus and His disciples, and then by the early Christians, to enter the Temple.

Echoes of history

The coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost echoes three key Old Testament events:

It's a new creation

God's Spirit comes with *“a sound like a mighty rushing wind”* (Acts 2.2). The wind is one of the Bible pictures of the Holy Spirit (see John 3.8 and compare Ezekiel 37.9-10). In fact, the word for 'Spirit' in Hebrew (*rûach*) can also mean 'wind'; the Greek word for Spirit (*pneuma*) can also mean 'wind' (John 3.8, Hebrews 1.7).

The particular Greek word for wind here in Acts 2.2 is *pnoē*, used only twice in the New Testament and related to *pneuma*. This word is also used in the Septuagint (the old Greek translation that was familiar to the New Testament writers) of Genesis 2.7. There we read that God breathed

into Adam's nostrils *“the breath of life”* – *“breath”* here being the same Greek word *pnoē*. God is creating again. By His Spirit, God is creating a new people for Himself (compare 2 Corinthians 5.17). It's the birthday of His new humanity, the Church.

It's a reversal of Babel

As we saw in Session 5, sometime after the great Flood, people settled in a plain in the land of Shinar and began to build a city with a great tower. They tried to create a united strong society, to gain enduring fame through their own achievements, to achieve a perfect world without God. But one day God would build His city – in His way and by His Spirit. At the end of history as we know it, New Jerusalem will descend from heaven. That city will be the real heaven on Earth, a realm where God's new humanity will live with Him in eternal unity, peace and security.

And now, on this Day of Pentecost, God takes a momentous step towards this goal. Through His Spirit, He begins to build a new humanity, not united in defiance of Him as Babel's builders were, but united under His authority, one in heart and soul (Acts 4.32). He's building, not with bricks or stones, but with people (see Ephesians 2.19-22, 1 Peter 2.4-5). They're filled with His Spirit, indwelt by the living God Himself!

At Babel, God divided humanity into many different language groups. Now God's new humanity embraces people from every language, race and national allegiance (see Revelation 7.9; compare Acts 2.5-11 and also compare Isaiah 2.2-3). The language barrier erected by Divine command at Babel is symbolically broken; everyone hears God's wonderful works in their own language (Acts 2.6-11).

And this new unity is no man-made consensus. It's a unity that God's Spirit creates (see Ephesians 4.3), and that's a very different thing. Human unity is powerful. In fact, that's part of how God made us. He designed mankind to be united – to be a community, a society. The unity of the people of Babel gave them great power – *“nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them”* (Genesis 11.6). But their unity was in rebellion against God. That solidarity would destroy them, and that's why God acted so swiftly and severely. But when people are one in God's Spirit and united under God's Lordship, they have God's unstoppable power. We see that power in action throughout the Book of Acts, as God's people launch a new conquest – not of the Promised Land alone (as in Joshua's day), but of the entire world.

It's a new filling with God's presence

When the Tabernacle was completed *“the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. . . . For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, . . .”* (Exodus 40.34,38). Now God reveals Himself in fire again. He manifests His presence in *“. . . divided tongues as of fire”* on His disciples (Acts 2.3). His Spirit comes to dwell within each one gathered there. God once lived in a Tabernacle, and in the Temple that replaced it. Now He lives in His people (1 Corinthians 3.16-17, 6.19, 2 Corinthians 6.16).

It's a new giving of the Law

The Jews have traditionally associated the Feast of

Pentecost with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai - they calculated that the Law was given on the same day of the year – 6th Sivan. At Sinai, God came down in fire and gave His Law (Exodus 19.18, Deuteronomy 5.22-24, Hebrews

12.18-19). He wrote that Law on tablets of stone. Now, on Mount Zion, tongues like fire rest on each of the 120 disciples (Acts 2.3) and God writes His law on “*tablets of human hearts*” (2 Corinthians 3.3).

Community and conflict

For the next two or three years, the Church grows and consolidates in Jerusalem. And what growth! Around 3,000 respond to Peter’s first sermon (Acts 2.14-41). Many more respond to his sermon after the lame man’s healing (Acts 4.4). Day by day, new believers are added to the fledgling Church (Acts 2.47, 5.14, 6.7).

The believers are a new, dynamic community. They devote themselves “*to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*”; they have “*all things in common*”; they’re “*of one heart and soul*” (Acts 2.42-47, 4.32-35). This is God’s new humanity in action. They aren’t just a group of individuals meeting together once a week. They spend lots of time together, encouraging and supporting each other, expressing in day-to-day reality the unity and mutual love of the body of Christ. Their fellowship sets a basic pattern for local church life.

God’s powerful word

The gospel is a *word*-based gospel. The disciples declare the word of God with astonishing power and fluency (see Acts 2.14-40, 3.12-26, 7.2-53). God’s word spreads, grows and multiplies (Acts 6.7, 12.24, 19.20). God, Who created the heavens and the Earth by His word (Genesis 1.3,6,9 etc., 2 Peter 3.5, Hebrews 11.3) now creates and shapes a new people for Himself through His proclaimed and preached word.

God made us in His image. His word is powerful and creative. Our key power, too, lies in the words we speak. In these opening chapters of the Church’s life, God employs His servants’ tongues to preach His gospel and to build up His Church. He gives His people a rich variety of *speaking* gifts. As we shall see in our next session, no less than eight of the gifts of the Spirit that Paul lists (if we include exhortation) are spoken gifts. Through teaching, prophecy and the other vocal gifts, God’s people glorify Him, edify each other, and proclaim the Gospel to the world.

❖ The Spirit, our Teacher ❖

Peter – an “*un schooled, ordinary*” man (Acts 4.13, NIV) – displays a masterly command of the Old Testament Scriptures in his sermons – as does Stephen, as he defends himself before the Jewish leaders. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach His disciples (John 14.26). Now the Spirit is doing just that. He is lighting up the Scriptures to them in an astonishing new way. And what He did for them, He can do for us, too.

Signs and wonders

The preaching of God’s word is attended by His miraculous power (Acts 2.43, 3.1-10, 5.12,15-16, 6.8, 8.6-7, 9.32-34,36-41, 14.3,8-10, 16.16-18, 19.11-12, and see Acts 4.29-30, 15.12). In F.F. Bruce’s words, “*God was at work among them; they were witnessing the dawn of the new age.*” What Jesus began to do during His ministry on

Earth, he continues to do through His servants. During those 3½ years, He and his disciples vanquished disease, death and demonic oppression. They began to release God’s people and God’s land from the curse. Now His people are continuing His work – and they’re poised to take His blessing into all the world.

❖ Deception’s danger ❖

Just as Achan’s deception nearly called time on Joshua’s conquest right at its inception (Joshua 7.1-26), so Ananias and Sapphira’s deception (Act 5.1-11) threatens this new worldwide conquest right at the beginning. That’s why God dealt so severely with Achan, and now does so with these two deceivers. He is cleansing the Church. It’s a warning to them, and to us.



