

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
1 – Saul the Persecutor

In this new series of "Discovery" talks I invite you to join me in looking at the life and work of Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as the Apostle Paul. He was a man who had more to do with the establishment of the early Christian church than any other individual servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. His tireless evangelistic activity; his understanding and insights into the Scriptures; his preaching and extensive writings, all had a unique and immeasurable influence on the development of Christianity.

In considering his personal profile, we discover from the New Testament record that he was born of Jewish parents in Tarsus in south east Asia Minor - present day Turkey. He inherited from birth the privilege of Roman citizenship and he grew up to speak, read and write Greek and Hebrew fluently. The Greek influence in his education gave him the ability to think clearly and systematically, while the Hebrew influence helped to create in him a character of moral uprightness.

Paul himself tells us in Acts chapter 22 that he was brought up in Jerusalem, and as a young man studied at the university there. His main tutor was a highly respected scholar named Gamaliel, who taught him according to the laws and traditions handed down from the fathers of Israel. All this fitted him to become the great orator and writer for which he is still renowned today. He was, like many others, taught a trade. In Paul's case the trade was tent-making, which later provided a living for him as he moved from place to place serving Christ. In all this early part of Paul's life we can see the hand of God preparing him for the work that He had for him in the future.

Like his father before him, Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee who lived according to the strict rules of that sect, and this greatly influenced his subsequent attitude and actions. It was his Jewish religious zeal that stirred up hatred in him for the growing number of Christians in Jerusalem in the very early days of the church. With the approval of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, he persecuted and had imprisoned those who openly owned the name of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. We read about this in Acts chapter 8.

Why was it that Saul so hated these Christians? It was because he considered them to be guilty of blasphemy in believing and accepting a Messiah who had died on a cross under the curse of God. These new born Christians believed, however, that Jesus had died not because He was a lawbreaker, but because He willingly bore the curse on behalf of those who are, that is all of us, for we have all broken God's moral law and stand in need of God's forgiveness.

In Acts chapter 7 we read the story of Stephen, recognised as the first Christian martyr. Stephen, according to the description of him in Acts chapter 6, was "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit; full of God's grace and power", who did "great wonders and miraculous signs among the people". He was brilliant in debating with the Jewish opponents of Christianity who could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke. As a result of this Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy and forcibly brought before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Acts chapter 7 is the record of Stephen's great speech to the Jewish leaders, including the high priest.

Stephen saw that Christianity was not simply a remodelling of the Jewish faith, but that through the teaching and life of Jesus, and through his death and resurrection, everything had changed. The Jewish laws, their ceremonies, temple and priesthood had fulfilled their purpose in pointing the way to Christ, "the Righteous One" whom they had put to death. When the Jewish leaders heard this they were furious, and so much so that the Bible records "they gnashed their teeth at him." Such was their fury that they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. Right up to the moment of his death Stephen

demonstrated the power of Christ in his life. We read in Acts chapter 7 verse 59, "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out," Lord do not hold this sin against them."

Verse 58 tells us that those who participated in the stoning "laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." Many Bible scholars believe that Saul was considerably affected by what he heard and witnessed that day, and it left a lasting impression upon him.

Christian, never underestimate the effect that your witness as a follower of Christ can have on those around you!

The mind of Saul of Tarsus towards the early believers is seen clearly in his own testimony before a Roman official as recorded in Acts chapter 26 verse 9 to 11:

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

We see from later comments by Saul, now Paul, that he was often full of remorse for what he had done, and on one occasion he described himself as "the chief of sinners" - one for whom Christ had died even though at first he had not believed.

That an amazing transformation took place in the life of Saul of Tarsus is very evident when eventually he became Paul the Apostle of Christ. That conversion will be the subject of my next talk as we discover how Saul the persecutor and unbeliever became a Christian himself and claimed Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. And what Christ did in the life of Saul of Tarsus, He can do in your life if you are presently not a believer, even one opposed to Christ as he was.

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2 – Saul's Encounter With Christ

We take up the story of Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul, in the ninth chapter of the Book of the Acts. Saul had finished his brutal work against the Christian believers in Jerusalem and now he was on his way to Damascus in Syria to carry out the same task of persecution and imprisonment. What he failed to realise was that his every evil action was being followed in heaven by his hated enemy, Jesus Christ. He believed that Jesus who had died upon a cross had received his rightful punishment and was dead and finished. However, as he made his journey towards Damascus, something happened that changed Saul as a man and changed the whole direction of his life.

The Bible account in Acts chapter 9 tells us that suddenly he was blinded by a light from heaven that was brighter than the noonday sun. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" Probably somewhat confused, Saul replied with the first of two questions. He asked, "Who are you Lord?" The answer was immediate: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." *How this must have shaken Saul* for he was convinced that Jesus was dead, never to speak again. In Saul's thinking, since the leader of these Christians was dead all that was now necessary was for him to destroy his many followers and that would be an end to it. One commentator says about this, "Now with crushing force, Saul learns that Jesus is not dead at all, but that He has been raised from the dead and has been glorified at the right hand of God in heaven." It was this revelation, and hearing the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, that dramatically changed the direction of Saul's life.

Saul also discovered something else of deep importance that day. It was, that while he had been persecuting the followers of Jesus, he had actually been persecuting the Lord Himself. Pain inflicted on the members of Christ's body on earth - his church - was felt intensely by the head of the body in heaven. If you are going through a time of persecution or trial because you are a follower of the Lord Jesus, then remember this, He knows the way you take and is with you in your suffering.