Street from Roman times along the western wall of the Temple Mount. The buildings on the left were shops, above which was once a staircase and bridge leading to the Temple. Jesus and His disciples, and the early Christians, almost certainly walked along this street. The large stones at centre right are some of those thrown down from the Temple into this street during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, after their capture of the city in AD70; the right side of the street in front shows damage, presumably from similar stones (now removed) thrown down at that time.

From Judaism to Jesus

The Church was born out of Judaism – the Old Testament teachings and practices, overlaid with “*the tradition of the elders*” (Mark 7.3). At this early stage, an umbilical cord still links the infant Church to Judaism. The believers continue to associate with the traditional Jewish community. They meet in the Temple as well as in their homes for fellowship, study and prayer (Acts 2.46, 5.42).

One day that umbilical cord would be cut – though that separation would prove to be long and painful. A new age has begun; the age of the indwelling Spirit, the age of gospel outreach to the ends of the Earth.

The first martyr

Right at the beginning, the fledgling Church finds “*favour with all the people*” (Acts 2.47, and see Acts 5.13,26). But

opposition gradually hardens. The Jewish leaders, who had crucified Jesus, now turn their attention to His disciples (Acts 4.1-22, 5.17-41). The disciples' beating (Acts 5.40) is the first entry in the long and harrowing catalogue of God's New Testament people persecuted down the ages.

Eventually the religious leaders' unyielding resistance to God vents itself in murder. Charges of blasphemy bring Stephen face to face with the Sanhedrin - the Jews' supreme judicial council (Acts 6.8-14). They accuse him of speaking against the Temple and the Law, by declaring that Jesus would destroy the Temple and change the traditions of Moses. What Stephen in fact seems to have been preaching was this: the old order of Temple ritual and Law had found fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Stephen responds to the Sanhedrin's accusations with power and authority. His eloquent review of Old Testament history presses home how Israel has consistently rejected God and His messengers (7.35-43,51-53). He concludes with this key point: God's presence isn't confined to a man-made Temple. The implication here is that God lives, not in

a building, but in His faithful people. They are now God's temple. Now people can be forgiven and have fellowship with God without the sacrificial ritual of the Temple.

But the Jewish leaders don't argue with Stephen about his interpretation of the Scriptures. Their problem is not with the Scriptures. Their problem is their rebellion – their own unbending defiance of God. And when Stephen bravely tells them so (Acts 7.51-53) they explode with fury. Crazed with rage, they summarily drag Stephen off and stone him (Acts 7.54-60), adding another name to the register of those slaughtered in a bid to silence God's voice. They lay their outer garments at the feet of a young Pharisee called Saul.

The first two or three years of the Church's history had been a breathing space. Gamaliel's counsel of moderation helped to hold back the flood of persecution for a while (Acts 5.34-39). During this time God gathered many Jews into His Church. They included a great many priests (Acts 6.7), whose lives were so bound up with the old order of things. But Stephen's bold sermon is like an earthquake, and this precarious state of tolerance collapses.

Highways to humanity

"The blood of the Christians is the seed [of the Church]" - so said Tertullian, an early church leader. After Stephen's death, there's an explosion of persecution against the believers.

But this persecution serves to speed the gospel out to the world. Many flee Jerusalem for Judea and Samaria, carrying the good news with them (Acts 8.1). In fact, the gospel had most probably been trickling out from Jerusalem from the beginning. Those present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost were "*from every nation under heaven*" (Acts 2.5). It's a reasonable assumption that some of these pilgrims were born again on that day, and would have taken the gospel back to their families and communities. And that was probably the pattern for the period up to Stephen's death - pilgrims to Jerusalem at the feasts becoming believers and taking the gospel home with them. Many believers living in Jerusalem and Judea, too, would have had contacts in the Jewish dispersion – another avenue of gospel outreach.

After Stephen's death, Saul becomes the Church's arch-persecutor. Burning with religious zeal, he becomes a fanatic (Acts 26.9-11, Galatians 1.13). He goes from house to house and hauls believers off to prison (Acts 8.3).

To Judea and Samaria

So the gospel goes out to Judea and Samaria. This is the second phase of witness to Jesus and the gospel promised just before Jesus's ascension: "*... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1.8). Philip (not the apostle by that name) goes north to a city in Samaria. He is the Church's first travelling evangelist that we know of. Almost certainly, he's a Greek-speaking Jew and, we assume, familiar with the Greek culture and ideas that dominated the Western world at that time. Such familiarity would have given him and Stephen, and other Greek-speaking Jews, a less prejudiced and more international outlook than their Aramaic-speaking and Hebrew-speaking fellow Jews. Philip is one of those who sees God's worldwide vision, and moves in step with Him.

The Samaritan crowds pay close attention to what Philip says. His message is backed up by miracles; there's great joy in the city. News of all this gets back to Jerusalem, and Peter and John come. God waits till His apostles are in place; then He does for these Samaritans - so despised by the Jews - what He has done in Jerusalem. It's their Day of Pentecost. Peter and John, doubtless inspired by all this, themselves preach in many Samaritan villages on their journey home to Jerusalem.



Image © LKA NRW (CC BY-SA 2.0 DE).

A compelling reconstruction of what Paul may have looked like, created by experts of the Landeskriminalamt of North Rhine-Westphalia using historical sources, proposed by Düsseldorf historian Michael Hesemann.

Foot Note The Apostles – going to the nations

When others flee Jerusalem after Stephen's death, the apostles stay behind. Perhaps they felt it their duty to remain with the persecuted church there. But were all the apostles really needed to shepherd the church in Jerusalem? Jerusalem had been evangelised and a church was now established – indeed the Pharisees had already accused the apostles of filling Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5.28). These men had heard Jesus's 'great commission' with their own ears (Matthew 28.18-20). It was now around 3 years since the Day of Pentecost. Wasn't it now time for them to move out to Judea, Samaria and beyond (see Acts 1.8)? And it's very probably at least 7 years before we find Peter travelling around outside Jerusalem (Acts 9.32-43) and ending up, as we shall see shortly, preaching to the Gentile Cornelius and his relatives and friends.

The apostles appear rather slow to take up Jesus's commission and carry the gospel beyond Jerusalem. Were they being disobedient? I think we can say 'No' to that. It's simply that it took time for them to fully grasp what God was now doing in the world. It was so radically different from what they had known and been taught before – in two ways:

► Before Jesus came, Gentiles needed to be circumcised and become Jewish proselytes in order to be members of God's covenant people. Now they do not – they simply have to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. As we'll see later in this session, the idea that Gentile believers didn't have to become Jewish proselytes met with resistance from some Jews in the Church.

► Before Jesus came, Israel was to have been a light to the nations. As Michael D. Williams tells us, "Rather than send his evangelists and witnesses out to the far-flung corners of the earth, as he does in New Testament times, God set a mission station in the midst of the nations for all to see." As Dr. Williams explains, God "intended Israel to function like a spiritual magnet, attracting other nations to him through its witness to God". Now it was different. The direction of witness had reversed. Now God's people were commissioned to take the gospel out to the remotest regions of the world.

Now the gospel was to go out to everyone, both Jew and Gentile, wherever they lived. To us in the modern Church – predominantly Gentile and with a history of tremendous missionary endeavour stretching back centuries - it seems obvious. To the apostles it was not. It required a seismic shift in their mindset – a completely new way of thinking about how God was extending His Kingdom.

So we can understand why it seems to have taken Peter and the other apostles a while to go with God's plan and take the gospel out to Jew and Gentile alike, wherever they lived. As we shall see, they do eventually begin to move out from Jerusalem. But, sadly, it seems their example isn't followed by the Jerusalem church as a whole.

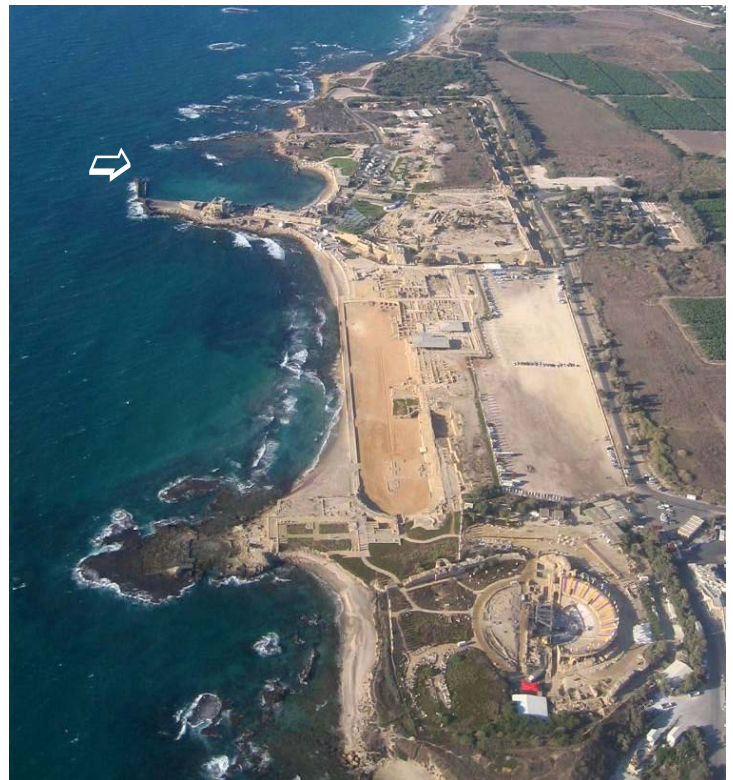
To the ends of the Earth

Then Acts records three very significant conversions - an Ethiopian finance minister, Saul the persecutor, and a Roman centurion. These conversions are told in detail. To understand why they're so significant, we need to go back to Genesis.

Noah's three sons repopulated the world after the great Flood (Genesis 9.18-19). In broad terms, Shem's descendants were the Semitic peoples of Syria and parts of Mesopotamia and Arabia, Ham's offspring settled in northeastern Africa, Canaan and some coastal parts of Arabia near the Red Sea, whilst Japheth's descendants fanned out northwards, westwards and eastwards, colonising parts of Europe, Asia Minor, and Iran. The map on page 7 of Session 5 shows where they all settled.

Each of these three key converts in Acts seems to represent one of these three great Biblical branches of humanity. They are descendants of Ham, Shem and Japheth, respectively, and converted in that order. And notice how each is saved on a road going *out from Jerusalem* to a region where their branch of humanity had settled - symbolising the gospel going out from Jerusalem to the ends of the Earth:

- The Ethiopian finance minister - a man from a region settled by the sons of Ham - is converted on the road to Africa (Acts 8.26-39).
- Saul, a Semitic man, is next. Out to arrest believers, he is himself arrested by Jesus on the Damascus road - a key highway to Syria, a region settled by descendants of Shem (Acts 9.1-19).
- Finally, Cornelius, a Roman centurion of the Italian regiment, represents Europe, a region colonised by the sons of Japheth. He's filled with the Spirit in Caesarea, a major port for travel to Europe (Acts 10.1-11.18).



Aerial view of the ancient port of Caesarea. It's mentioned a number of times in the Acts of the Apostles. Cornelius and those with him were baptised with the Holy Spirit here (Acts 10.24-48). Paul embarked from this harbour when he was sent off to Tarsus (Acts 9.30) and disembarked here at the end of his second journey (Acts 18.22). After his third journey, he stayed in Caesarea en route to Rome at the house of Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21.8-14). It was here in Caesarea that Paul appeared before Felix (Acts 24.1-22), Festus (Acts 25.6-12) and Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25.23-26.32), and spent around two years in custody (Acts 24.23-27). It's likely that his ship departed from Caesarea for Rome to be tried by Caesar (Acts 27.1-2). The position of Caesarea's ancient harbour is marked by the arrow; what can be seen today is a more modern harbour. The older Herodian harbour is concealed under the sea at that point, and it stretched further out to sea than the modern version. However, its outline can still be seen from the air.

Also clearly shown in this photo is the restored Roman theatre to the lower right, and long stadium towards the centre. This theatre (or perhaps the long stadium) may well have been where Herod Agrippa I was struck with a mortal illness (Acts 12.19-23).



'Market in Jaffa' by Gustav Bauernfeind (1848-1904) – a view that captures something of what the town would have looked like in New Testament times. Peter was in Jaffa (called Joppa in the Bible) when God showed him the vision of the sheet containing all sorts of animals, preparing him for the arrival of Cornelius's delegation (Acts 10.9-23).

To the Gentiles

We're given most detail about Cornelius's conversion - it's a key to worldwide outreach.

Peter is staying in Joppa (now called Jaffa), around 35 miles from Jerusalem (Acts 9.43). God prepares him for his encounter with Cornelius. In a vision, God shows him a sheet containing all sorts of animals, including those declared unclean by the Law of Moses (Acts 10.9-16). A voice says *"kill and eat"*. Peter is shocked. *"By no means, Lord,"* he replies; *"for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."* The food laws (Leviticus 11.1-47) were one of the key things that highlighted Israel's separation from the Gentiles. God now shows Peter that He is repealing those laws. Peter should now have no scruples about going to a Gentile home and eating with them.

But the vision didn't just symbolise the cleansing of food - it symbolised the cleansing of the Gentiles themselves. Peter realises that he mustn't call any person unclean (Acts 10.28). In the New Covenant that God has inaugurated, God is cleansing both Jew and Gentile and filling them with His Spirit. In so doing, He is dismantling the barrier between Jew and Gentile. That barrier was the Law of Moses which made it difficult, if not well nigh impossible, for faithful Jews to enjoy table fellowship with Gentiles. God is joining Jew and Gentile together into one body (see Ephesians 2.11-18). As Paul writes, *"through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body,*

and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3.6, NIV).