Later on, in Acts chapter 22, we discover some more detail of what happened that day on the road to Damascus. In that chapter we have Saul's account of his conversion, given to the crowd in Jerusalem. Verse 10 tells us that as he lay on the ground, he asked a second question of Jesus, who had spoken to him from heaven. It was: "What shall I do, Lord?" Notice that on each occasion that Saul addressed Jesus, he called him 'Lord.' There was something in that voice that caused Saul to begin to respect the One whom, up to then, he had so despised. The Lord's answer comes, "Get up, and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do." And so his companions then led him by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded him.

Now a second fine Christian comes into Saul's life experience. First there was Stephen whose death for the cause of Christ had so affected him, and now there is a man in Damascus called Ananias. We pick up the story again in Acts chapter 9 verse 10. This man was directed to go to Saul by the Lord in a vision. He was told which house to go to and that he would find Saul praying. Understandably, at first, Ananias was reluctant to do this, knowing the terrible reputation that this Saul of Tarsus had for persecuting Christian believers. But the Lord said to him, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Now we see God's purposes in the life of Saul of Tarsus being revealed. "Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord - Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up

and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength." Saul, the proud Pharisee and bigot had been saved and converted. He had been transformed into a dedicated believer and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ who had met and challenged him on the road to Damascus.

This faithful disciple, Ananias, teaches us a number of lessons as Christian believers. He is described in the book of Acts as "a good man, full of faith and the Holy Spirit." I have always been impressed by the way he responded when the Lord called him in that vision to go to Saul. In spite of his natural reservations concerning Saul, he went as the Lord had directed him, when the Lord explained his purposes for Saul. It is obvious that this quiet, little known disciple was ready to respond directly when the Lord spoke to him, just as many other of God's great servants responded to the voice of God as he spoke to them in bygone days. God speaks to his people today through the challenge of his written word, the Bible. How do we respond when He speaks to us? Do we hesitate? Do we put aside what He says to us? Or do we say "Lord, I will do what you ask of me"?

As I come towards the end of this second talk on the life and work of the Apostle Paul, let us note his very quick response to the Lord's call in those early days of his conversion to Christ. We see them in Acts chapter 9 verses 4 to 22:

In verse 6 - he was filled with a desire to obey the Lord and to do his will.

In verse 11 - he began to pray.

In verse 18 - he was baptised as a believer.

In verse 19 - he was quickly united in fellowship with God's people.

In verse 20 - he began to preach about Jesus in the Synagogues.

In verse 22 - he grew very evidently in grace and power.

We cannot but marvel at the immediate willingness of Saul to get involved in the work of the Lord which so recently he had been determined to destroy. Luke reports that he began at once to preach that Jesus is the Son of God, amazing all who heard him. He baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. As a result of all this, Saul himself became the object of persecution and there was a plot made against his life, and he was forced to make his escape from the city by night and go to Jerusalem. We will take up the story next time on "Discovery".

The greatest lesson we can learn from all of this is that God is constantly working his purpose out for the building of his church. As Jesus said during his ministry here on earth, every new believer who repents and believes the gospel, just as Saul of Tarsus did, becomes another stone in this great building which is his church and which stands erect for the glory of God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Christ died on the cross to make this possible and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

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3 – Paul's Friend Barnabas

In the previous two talks in this series looking at the life and work of Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle, we have discovered how, as a result of his encounter on the road to Damascus, he became a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ, the one whose followers he had been persecuting. We have also discovered facts concerning his calling into Christ's service, and his early commitment as a new believer. Because of his conversion and his fearless preaching of the Lord Jesus to the Jews in Damascus, his life was threatened and with the help of the believers he escaped from the city, being lowered in a basket through an opening in the wall, and made his way back to Jerusalem.

The story continues in Acts chapter 9. In Jerusalem he tried to join with the Christians there, only to find that initially they were afraid to receive him knowing his reputation as a persecutor of the believers. They found it hard to accept that Saul had become a dedicated follower of the Lord Jesus, who was now his Lord and Master. However, God's hand was clearly upon Saul, and he directed another fine man of God, called Barnabas, to speak up for him and become his sponsor. We read that Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the Apostles and recounted how Saul had met with the Lord and been wonderfully converted, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. In consequence the church in Jerusalem welcomed Saul into their fellowship, recognising his sincerity and his desire to honour the Lord.

Barnabas was a delightful servant of Christ whose name we understand to mean "Son of Consolation". He was an encourager, and all the evidence shows that he became just that to Saul in his time of need. As you look back over your life as a Christian you can probably think, as I can, of those in your experience who have helped and encouraged you in your times of need. Consolation is love in action, and we recall the words of our blessed Lord to his disciples as he was about to leave them. He told them of a new commandment which required them to love one another as He, the perfect example, had loved them. By this, He told them, everyone will know that you are my followers. Barnabas certainly followed his Lord's example by his kindness and consideration to Saul when it was most needed. We must never forget that when we came to Christ, we became members of God's family. We all need each other in those times of stress and difficulty that we face in our lives and a timely word or act of encouragement can often make all the difference. Are you an encourager in the family of the Lord where you are?

Saul's story is continued in Acts chapter 9 verse 28. Once again he began to preach Christ fearlessly to the Jews, and once again his life was threatened, so the believers escorted him to the seaport of Caesarea for his own safety. From there he sailed northwards for his hometown of Tarsus near the south east coast of

Asia Minor. Little is known of the eleven years or so that he was in Tarsus, though they must have been spent in preparation for his God appointed future work.

We pick up the story again in Acts chapter 11 verse 22 where Barnabas appears once more. He is sent to the newly formed church in Antioch in Syria where he spends some time with them. Barnabas is described as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. What a commendation this is for a spiritual leader. Only a man with qualifications such as these would be able to stimulate and teach faithfully the many new Christian believers in that infant church in Antioch. We note the very stirring message Barnabas had for the believers. It was that they should remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. It is only those with the qualifications that Barnabas had who can faithfully and effectively lead and teach God's people in local churches today. It is those whose lives honour Christ, and who are truly led by the Spirit, trusting in Him in all things as they minister to the Lord's people.

After this, Barnabas went to Tarsus in search of Saul, and it appears that after some difficulty he found him, and on finding him told him of the need of the church at Antioch for teaching and the building-up of the believers there. In seeking out Saul, Barnabas had recognised that the size and nature of the work in Antioch was beyond the abilities of the available leadership. What was needed was a man who could give a powerful testimony of his own conversion and provide what was necessary in establishing this new church. So Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch and together they met with the church and taught them for a whole year. These were the final years of Saul's preparation for the ministry to which the Lord had called him.

As we read Luke's account of these things, we see two hints that we are entering a new era in the history of the early church. First, he speaks of "the church" in Antioch, showing us that this company of believers is now a separate entity, independent from that in Jerusalem. He then signals this new era by recording the introduction of the new name that was given to the believers there. In Acts chapter 11 verse 26 we are told that, "the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." We are not told if it was the believers who first used the name themselves or if it was a name given to them by those outside of the church who saw that they were truly disciples or followers of Christ. It is possible that the name was given mockingly by those who opposed them. Whatever the reason, no better name could have been given which so clearly identified them with their Lord and Saviour.

There are many ideas about today as to what makes a person a Christian. I was encouraged on looking at the definition of the name given in my universal dictionary. Here is what it says: "A Christian is one who professes belief in Jesus as the Christ - or Messiah - and follows the religion which is based on his example and his teaching. Further, a Christian is one who shows in his life the qualities or spirit of Christ." But while all that is true, I remember as a young believer hearing a preacher say, concerning what it means to be a Christian, that it is only when you recognise that you are a sinner in need of a Saviour, and realise from the word of God that this Saviour is the Lord Jesus Christ, and you repent and turn from your sin, believe and accept this Saviour and invite him into your life that you become a Christian. As you do this Christ responds immediately and He becomes "Christ in you" through his Holy Spirit and you are born again. So the name Christian is a wonderfully suitable and descriptive title for all those who have truly placed their faith in Christ.

The challenge is to be sure, even if you are known as a Christian, that you have personally trusted in the Saviour, and are showing in your life the qualities and spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ as an evidence that you are following Him and have the God-given right to be called a Christian.

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4 – Paul and Barnabas as Missionaries

If you are following along in your Bible our study of the life and work of Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ, we have reached Luke's account in Acts chapter 13. We are seeking to learn lessons from the experiences of this great man of God.

We noted in the last talk that Barnabas and Saul met with the believers in the newly formed church in Antioch for at least a year. We are told that they taught great numbers of people, and you may remember that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. As a typical New Testament church they would meet often for regular worship and prayer, and for the presentation of the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ. This was a large church made up of numerous nationalities. Acts chapter 11 verse 20 tells us that "men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus." Here was a church consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, but they were all one body in Christ, and for them He was the supreme head. They were part of his church for which He had given his life on the cross. We are told in Acts chapter 13 verse 1 that there were other prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch in addition to Barnabas and Paul. Between all of them there was a Levite, a black man, a North African, a nobleman and a Pharisee, but such a distinction in race, colour, social class and education could not harm a fellowship enjoying oneness in Christ Jesus their Lord.

The Holy Spirit had provided within this infant church prophets and teachers to benefit them. Prophets spoke the word of God as the Spirit revealed it to them before the coming of the New Testament Scriptures, and the teachers explained it. The Lord Jesus himself had promised his disciples, before He returned to his Father in heaven, that the Holy Spirit would reveal the things of Christ to them and remind them of what He had taught them. How we thank God that some two thousand years later the Holy Spirit continues this work of revealing the truth of God's word to those who believe.

As time went on, it became apparent that the Holy Spirit was working in and upon Barnabas and Saul, and actually made it clear to the church that the Lord was assigning them to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The church in Antioch was itself a powerful evidence that the gospel was not only for the Jews, but for all nations.

You may remember the words of the Lord to Ananias many years before at the time of Saul's conversion: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel." The clear indication of this came to the church leaders as a result of their worshipping the Lord and fasting and evidently seeking his will for them. Their only desire was to follow the pathway which the Lord in his purpose had laid out for them. It is not always easy for any one of us to know the leading of God in and for our lives, but we should wait patiently upon Him, and only move as He directs us.

So Barnabas and Saul received the blessing of the fellowship in Antioch and set off on their missionary journey. Incidentally, the word Missionary comes to us from the Latin language, just as the word Apostle comes from the Greek, and both mean the same thing: "One who has been sent out on a mission."

In chapters 13 and 14 of Acts, we notice that Luke records a change in leadership from the older man, Barnabas, to the younger man, Paul - as Saul became known from this time on. Barnabas, the one who so graciously encouraged Saul in the early days of his conversion to Christ, now teaches us a lesson in humility, by taking the lesser place. He was an example of how a true servant of God should be, willing to stand aside for the one appointed by the Lord.

The significance and importance of what Paul and Barnabas were setting out to do as missionary pioneers cannot be overestimated. It was eventually to change not only religious belief, but long held philosophies, and to have a lasting effect on the civilisation of the world. Paul's missionary journeys would cover some eight thousand one hundred miles or over thirteen thousand kilometres and take around ten years!

The record of these missionary journeys covers just eight and a half chapters of the book of Acts. Luke only records the most striking incidents and events of these journeys, and probably not all are given. His purpose seems to have been to show how, and in accordance with the command and promise of Christ in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, the knowledge and power of the Christian gospel was spread, beginning in Jerusalem, then throughout Judea and Samaria and outwards into the whole world.