Then God arranges for Peter to go to Cornelius's house in Caesarea, about 35 miles south of Joppa. Peter's message to Cornelius and those gathered in his house is met with open-hearted welcome. Before he's had time to get to the next point in his sermon, the Holy Spirit falls on his audience. It's the Gentiles' Day of Pentecost. Then Peter stays with Cornelius and eats with him - sealing the fellowship between Jew and Gentile that God's Spirit has inaugurated.

But back in Jerusalem, Peter has to defend himself against some orthodox Jewish believers (Acts 11.1-18). They're shocked that he dared to go into a Gentile home and actually eat with Gentiles. However, after Peter's explanation, they exclaim: *"Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life"* (Acts 11.18). They realise that these Gentile believers don't have to become orthodox, Law-abiding, circumcised Jewish proselytes before they can be part of God's new community. This is a real breakthrough. But that point is still to be fiercely contested, as we shall see. Old traditions die very hard! As I.H. Marshall comments, ". . . it is not clear how far the church at Jerusalem was prepared to follow Peter's lead. We should not take verse 18 [of Acts chapter 11] to imply that the church at Jerusalem forthwith entered zealously into a mission to Gentiles; indeed, it never seems to have done so, . . ."

And another vital point is this. Will these Jewish Christians

also follow this through to its logical conclusion? Will they follow Peter's lead and, as circumcised Jews, be prepared to relax their *own* commitment to the Law of Moses? Will they abandon the Jewish distinction between clean and unclean foods - and clean and unclean people? Will they now eat with their fellow Gentile Christians, and have close social relationships with them? I.H. Marshall tells us, "*this was an earth-shattering idea for Jews, and was not to be accepted without much heart-searching and controversy*". As we'll discover, years later there were still multitudes of Jews in Jerusalem "*all zealous for the law*" (Acts 21.20) – it seems these Jews hadn't made this decisive move to full fellowship with their Gentile brothers and sisters.

Israel never had, in fact, been a purely ethnic community, closed to anyone except purebred Israelites (descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob). Gentiles had always been able to become part of God's covenant people. Right

from the very birth of the nation, immigrants and purchased slaves could be circumcised, become 'one of the family' and eat the Passover (Exodus 12.48-49).

But from the Day of Pentecost onwards, it's different. Jew and Gentile alike can become members of God's new community simply by faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 10.9-13). They don't have to be circumcised; they don't have to keep the Law of Moses. Circumcision, sacrifices, priesthood, laws about leprosy, dietary rules, and observing the Sabbath and the feasts - all these had been God's picture of something real and permanent that He has now brought into being. The truth that these rules and practices pictured still remains, but the rules and practices themselves are now obsolete. Peter's orthodox Jewish critics probably understood very little of all this at this point. It would take Paul and Peter and other New Testament writers to explain it all to them.

Jerusalem to Antioch

Those who flee Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom disperse northwards as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching only to Jews (Acts 11.19). But some of these evangelists are from Cyprus and Cyrene. In F.F. Bruce's words "*... in Antioch some daring spirits among them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, took a momentous step forward*". They preached Jesus as Lord and Saviour to "*Hellenists*", which in this verse means Greek-speaking Gentiles. And "*a great number who believed turned to the Lord*" (Acts 11.21). God opened the door of gospel outreach to the Gentiles at Caesarea. But now the mission to the Gentiles is beginning in earnest. The gospel is beginning to flood out beyond Judea and Samaria in earnest - the final stage of Jesus's plan for gospel outreach (Acts 1.8).

The city prided itself on its tolerance. It seems that even its resident Jews weren't antagonistic to Gentiles in the way they were in Jerusalem. And many Gentiles, disenchanted with polytheism, were attracted to the monotheism and morality of Judaism. Both factors provided fertile ground for the growth of a multicultural church there.

The Antioch church grows apace; this news reaches Jerusalem. The apostles send Barnabas to check out what is going on there (Acts 11.22). Big-hearted Barnabas is full of the Holy Spirit (Barnabas is a nickname meaning 'son of encouragement', Acts 4.36). He's a Cypriot Jew by birth, like some of Antioch's first evangelists. His upbringing outside Judea most likely gives him a broader, more cosmopolitan outlook than many in the Jerusalem church. This, coupled with his generous spirit and natural gift of encouragement, make him just the man for the job. Here in Antioch, Jew and Gentile are able to eat together freely (which included celebrating the Lord's Supper). Barnabas doesn't insist the believers get circumcised and keep the Law. He simply encourages them all to stay resolutely faithful to God (Acts 11.23-24).

This vibrant, multicultural church continues to expand, and Barnabas soon realises he needs help. He doesn't do what to us might seem the obvious thing - to ask the apostles back in Jerusalem to come and help. Instead, he goes to Tarsus to

Foot Note The Jerusalem church bypassed

The church in Jerusalem seems slow to break with the past, slow to move forward with God, reluctant to go with God's vision of worldwide gospel outreach. Church history demonstrates that, if any local church or association of churches persistently fails to go with God, He will bypass them and use another to do His work. And that's what happens here. To quote I.H. Marshall again: "*... the initiative in the Gentile mission passed to Antioch, ... We should not take verse 18 [of Acts chapter 11] to imply that the church at Jerusalem forthwith entered zealously into a mission to Gentiles; indeed, it never seems to have done so, and as a result it lost its importance in course of time.*"

The church at Jerusalem lost its strategic importance in the fulfilment of Jesus's worldwide gospel commission. The final phase of Jesus's great commission - "*to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1.8) is now being spearheaded, not by the church at Jerusalem, but by the church at Antioch.

Antioch

Antioch was over 300 miles north of Jerusalem, and a very different kind of city. This great, sophisticated city was a cosmopolitan commercial and political centre, the third largest city in the Empire, with perhaps around 300,000 inhabitants or more. It was, in Richard Longenecker's words "*a hotbed for various philosophies, cults, and religions*" and had a well-deserved reputation for immorality.



Image © afsx5000 : Flickr.com All rights reserved
A Roman road uncovered at Paul's home town, Tarsus – one of the main streets of the city, and one that existed in Paul's time and that it's reasonable to assume he once walked on.

find Saul (Acts 11.25-26). He knows the church in Antioch will benefit tremendously from Saul's teaching gift.

So for the next year Saul and Barnabas teach and disciple the church at Antioch (around **AD47/48**). Teaching the believers in this new church was crucial. David Peterson points out: "Luke regularly shows the importance of teaching as an essential aspect of evangelism (e.g., 2.14-36; 3.12-26; 13.16-41) and as a vital means of growing a church to maturity and keeping believers faithful to the Lord (e.g., [Acts] 14.21-22; 18.11, 24-28; 19.8-10; 20.17-35)." It's here in Antioch – not in Jerusalem – that believers are first called 'Christians'. And it's from the church here in Antioch, not from the Jerusalem church, that Saul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey.