Christian workers could well take note of the methods Paul used as he and his fellow-worker went from place to place. For example, they sought first a place to lodge in, and then some form of employment so that they would not be a burden on anyone. In Paul's case, we are told that he worked at his trade as a tent maker. On the Sabbath day they would find the Jewish synagogue and an opportunity to speak after the Scriptures had been read. In his presentation Paul would perhaps use the Old Testament Scripture that had been read, speaking of the message of the prophets and leading into the great topic that was dear to his heart, that Jesus was their promised Messiah, and closing with an exhortation for the people to believe on Him.

Such a presentation would naturally excite great interest coming from one who, by his speech and his handling of the Old Testament Scriptures, would be recognised as a cultured Jewish Rabbi. Paul would be asked to speak again on the next Sabbath when the synagogue would be full of people curious to hear what this stranger had to say, who had spoken so powerfully. This time Paul would proclaim Jesus Christ more plainly as Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles. This would generally produce a hostile reaction from the Jewish leaders who would not believe that the Messiah was for Gentiles as well as Jews; that He came to be Saviour of all who would believe on Him. But some of the Jews present would believe, and along with them some of the Gentile adherents to the Jewish faith. This would be the starting point of the Christian church in that community.

This good news which Paul preached to both Jews and Gentiles was the moving force of his work. Wherever he went and whenever he had the opportunity he told the people about Christ. This was because he believed, and knew from his own experience, that this gospel of salvation from sin's penalty was the power of God for the salvation of everyone who would respond and believe. And it still is!

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5 – The First Journey Begins

We continue to observe the life and work of the Apostle Paul, the one sent by God to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. We look this time at his first missionary journey as recorded in Acts chapter 13. We note right from the very beginning, Paul's enthusiasm for the task before him. Neither distance nor circumstances, which were often very difficult, meant anything to this fine man of God. He is a very real example to all believers who would set out in service for their Saviour.

On this first journey Paul is accompanied by Barnabas and Barnabas's nephew John Mark. Commended by the church in Antioch, they set sail from the port of Selucia to Cyprus, which was Barnabas's native island. Landing at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God first in the Jewish synagogue which, as we have seen in a previous talk, was the pattern that Paul was to follow as he moved from place to place. Leaving Salamis they travelled east to west across the island to the city of Paphos. This city was the seat of the most degrading and immoral worship of Venus the pagan goddess of love. Old Paphos was founded by the Phoenicians, built close to a good harbour, but New Paphos was developed in Roman times and became the headquarters of the Roman proconsul.

When Paul and Barnabas reached the city, they undoubtedly again looked for a Jewish synagogue, however, Luke makes no mention of them finding one. Rather, he records, in Acts chapter 13 verse 6: "there they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus (known also as Elymas), who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus". Luke describes the proconsul as "an intelligent man". We are told that "he sent for Barnabas and Paul because he wanted to hear the word of God", an indication perhaps that the two men had already been preaching in the city. But then we have the evidence of truly Satanic opposition to the gospel. Luke records, in verse 8, "but Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil, and an enemy of everything that is right. You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?' Then Paul pronounced a judgement from the Lord against this evil man, and Elymas was struck with blindness. Unable to see he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When Sergius Paulus saw this demonstration of the power of Paul's Lord, he believed, being amazed at the teaching he had heard.

The lesson we can take from this incident is clear: false prophets have always sought to hinder the true servants of Christ, but he continues to protect his servants and their work for him. We see here, too, that despite the efforts of the enemy of souls, the word of God prevailed and the proconsul became a believer.

Soon after this, Paul and his companions sailed from Paphos and came to Perga in the region of Pamphylia, the coastal area of Asia Minor - part of Turkey today. It was here that Barnabas's nephew, John Mark, left them and returned to Jerusalem. We are not told in Acts chapter 13 why this was, but his leaving was a cause for some sadness to both Paul and Barnabas. It is in chapter 15 verses 37 to 39 that we are told that Paul considered that John Mark had deserted them and not continued with them in the work.

From Perga they moved on to Antioch in the region of Pisidia - this was a different Antioch to the one from which they had originally set out. It was a good sized city with a large Jewish population. Following their custom Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. As was usual, the service consisted of prayers and the reading of the Scriptures followed by a word of exhortation or teaching. The synagogue leaders appear to have recognised Paul and Barnabas as perhaps being visiting Rabbis, and they invited

them to bring a message of encouragement for the people. It was Paul who stood up to speak.

There follows, in Luke chapter 13 verses 16 to 41, Luke's account of the first recorded sermon of the great Apostle, which he covers in some detail. It is a model presentation which came from one who was an able, well-versed student of the things of God and of the Old Testament Scriptures. Read this sermon through for yourself, and see a wonderful Scripture-based presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, he recounts the history of God's dealings with his chosen people, the Israelites. He speaks about the time of the judges and of their first king, Saul. Then he centres on David, who is often referred to as their greatest king and of whom God said "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do." What a commendation that was of any man; and what an example for us today who are followers of Christ.

Next, Paul moved on to consider the Lord Jesus. He said, concerning David, "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus as he promised." He was saying to the assembled congregation of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles that this Jesus is God's promised Messiah, the deliverer of his chosen people. He then speaks of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, this being at the very heart of the Christian good news.

Finally, he applies the message to his hearers - verse 38: "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses." Here Paul sets the gospel of Christ in contrast to the law. The first can save; the second cannot. This was the message that Paul had been appointed to preach for the rest of his life.

There was an inevitable reaction to this fine sermon by Paul. As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

We will observe as we follow these missionary journeys that Paul prayed constantly for his hearers. He prayed that they might be converted; that they might continue in the faith; that they might be consistent in their living as Christians; and that they might communicate the gospel to others.

We who are followers of Christ today could do no better than to take this a blueprint for our own life and for our service for our dear master.

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6 – Trials and Triumphs

We are following Paul on his first missionary journey bringing the gospel to places where it was hitherto unknown. Last time we left Paul and his companion Barnabas in the city of Antioch in Pisidia where they had preached in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. There were believing Gentiles present in the synagogue on that first Sabbath who had heard Paul say as he started his sermon, "Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen". He was addressing himself to the Jews present and to the Gentiles making it clear that his message was for both groups. As a result of Paul's outstanding presentation of the gospel of Christ he had been invited to speak again on the following Sabbath. You will find the account of this in Acts chapter 13 where we read in verse 44 that, "On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord."

Among that great crowd on this second occasion there would have again been Jews and the believing Gentiles who worshipped with them in the synagogue. No doubt there would also have been many in the crowd who were pagans, worshippers of false gods. This coming together of such a large crowd to hear the word of God filled the Jews with jealousy and they began to oppose Paul and to talk abusively against what he was preaching. Again we see that whenever there is a faithful declaration of the word of God and the gospel is preached, there will be opposition of one kind or another, as the Apostle was to experience time after time on his travels. It was as a result of this rejection of his message by the Jews that Paul made his great pronouncement, "Since you reject the word of God to you, and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us."

It was always God's intention that his ancient, chosen people the Jews would be those who would be his witnesses to the Gentile world. Paul quotes to them Isaiah 49 verse 6: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." In this as a nation, they had signally failed. This declaration produced great joy among the Gentiles because they now knew that they could worship the God of the Jews without becoming Jews themselves. Verse 48 tells us that "they honoured the word of the Lord and all who were appointed for eternal life believed." But we must note that although the Jews in that city had rejected the gospel, wherever Paul went he continued to preach the message to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles in accordance with his God-given mission.

Acts chapter 13 ends by telling us that "the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from the region." How sad it is that so often it is prominent people and people of influence who oppose the gospel and those who preach it, even in our day. Verse 52 however closes the chapter with a note of victory! We are told that as they left that place and moved on to Iconium, "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." In this we are reminded of the words of James chapter 1 verse 2 where he writes: "consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance." And perseverance was something that the great Apostle demonstrated again and again as he faced opposition and great hardship as he went about fulfilling his great commission. As they left Antioch, the Apostles in biblical fashion, "shook the dust from their feet" as a witness against those who had rejected the word of life.

Travelling with Paul, this now great evangelist, we can note some of the characteristics of his approach to evangelism. The first is CONCENTRATION. Instead of trying to reach every

township in an area, Paul focused on the major cities. There his aim was make real disciples who would in turn continue the work and take the message further afield.

As we read the gospels we note the mission and ministry of the Lord Jesus. We see that he spent three years instructing a small group of men who, as a result of his intensive training, turned their world upside down. In his great commission recorded in Matthew chapter 28 verses 18 to 20, our Saviour included three key stages in the preaching of the gospel: salvation, baptism and the discipling or systematic teaching of new believers so that they too would become "fishers of men."

Secondly, we can note the principle of CONSOLIDATION. We will see that Paul, when he returned to Antioch in Syria, went by the same way that he came, in order to encourage the new believers and to take note of those who were already showing gifts of leadership, and commending them to an all-keeping God who cared for them as no one else could.

Having left Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas travelled to Iconium which was some one hundred miles, or around one hundred and sixty-one kilometres, distant. On arrival they followed the pattern they had previously set, going first to the synagogue to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to Jews and Gentiles. Paul's background gave him both a deep love for his nation and an ability to reach them. In the synagogue they had a ready made audience, and Luke records that both Paul and Barnabas spoke so effectively that "a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed." We are told that the Apostles "spent some considerable time in Iconium speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." This again caused opposition to develop among the unbelieving Jews who stirred-up the unbelieving Gentiles and a plot was made to ill-treat and stone Paul and Barnabas. Because of this danger they fled the city and moved on to the cities of Lystra and Derbe in the region of Lycaonia.

In Acts chapter 14 verses 8 to 10 we have Luke's account of the healing of a man in the city of Lystra who had been lame from birth and had never walked. He was listening to Paul as he was proclaiming the message of Christ. Paul, we are told, "looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed." We wonder, had this man heard reports of the miraculous signs and wonders that had taken place in Iconium? Luke does not tell us. Perhaps the man was moved as Paul spoke about Jesus and thought with faith, "if only Jesus had come here, He would have made me walk." Seeing his faith Paul said to the man "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

We are reminded of the account in Acts chapter 3 of the healing by Peter and John of another man who was lame from birth. When questioned by the religious leaders "by what power or what name did you do this?", Peter replied, "Know this and all you people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed." Concerning Jesus, Peter went on to say "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." This is the message that Paul and Barnabas preached that day in Lystra. It is the same message today, that the Lord Jesus Christ not only heals the sicknesses of the body, but by his death and glorious resurrection he has provided for the healing and forgiveness of sin sick souls who will place their faith in him.

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
7 – The True and Living God

We are following Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Already they have seen an encouraging response to the preaching of the gospel, but also very definite opposition from those who would not believe the message. Last time we left the Apostles in the city of Lystra in the region of Lycaonia - which is part of present day Turkey. There they had encountered a man lame from his birth who had listened intently to Paul as he was speaking. Paul had detected in this man faith to be healed and had commanded him to stand up on his feet. The result of this was that the man jumped up and began to walk. We noted last time that it was power in the name of Jesus that brought about this miracle of healing.