God's chosen vessel

Paul is the key man of the fledgling Church (his Jewish name was Saul). He was at home in three cultures – Hebrew, Greek and Roman:

- An orthodox Jew, he went to Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel, a famous teacher of the Jewish law (Acts 22.3, compare Acts 5.34). He became a Pharisee (Acts 26.5, Philippians 3.5).
- He was well-versed in Greek culture (he quotes poets in Acts 17.28 and Titus 1.12) and was a master of the common or *koiné* Greek language. One scholar tells us that 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus can be counted among the classics of Greek literature.
- And he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16.37-38, 22.25-29), entitling him to the rights and privileges accorded to citizens by Roman law.

After his encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (around **AD32/33 or AD36**), he immediately preaches powerfully in the synagogues in Damascus (Acts 9.20-22).

Paul then "*went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus*" (Galatians 1.17). We don't know how long he was in Arabia; it may have been as long as two or three years. It was probably a period of seclusion and preparation for his life's work. But it was also an opportunity to preach the gospel there. Paul then returns to Damascus. He avoids assassination by the Jews by escaping from the city through



Wall in Damascus – an early photograph taken around the end of the 19th century and captioned 'Wall over which St. Paul escaped, Damascus . . .'. The walls of the Old City of Damascus have been much rebuilt over the centuries, but the lower masonry of this section may perhaps at least be recycled Roman material. Whether it was over this section of the wall that Paul escaped (2 Corinthians 11.32-33) is conjectural. Note the house built on the wall – it is easy to imagine how Paul could be let down from a window set in the wall.

a window in the city wall (Acts 9.23-25, see 2 Corinthians 11.32-33)! As David Peterson comments, "*The persecutor soon becomes the persecuted!*"

Paul then goes to Jerusalem (Acts 9.26-30, 22.17-21, Galatians 1.18-19). At first the disciples are suspicious and fearful of their former persecutor (perhaps they thought he was a spy). But big-hearted Barnabas takes him under his wing and introduces him to Peter and James. Another plot to kill him sends him packing, back to his home city Tarsus (Acts 9.30). Paul spends the next decade or so evangelising and teaching in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1.21). As He often does with His servants, God uses a long period out of the limelight to prepare Paul for life in His service.

An apostolic rendezvous

Then around **AD47** Barnabas finds Paul and invites him to Antioch, as we've seen. After Paul has been there a year, he and Barnabas visit Jerusalem to take funds to help the Jerusalem church through a time of famine (Acts 11.27-30, 12.25). Galatians 2.1-10 probably refers to the same occasion and, if so, Paul takes the opportunity on this visit to explain his teaching to the church leaders there, and discuss the missionary work with them.

James the Lord's brother (and now a leader of the church in Jerusalem), and Peter and John welcome Paul's understanding of the gospel. But they decide that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles, while they themselves will go to the "*circumcised*" – that is, the Jews. This division of labour doubtless reflects the division of culture between the Jewish and Gentile sectors of the Church. Perhaps this is the wisest decision in the circumstances.

James, Peter and John's sphere of ministry is the Jews. That almost certainly meant not only Jews in Jerusalem and Judea, but those who had settled in other lands, too. F.F. Bruce comments, "*There were Jewish colonies in most of the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean world*". And Jews had settled beyond those regions, too – such as Babylonia. But these apostles don't plan, it seems, to reach out to Gentiles, too. We have to ask whether they had yet really grasped the full implications of Jesus's great commission.

A different gospel

After the meeting with the leaders in Jerusalem, Paul and his team return to Antioch. Not long afterwards, probably, we find Peter in Antioch, too. He may well be there primarily to evangelise Jews in that city, following the plan decided in the meeting in Jerusalem (Galatians 2.9). But, naturally, he associates with his brothers and sisters in Christ there, too. He's with the church there, eating and sharing the Lord's Supper with this cosmopolitan church of Jews and Gentiles.

Then trouble arrives (Galatians 2.11-14). A group of Jewish believers from Jerusalem arrive in Antioch. They're associated with no less than James, seemingly by now the main leader of the Jerusalem church. They're most unhappy at the way Peter and other Jewish believers are sharing meals so freely with Gentile believers. In the face of their disapproval, Peter stops eating with the Gentiles – despite the clear guidance God gave him on this very issue (Acts 10.9-16). Even open-hearted Barnabas is carried along with all this.

Why were they unhappy at seeing Jew and Gentile eating together? Perhaps it was causing scandal among the strict Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Perhaps it was hindering their evangelism among Jews in Jerusalem and Judea. Perhaps – and this seems the most likely reason - it was inciting the wrath of Jewish nationalists who considered Jews who fraternised with Gentiles to be traitors. Whatever the reason – and however reasonable it might have appeared - it was compromising the gospel. At this point, Paul (now, it seems, back in Antioch after his first missionary journey) has to act decisively before it wreaks havoc in the Church. Paul criticises and corrects the apostle Peter in public!

But that's not all. Strict Jewish believers (called 'Judaisers') from the church in Jerusalem come to Antioch (Acts 15.1-2) – these seem to be a different group from the Jews linked to James. These activists say: *"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*

The issue that confronts the Church boils down to this - to be a Christian, do you have to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (see Acts 15.5)? As David Peterson points out, *"It was widely accepted that Gentiles could become proselytes [converts] of Judaism and so share in the blessings promised to Israel."* All converts to Judaism would promise to keep the Law of Moses; males would also be circumcised. These strict Jewish believers thought that converts to Christianity should do the same – that is, they had to become Jewish proselytes as well as Christians. They hadn't grasped the basic principle of the New Covenant - that salvation is God's free gift to everyone who repents and believes in Jesus Christ. Circumcision, dietary rules, Sabbath observation - all these just foreshadowed the reality of the new age that sprang into being when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost.

The consequences of these strict Jewish Christians' theology are appalling. For example, Jewish believers would have to be very careful about going into the homes of uncircumcised Gentile believers (see Acts 10.28) in case they were ritually defiled – largely because of strict Jewish food laws. A meal was a key part of social fellowship. And, what was even worse, Christian communal meals were often celebrations of the Lord's Supper in those early days (see 1 Corinthians 11.20-22,33-34). So it was difficult for Jew and Gentile to enjoy the Lord's Supper together – for scrupulous Jews, perhaps impossible. So you can see how serious this all was.

Judaisers even infiltrate the Galatian churches that have sprung up from Paul's ministry during his first missionary journey. Paul writes the letter to the Galatians (probably around **AD48/49**) against this *"different gospel—which is really no gospel at all"* (Galatians 1.6-7 NIV).

A conference in Jerusalem

In the end, a team led by Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem in around **AD49** to settle this issue and to combat this crippling legalism. There Paul and his team have a summit meeting with the leaders of the Jerusalem church to hammer out a solution (Acts 15.6-29).