This was witnessed by the crowd of Gentile onlookers and it had a very unexpected effect. They began to shout in their own language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" And they named Barnabas and Paul after their heathen gods Zeus and Hermes. Zeus they regarded as the father of the gods and Hermes their messenger. Since the people were shouting in their own language the Apostles did not understand what they were saying. Luke's account at Acts chapter 14 verse 13 goes on to say, "The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them." It was at the signs of sacrifice that Paul and Barnabas suddenly became aware of what was happening. Tearing their clothes, a Jewish sign of blasphemy, they rushed into the crowd shouting "Men why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them." Even after Paul's declaration concerning the true God we are told that the Apostles had difficulty in keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

So far as we know this was Paul's first sermon delivered to a wholly pagan group who knew nothing of the living God. We can perhaps compare this sermon of Paul's to a later sermon to other pagan worshippers in Athens at the Areopagus on Mars hill. This is recorded for us in Acts chapter 17 verses 15 to 31. The content of this sermon at Lystra is well worth noting. Having exhorted his hearers to turn from their worthless idols, Paul went on to speak about the true God who made all things and who in the past let all nations - that is the Gentiles - go their own way. Yet, said Paul, he has not left Himself without a witness. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

The Bible teaches us, particularly in the Psalms, that there is a revelation of God in nature. His created world bears the marks of the Creator. David says in Psalm 19 verses 1 to 4, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the Earth, and their words to the end of the world." We must note, however, that this revelation in nature only tells us of God's wisdom, power and providential care, it does not declare his love in redeeming sinful man. Nature tells us nothing about God's will for our salvation. We only learn about this from the Word of God coming among us in the person of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only by his sinless life, his tireless work among men, his sacrificial death on the cross bearing the punishment for our sins and by his glorious resurrection from the dead, that we learn of God's love for a lost world. This was the good news that the Apostles were bringing to the people of Lystra.

It is perhaps understandable that the heathen people of Lystra, seeing the remarkable healing which had been performed, thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods in human form. However, it had to be made plain that as Christians they were working to bring glory

to the true and living God, not to themselves. This is a principle that should be observed by all who would be ambassadors for Christ.

Opponents of the gospel do not easily give up for we are told in Acts chapter 14 verse 19, "Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowd. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead." However, this was not God's time for his servant to die. We read on, "But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city." Here was a truly courageous and dedicated servant of the Lord Jesus who was willing to put himself in danger for the sake of the gospel and those who had responded to it. After this, Paul and Barnabas left Lystra for the city of Derbe where they again preached the good news and won a large number of disciples for Christ.

From Derbe, Paul and Barnabas set off on a further mission which was aimed at revisiting Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. Their purpose was to strengthen the new disciples and encourage them to remain true to their new found faith. In this we see that Paul, as well as being an evangelist, along with Barnabas was an encourager. Here we observe also the pastoral role of these servants of the living Christ. It is important to note further that they reminded the believers that God's servants would always be open to opposition and hardship as they themselves had experienced. In each local church that the Apostles visited they appointed elders who would be responsible for leading and caring for God's people. They were to be the shepherds of God's flock for that is one of the definitions of the term "elder". Here was established the scriptural pattern for all local assemblies of the Lord's people. An elder is also described as an "overseer" in Paul's later description of the qualifications required of an elder in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verses 1 to 7 where he says: "Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect....He must not be a recent convert or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap." We need to pray much for those who carry this responsibility in our own local churches.

Resuming their journey, the Apostles made their way back to the coast, passing through the city of Perga where they again preached the word; then on to Attalia from where they sailed back to Antioch in Syria where they had originally been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. Acts chapter 14 closes with a description of their report to their home church: "On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." We note that the returning missionaries did not boast or seek to give credit to themselves. They simply told all that God had done with them and through them. They had gone on their mission to Asia minor and God had gone before them. They had seen God performing his gracious acts of saving, of healing, of watching over his servants, and of advancing his redemptive purposes in his world. In particular he had opened the door of faith to Gentiles as well as Jews. The closing verse of Acts chapter 14 tells us that they stayed in Antioch a long time with the disciples.

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
8 – Paul's Fellow Workers

We continue our study of the life and work of the Apostle Paul as we come to Acts chapter 15 and verses 36 to 41. Here we read of the commencement of his "Second Missionary Journey".

Before the story of this journey begins in chapter 16, we see something of Paul's strong and often determined character and his passionate concern for God's work. We are told that a sharp disagreement occurred between Paul and Barnabas as to whether John Mark should accompany them. Paul did not think it wise to take him because he had deserted them on their previous mission and not continued with them in the work. Barnabas disagreed and so they parted company, Barnabas taking John Mark with him, home to Cyprus. Sometimes Christian workers will strongly disagree, as did Paul and Barnabas in this instance, but the important thing to note is that later we find there is a reconciliation, and Mark is accepted by Paul as part of his team. In 2 Timothy 4 verse 11, Timothy is instructed by Paul to "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

So, on this second journey, Paul was accompanied by two new helpers, Silas and Timothy along with the faithful Doctor Luke. This second journey was to cover some three thousand two hundred miles and would be the longest which he undertook. Let's look for a moment at Paul's two new travelling companions and co-workers.

Silas is described, in Acts chapter 15 verse 22, as one of the leaders among the believers in Jerusalem. He is further noted as being one of the men chosen to be entrusted with a message from the church at Jerusalem to the church in Antioch. In verse 32 he is described as being a prophet, someone who was gifted by the Holy Spirit to declare the mind and word of God to the people. We see further, in chapter 16 verse 26, that Silas was one of those who hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel. He clearly was prepared to be a witness and even a martyr in the fullest sense. Such committed believers have been vital to the work of the Lord in every generation, and we give thanks for those even in our day who are giving their lives for their faith. We know that their reward will be great in the coming day of glory. We see that Paul's choice of Silas was a wise one, Silas having all the qualifications necessary for such an undertaking.

Timothy, the second new member of Paul's missionary team, stands in special relationship to Paul. He calls him, "My own genuine son in the faith". We read, in Acts chapter 16 verse 2, that "the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him", and that Paul wanted to take him on the journey. Much later Timothy would be the recipient of two personal letters from the Apostle in which he would be encouraged in his faith and given teaching about order in the church. Paul was ever conscious of the need to encourage young men to follow in his steps as he endeavoured to pioneer the gospel. This is a good principle that should be the aim of all church leaders today.

So Paul took with him on this second journey one who was experienced and gifted in the things of God, and one who was a new believer showing promise in his walk with the Lord. And of course, there was dedicated and travel experienced Luke who was a steadfast companion and dear friend of Paul and the one whose account of Paul's great ministry we have in the Acts.

In Acts chapter 16 verses 6 to 10 we are told of a vision that Paul had of a man of Macedonia pleading for him to come and help the people there. Up to that point Paul's intention had been to go eastwards, but now the Holy Spirit was directing them westwards into Europe. This change of direction was to have a momentous effect on the subsequent history of the continent.

Someone has said of it: "In its issues it far outrivalled the expedition of Alexander the Great when he carried the aims and civilisation of Greece into the heart of Asia." It is being realistic and stating a sober fact that because of this change of direction by Paul a continent was turned from the worship of idols to the worship of the true and living God.

The gospel which Paul loved to preach was now to try its strength with the keenest philosophers and the most seductive fascinations of immorality masquerading under the guise of religion. What could this missionary for Christ do? What message could he preach? If philosophy or art or beauty could have saved the souls of men then they would not have needed Paul's message; but they could not! The good news that Paul was to take to the people living in what someone has called a "charmed circle of civilisation" was the same message that he had preached in the rough mountain towns of Asia Minor. Human nature, whether under a rough or a polished exterior, is the same the world over. Paul's purpose was to bring men and women to a knowledge of their alienation from the only true God because of their sin, and to show them the way of salvation through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are following in your Bible, look now at Acts chapter 16 verses 11 to 15. So, obedient to the Holy Spirit's leading, Paul and his companions, Silas and Doctor Luke, crossed the sea from Asia Minor to what is modern day Greece. Greece at that time was under the dominion of Rome and had been divided into two regions: Achaia in the south and Macedonia to the north. A great Roman road ran from east to west through Macedonia and it was by this road that Paul would have travelled to the important city of Philippi. This city will be forever memorable as the first city in Europe in which a Christian church was established. Philippi had the rank of a Roman colony; both the civil and military authorities being Roman.

The beginning of the work in Philippi was at first encouraging, but as we shall see this soon changed.

However, Luke tells us that "on the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there." We are told that one of them was a business woman from Thyatira whose name was Lydia. Luke notes that she was "a worshipper of God" and goes on to say, one feels with some delight, "the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." It appears that the others at that riverside prayer meeting were members of her household and they along with Lydia were baptised there and then as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Listening friend, has the Lord opened your heart to respond to the gospel of Christ? Have you acknowledged your need of the Saviour and placed your faith in the One who died on the cross to bear the punishment for all your sins? And having believed have you, like Lydia, been baptised as a confession of your faith and a declaration of the new life that you intend to live as a Christian believer?

After this Lydia invited the men of God into her home saying "If you consider me to be a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." Paul and his companions were so persuaded and stayed in Philippi several days.

So we have this record of the first converts to Christ in Europe through the witness of the great Apostle Paul.

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
9 – Riot, Prison, Miracle and Encouragement

We are following the Apostle Paul and his companions, Silas and Doctor Luke on Paul's second missionary journey. They have come to the city of Philippi and are staying at the home of Lydia, a business woman who as a result of Paul's witness had, along with other members of her family, become a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We take up the story in Acts chapter 16 verse 16 where we read: "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned round and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her. Once again in this story of the great Apostle we see the power there is in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. His is the power over sickness and over demons like the one that possessed this sad girl. When the owners of the slave girl realised that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place to face the authorities." The result of this was that after a series of false accusations and the fermenting of a riot, Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten and thrown into prison. The jailer was commanded to guard them carefully, so he fastened their feet in the stocks and they were left there with their terrible wounds unwashed and undressed.

The behaviour of these disciples of Christ in the prison beautifully illustrates the correct response to unjust suffering. Far from bemoaning their situation, as we so often are prone to do, these faithful servants of God accept the circumstances in which they are placed and they REJOICE! We read that at about midnight Paul and Silas were found praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them. What a testimony to the faith of these men of God! They were putting into practice a principle that James writes about in his letter, in chapter 1 verses 2 to 4: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." James follows this up with a word of encouragement for those who are suffering for Christ. He says in verse 12: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

Suddenly God intervened on behalf of his imprisoned servants. There was a great earthquake that shook the prison to its foundations. The prison doors flew open and all the prisoner's chains came loose. The jailer awakened by the shock saw the prison doors open and concluded that the prisoners had escaped. Since his life was the guarantee of the prisoners being held securely, he drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" It is an exciting story, but it has an even more exciting outcome. The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He brought them out of the prison and asked them the most important question that anyone can ask: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Perhaps he feared for his own life or perhaps he had heard the cries of the demon possessed girl when she said, "These men are servants of the Most high God who are telling you the way to be saved." Whatever the motive behind his question, he probably did not expect the kind of answer he got from Paul and Silas. In one brief sentence they preached the gospel to him. They said to the jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." Then we are told that they "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house." That would have been a detailed explanation of what it means to be saved from the penalty of

sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who has by his death on the cross paid that penalty for us all.