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all He had said and lead them into all truth (John 14.26, 16.13). That promised guidance was now their greatest need. After much debate, James sums up and declares that Gentile believers don't have to be circumcised or to keep the Law - *"the truth of the gospel"* (Galatians 2.5,14) wins the

day. But it's agreed that Gentile believers should observe a few basic rules. These all seem to relate primarily to the idolatry that went on in pagan temples – pagan rites and temple meals, and so-called 'sacred' prostitution. If so, James is saying that they mustn't go to temple feasts, with all that this entailed in that pagan world. The leaders write a letter that's delivered to the church in Antioch (Acts 5.30). Paul and his team also report these decisions to other churches on their second missionary journey (Acts 16.4).

But the decision only relates to Gentiles. What should Jewish believers do? Should they continue to observe the food laws and practise circumcision? The conference didn't address that. For years afterwards, in Jerusalem itself and doubtless other places, there were many Jewish believers *"zealous for the law"* – who continued to observe the Law of Moses rigorously (see Acts 21.18-21).

Why were they zealous for the Law? Was it to avoid offending their unconverted Jewish compatriots for the gospel's sake - after all, they lived in Jerusalem at the very heart of Judaism? Paul himself set something of an example in this respect (1 Corinthians 9.19-23, see 1 Corinthians 10.32-11.1). Was it to avoid offending the stricter Jewish believers? Or was it to avoid inflaming the wrath of Jewish nationalists who considered Jews who fraternised with Gentiles to be traitors?

We can be fairly sure that their zeal for the Law wasn't primarily for any of the above reasons. It was simply that they were unwilling or unable to abandon the old ways and enter into the liberty of the gospel. They would have disapproved of Jews who, like Paul, abandoned their traditions when it was appropriate to do so. And perhaps another factor was fuelling their zeal for Judaistic culture – the rising tide of Jewish religious nationalism in Judea at that time.

There were many who hung on to a Jewish form of Christianity. In practice, this will have hampered – if not prevented altogether - open fellowship with Gentile believers. And it seems the Jerusalem church never really joined in the gospel outreach to the nations in obedience to the Lord's great commission (Matthew 28.19-20). But blinkered legalism wasn't just the speciality of the first-century church in Jerusalem. It still troubles the Church today.

In the end, the church in Jerusalem is dispersed. The First Jewish-Roman War in AD 66-73 climaxed in the siege and



'The Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem' by Francesco Hayez (1791-1881). (Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Venice). The enormous altar of burnt offering is in the centre; also notice the candlestick (or 'menorah') to its lower left.

destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans in **AD70**. Tens of thousands in the city died. Jesus Himself predicted this time of unspeakable tribulation (Matthew 24.21). But, according to the historian Eusebius, the Christians in Jerusalem managed to escape to Pella in Transjordan.

Jerusalem was now in ruins. The Temple and its sacrificial system was no more. The umbilical cord that had joined Christianity to Judaism had now been severed completely.

Photograph opposite: Relief panel on the Arch of Titus in Rome. The arch was built by the Roman emperor Domitian (who ruled AD 81-96) to commemorate the victories of his brother Titus, including the capture of Jerusalem in AD 70. Titus was himself emperor from AD 79-81. This panel depicts the booty taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. You can see three items - the seven-branched candlestick (menorah); the table of showbread immediately to its right, and two trumpets further to the right.



Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org

God's missionary theologian

We now go back to around **AD48** - a couple of years or so before the big summit meeting in Jerusalem described above. The church in Antioch is established and thriving. What is God's next step? Leaders in the church pray and fast; they're open to the Spirit's leading, and willing to obey Him.

At this cosmopolitan prayer meeting (Acts 13.1) God speaks. They're to open a new front in the gospel conquest of the world. Paul and Barnabas are to spearhead it. Jesus said, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, . . ."* (Matthew 28.19). Now the final and greatest advance of the gospel begins - an advance that continues to this day. Within 30 years, churches are established through the Eastern Roman empire as far as Rome itself.

So, from Antioch, Paul's three great missionary journeys are launched. Note how the hub of gospel outreach has shifted from Jerusalem, full of orthodox Jewish believers still upholding the traditions of Moses, to Antioch. Here in this cosmopolitan city, the church is free of legalism and ready to move at the Spirit's bidding to take the gospel out to Jew and Gentile alike.

Into Galatia



Paul's first missionary journey

Paul's first missionary journey (around **AD48**) takes him through Cyprus, then on through the region of Pamphylia to the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia. Both Pamphylia and Galatia lie in what is now Turkey. Acts 13.1-14.27 tells the story. Among the cities he visits are Antioch in Pisidia (not the Antioch where Paul's home church is),

Iconium, Lystra and Derbe - churches are planted in all these cities. Paul's first sermon in the synagogue at Antioch is recorded for us.

Paul and Barnabas's ministries complement each other perfectly - Paul the preacher and teacher; Barnabas the big-hearted encourager. The 'lone pioneer' may sometimes be necessary, but it's not God's norm for Christian work. Paul always seems to have had a team with him as he travelled.

Onwards into Europe



Paul's second missionary journey

After a period back in Antioch, Paul sets out on his second journey (around **AD49-52**) - this is after the big summit meeting in Jerusalem.

But this second journey is launched with a blazing row! Paul and Barnabas can't agree whether to take John Mark (Acts 15.37-39). Paul refuses to take Mark, because he deserted him on his first missionary journey (Acts 13.13), and might prove unreliable again. But Barnabas the encourager (who was such a support to Paul himself in years past) has more confidence that John Mark, whom he's related to (Colossians 4.10), will prove a worthy companion.

Unable to resolve their difference, they separate - Paul taking Silas with him, and Barnabas taking John Mark, and going to Cyprus (Acts 15.39-40). John Mark clearly flourishes under Barnabas's fatherly care - years later, Paul writes to Timothy, *"Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry"* (2 Timothy 4.11). In 1

Peter 5.13, Peter refers to a Mark, who is presumably John Mark, and calls him “*my son*”. It’s probable that this is because Mark was associated with Peter in Rome at the time Peter wrote his first letter. And now two missions are sent out, not one! God is always in charge; He sorts things out, and uses these difficulties for His purposes.



Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org

The Cilician Gates or Gülek Pass - a mountain pass, the southern end of which is about 27 miles north of Tarsus, Paul's home town. We can assume that Paul passed through this area at the start of his second and third missionary journeys.

Paul travels through Syria and Cilicia, and on to the cities of Derbe, Lystra, through Phrygia and Galatia and on to Troas, and over the Aegean Sea to Europe – visiting such cities as Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. This is Paul’s first trip to Europe - he’s led there by a vision from God. It’s a momentous step forward. Paul returns to Antioch via



Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org

Part of a pavement laid around AD 50, found near the theatre in Corinth. It mentions 'Erastus' who was the 'aedile' of the city of Corinth. An 'aedile' was in charge of the financial matters of the city. In Romans 16.23, Paul says “Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.” Paul wrote Romans when he was in Corinth around AD 57. It is probable that the 'Erastus' mentioned in Romans is the very same person named in this inscription. John McRay has transcribed the inscription as 'ERASTVS PRO AEDILIT[AT]E S P STRAVIT' (in full 'Erastus pro aedilitate sua pecunia stravit') which, translated, is 'Erastus in return for his aedileship laid [the pavement] at his own expense'.

Ephesus and Jerusalem. He writes **1 and 2 Thessalonians** on this second journey, probably when he is at Corinth. Acts 15.36-18.22 documents this missionary journey.

The key city on this trip is **Corinth** - a wealthy and worldly trading crossroads, and infamous for immorality even in that dissolute world. But its mobile population gives it high strategic value for the spread of the gospel. Here Paul stays for 18 months (Acts 18.11), teaching the word of God.

Timothy joins Paul’s team on this trip. Timothy – a younger man, probably in his thirties - becomes not merely Paul’s co-worker, but his “*beloved child*” (2 Timothy 1.2). Luke also accompanies Paul for parts of his second and third missionary journeys and on his voyage to Rome, too; Luke’s use of “*we*” (in the passages Acts 16.10-17, 20.5-21.18, 27.1-28.16) indicates when he is with Paul. Paul values Luke not only for his companionship and partnership in the gospel ministry, but undoubtedly for his medical skills, too.



'Idealized View of the Acropolis and the Areopagus in Athens' painted by Leo von Klenze (1784-1864) and held by the Neue Pinakothek, Munich. This is an idealised view of the Acropolis in Athens as the artist (a German neoclassicist architect, painter and draughtsman) envisaged it in the city's 'golden age' in the 5th century BC. The building to the right on the summit is the Parthenon. To the left and in the background is the Athena Promachos, a colossal bronze statue of Athena. In the foreground is the Areopagus, where Paul preached to the men of Athens (Acts 17.18-33). This painting is not entirely accurate historically, but it certainly conveys the kind of architectural grandeur (and paganism) that Paul would have encountered when he visited that city.

Paul's third journey



Paul's third missionary journey

Paul's third journey (Acts 18.23-21.17), around **AD 53-57**, takes him through Galatia and Phrygia and then to Ephesus. **Ephesus** is the key city on this mission – it was a large strategic trade and commercial centre. It was the main city of the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey). Paul stays here for over two years. He then travels to Macedonia and Greece before returning (via Macedonia and the cities of Troas and Miletus) to Caesarea and Jerusalem. Paul writes **1 and 2 Corinthians** and **Romans** during this tour.



The Roman theatre at Ephesus – the place where the crowd assembled during the uproar instigated by Demetrius the silversmith during Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 19.23-41). The original theatre is believed to have been constructed around the beginning of the third century BC. It was improved in the reign of Emperor Claudius (41 to 54 AD), Nero (54-68 AD) and Trajan (98-117 AD), as well as later years. Paul was in Ephesus around 52-54 AD, and so would most probably have seen the theatre as improved by Claudius.

To Rome

And so Paul arrives in Jerusalem. As F.F. Bruce comments, "Paul foresaw that this visit to Jerusalem would be fraught with hazards". He had told the elders at Ephesus: "*the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me*" (Acts 20.23). These prophecies are echoed by Agabus in Caesarea shortly before Paul enters Jerusalem (Acts 21.10-11).

But Paul faces the future with resolute courage. He comes to Jerusalem and meets with the leadership of the Jerusalem church (Acts 21.18-25). They glorify God at the news of what He has done among the Gentiles. But then they tell Paul about the Jewish believers "*zealous for the law*", who think

that Paul has been teaching Jewish Christians in Gentile areas "*to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs*" (Acts 21.21). That is a distortion of the truth. There's no evidence that Paul was explicitly telling Jewish believers to forsake Jewish law or customs. It's simply that he felt they didn't *have* to continue observing them – they could if they wished, but these laws and customs were no longer obligatory. They were free to decide for themselves what to do – and no-one was to impose their practices on others (compare Romans 14.1-15.7). Paul himself did what he felt was best for the gospel's sake, so he didn't hinder people from receiving salvation. He felt free to live as a God-fearing Gentile among the Gentiles, but when he was with observant Jews, he submitted himself to their cultural practices as he felt appropriate (1 Corinthians 9.20-21).



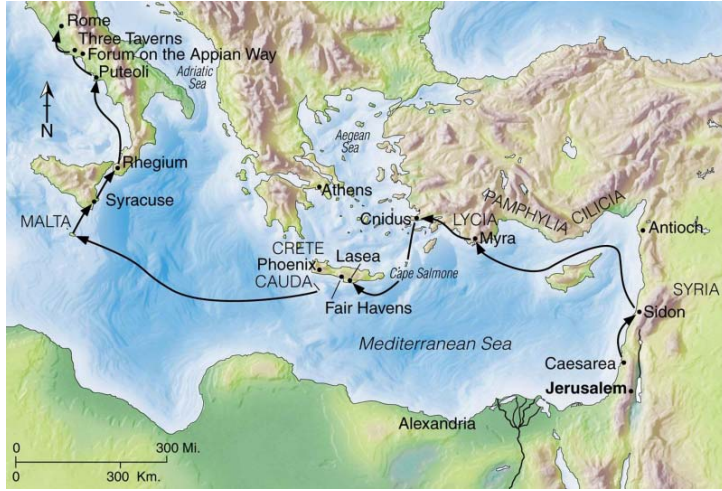
The Gate of Mazaeus and Mithridates in ancient Ephesus, built by two freedmen called Mazaeus and Mithridates during the early first century. We can therefore assume that it was complete when Paul stayed in the city during his third missionary journey (Acts 19.1-20.1). It was reconstructed in the 20th century.

We do, however, get the impression that Paul felt that non-observance was, in the end, the better option. As David Peterson points out, ". . . Paul's arguments about 'strong' believers welcoming and supporting 'weak' believers with scruples about matters of food and drink and ritual conveyed the impression that his position as a liberated [i.e. non-observant] Jew was ultimately the most desirable . . ." But this is a very different thing from teaching Jewish believers "*to forsake Moses*".

To scotch the rumours, the elders suggest that Paul undertakes a Jewish purification rite and helps four other Jewish Christians discharge their vows (probably Nazirite vows - see Numbers 6.1-21) by paying their expenses. That will demonstrate that Paul observes the Law of Moses. Paul falls in with their plan (Acts 21.26). But while Paul is in the Temple (very possibly in connection with these rites), he is spotted by Jews from Asia. They accuse him of betraying Judaism and defiling the Temple by bringing a Gentile into its inner court. A riot ensues; the mob try to lynch Paul, who is rescued by Roman soldiers. Acts 21.27-22.29 tells the story.

Paul is brought before the Jewish leaders (Acts 22.30-23.10). Some Jews hatch a plot to kill him. So he's taken to Felix, the Roman governor, in Caesarea - accompanied by a considerable armed escort (Acts 23.12-35). Paul defends himself before Felix and (after two years' custody in Caesarea, in around **AD57-59**) before Felix's successor

Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II (Acts 24.1-26.32). Before Festus, Paul appeals to be judged by Caesar himself. So he travels under Roman protection to Rome, where he longs to go anyway (Romans 1.13, 15.22-24); he's shipwrecked on the way (Acts 27.1-28.16). Two years' house arrest in Rome follow in around **AD 60-62** (Acts 28.16-31), during which he probably writes **Colossians**, **Philemon**, **Ephesians**, and **Philippians**.



Paul's journey to Rome

Jerusalem to Babylon

And so the Book of Acts, which began in Jerusalem, ends in Rome – the capital of the greatest empire of its time. Peter refers to Rome as Babylon (1 Peter 5.13). That's surely significant. We first meet Babylon way back in Genesis. Sometime after the Flood, people began to build a city and a tower. Here – inspired by Satan - proud mankind tried to create a human civilisation in revolt against God. The city became known as Babel (the same Hebrew word is also translated Babylon). And right at the end of the Bible, we see Babylon as a gaudy prostitute reigning over the kings of the earth (Revelation 17.18).

As we saw in Session 5, history is a tale of two cities – fallen mankind's city and God's city. Babylon is the Bible codename for the world system – a godless society in rebellion against God, and ruled by Satan (see John 12.31, 14.30, 16.11). But God has *His* city, *“the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God”* (Hebrews 11.10) and which John sees as *“the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”* (Revelation 21.2). New Jerusalem is God's world, a world where He rules with His people, the Church.

Rome was the Babylon of its age, capital of a pagan empire – in Alan Stibbs' words, *“the world-centre of organized godlessness”*. But within three decades of the Day of Pentecost there was a Christian community there - a community to whom Paul wrote his magnificent letter to the **Romans** (in around **AD 57**). God's city had a bridgehead in Babylon!

Only a few generations later, Christians had infiltrated the entire empire. Tertullian (whose works can be dated to around AD 196-212) addressed a defence of Christianity to *“the governors of the Roman Empire”*. In it, he declared, *“... we have filled all that is yours, cities, islands, fortified towns, country towns, centres of meeting, even camps, tribes, classes of public attendants, the palace, the senate,*

the forum; we have left you only your temples.” God's Kingdom is advancing powerfully across the world. One day Babylon will fall, never to rise again (see Revelation 18.1-24).

Paul's last years

Paul is then freed and may have travelled to various places, including Crete, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia Minor, and very possibly Spain (where he wanted to go - see Romans 15.24,28). During this time of freedom Paul probably writes **1 Timothy** and **Titus**. Another period of imprisonment in Rome ensues (during which he writes **2 Timothy**). His confinement ends in his trial and his release by execution (in around **AD65-67**) into the presence of the One he has served so faithfully and tirelessly.

Foot Note The Apostles – going to the nations

Early accounts and legend tell us that many of the apostles themselves did eventually go out to fulfil their Lord's great commission. As we have seen, Peter was in Antioch at least by around **AD48** or **49**. He ultimately settled in Rome. Philip is said to have been martyred at Hierapolis in what is now western Turkey. John's last years were spent in Ephesus. Tradition links Thomas with Parthia (in north-eastern Iran) and with India.

Turning the world upside down

The early Church grew at astonishing speed. Just two decades after Jesus's crucifixion, people were saying the Christians had *“turned the world upside down”* (Acts 17.6). How had they done that? Firstly and fundamentally, through the unstoppable power of God's Holy Spirit. Secondly, God's timing was perfect for His gospel's advance. Political unity and lasting peace (the *Pax Romana*) coupled with easy travel by road and sea, and a common language (*koiné* Greek) gave wings to the gospel.

And, thirdly, God's key man, Paul, was a master strategist:

► **He targeted large and influential cities** along the great trade routes of the Roman Empire - such as Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Corinth. The churches in those cities could then take the gospel to the surrounding areas (see Acts 19.10, 1 Thessalonians 1.7-8).

► **Once in a city, he typically targeted the synagogues** (Acts 13.5,14, 14.1, 17.1-2,10,17, 18.4,19, 19.8). As Wayne Meeks points out: *“there was a substantial Jewish population in virtually every town of any size in the lands bordering the Mediterranean”*. James could say: *“For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, . . .”* (Acts 15.21). But it wasn't only Jews who met in the synagogues. Jewish morality and monotheism appealed to many Gentiles, disenchanted with pagan polytheism. Some underwent circumcision and baptism and undertook to obey the Law of Moses. Others, though not circumcised, worshipped God and frequented the synagogues (see Acts 10.2, 13.16, 16.14, 18.7). It was these Gentiles, in fact, who proved by and large more ready to receive the gospel than the Jews. Many Jews caused Paul great trouble (see, for example, Acts 13.45,50, 14.2,19 and compare 1 Thessalonians 2.14-16), though some did believe (see, for example, Acts 17.11-12). So the Jewish synagogues played a key role in the expansion of the Church.

Foot Note Led by the Spirit

God used Paul's unique gifts, temperament and background - as He will ours too. After all, He Himself gave us our gifts and personality; He rules over our experiences and circumstances. But above all, Paul's intellectual brilliance and tireless energy were governed by the vision and day-by-day leading of the Holy Spirit. Only then could his gifts and personality be deployed effectively in God's service. And only as we follow the Holy Spirit's leading will we, too, serve our Lord effectively.

Life in God's service

Paul's missionary career was anything but glamorous. Read 2 Corinthians 1.8-9, 6.4-10 and 11.23-28 for a candid account of his life on the move in God's service! And Paul's earthly reward for his labours was imprisonment and execution. Jesus Himself prepared His disciples for

hardships in His service (Matthew 10.16-23, John 16.2). He told Paul at the very beginning what faced him (Acts 9.16).

In addition to physical privations and persecution, Paul faced Satan's hindering efforts (1 Thessalonians 2.17-18). Our enemy is fighting a fierce rearguard action. Paul and his team were at war, and so are we. We're called up for military service in God's army. At the end of his life, Paul could write: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race"* (2 Timothy 4.7). How wonderful if we, too, could say that!

► Next Session God's New Humanity

On the Day of Pentecost God began to build a temple, not of stone, but of people filled with His Spirit - His new humanity. It was His Cross and resurrection that made this possible. We'll explore what He really accomplished when He died and rose again - and what really happens to us when God saves us and makes us part of His new humanity.



A street in Pompeii frozen in time in AD79 by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. This remarkable view recaptures a first-century street scene of the kind that Paul and the first Christians would have been familiar with. It's very possible there were Christians in Pompeii. Who knows whether some might have met together near this scene?

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