It is evident from all that follows in Luke's account of these events that this hardened man responded to the message; recognising that he was a sinner in need of salvation he placed his trust in Christ as his saviour. Luke records in verse 33, "At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds." He brought them into his house and set a meal before them. We are told that "he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God - he and his whole family." Listening friend, have you experienced the real joy of knowing that your sins are forgiven and that you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

There was real evidence of the grace of God in the life of this man and his family members. And just as Lydia and her household had believed and were baptised, so the Philippian jailer and his household were immediately baptised in confession of their new found faith in the Lord Jesus. Throughout the book of Acts we note that all who believed were prepared to give witness to the fact that they had begun a new life in Christ. They were turning their backs on their old ways by giving public testimony in baptism.

This account of the Apostle's visit to Philippi has one more remarkable turn (verse 35). "When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: 'Release those men.' The jailer told Paul, 'The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.' But Paul said to the officers, 'They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out. On hearing Paul's statement that they were Roman citizens the authorities were alarmed and they came to the prison to appease them and they escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city.'"

We note that Paul and Silas did not immediately get out of Philippi where they had been made so unwelcome. Luke records that before they left "they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left." Here was a small, new group of Christian believers who were going to be left for the time being in the care of their new found Lord, but Paul, ever concerned for the welfare of those whom he led to Christ, takes time to give them a word of encouragement. The care of the churches was something that was always on the mind of this great Apostle. Sometime later when the church had been established with its own elders and deacons, he would write them a wonderful letter thanking God for every remembrance of them and assuring them of his prayers. The Lord had begun a good work in Philippi through the faithful witness of Paul and Silas and the Lord would carry it on to completion until Christ returned.

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
10 – The Unknown God

We come this time to the seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts. The Apostle Paul is continuing his missionary journey into Europe. After leaving Philippi he and Silas his companion travelled westward along the Egration road through the two beautiful Greek cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia. Their destination was Thessalonica which was some one hundred and seventeen kilometres from Philippi. In Paul's time it was a great commercial centre, the inhabitants being a mixture of Greeks, Romans and Jews.

As his custom was Paul went into the Jewish synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with the assembled congregation from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that their longed for Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. Paul declared to them that Jesus, whose servant he was, was the promised Messiah and that He had suffered and died upon the cross and had been raised from the dead. We have recorded the same results here which followed similar preaching elsewhere. By the grace of God, some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. So there emerges a new Christian church in Thessalonica.

This church grew and had both a great testimony and influence on many others. Much later Paul would write two letters to this church to encourage and to teach them. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, he wrote concerning them:

“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul went on to write concerning the believers at Thessalonica that in spite of severe suffering for their Christian faith, they had become a model for all the believers in the area of Macedonian and Archaia. In fact their faith in God had become known everywhere. In light of that commendation from Paul, we can only exclaim, “What a testimony!” And what a challenge to us that we too as Christians are known where we are for our faithful witness and our faith in God.

Sadly, because of great opposition, Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica, so the believers sent them during the night to Berea which was about sixty-five kilometres away to the west. Here was a secluded inland city where the missionaries found godly Jews who are described as being “of more noble character than the Thessalonians.” One Bible commentator says that their nobility lies in the fact that they, as Luke records in verse 11, “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” There is a lesson for us in the response of the Bereans to the preaching of the Apostle. They tested what he was telling them by the Scriptures so as to be sure that what he was teaching was the truth. This is something that we should do today, for there are many whose teachings do not stand up to the scrutiny of God's Word. Always test what is being taught by comparing it with what the Bible teaches to be sure that you are not being led astray.

Verse 12 goes on to tell us that “Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” Once again it was the faithful preaching of the gospel, and the work of the Holy Spirit, that brought the response of faith in those who heard it, just as it does today.

News of what had taken place in Berea reached the Jews in Thessalonica and in Acts 17 verses 13 and 14 Doctor Luke tells us that these people “went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and

Timothy stayed in Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible."

So Paul finds himself in Athens which was the most cultured city of the old world. On every corner was a statue and in every street an altar. In the golden age of its history it is said that Athens possessed more men of the very highest genius than any other city. Yet even in Paul's time those days had long gone and Athens was a city living on its past reputation. Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34 give us Luke's account of the Apostle's time in what is still a notable city today.

According to his custom, Paul went first to the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. He went also into the market place each day and got into conversation with the people there. We see that in addition to being a great preacher to large audiences, the Apostle was also a fine personal worker willing to share the gospel with all with whom he came into contact. This is a reminder to all of us of our responsibility as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to share the good news whenever and wherever we have the opportunity.

Among those listening in the market place were some of the philosophers of the day, Epicureans and Stoics, who began to dispute with Paul and mocked him, calling him a babbler. They considered that he was talking nonsense. Nevertheless, always wanting to hear of something new, they took Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus on Mars Hill next to the famous Acropolis. Paul's address to this audience has a striking beginning and it is recorded for us in Acts chapter 17 starting at verse 22 where we read: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown god'. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." With that opening statement Paul would have gained the full attention of his hearers!

No doubt that Paul was both saddened and angry at what he had seen as he moved around the city with all its altars and idols. Now he is going to witness about the only true and living God to those who did not know this God. He tells them that this, to them 'unknown god', is the one who is the creator of all things. This God does not live in the magnificent temples for which the city was famous. No man-made temple could contain Him. He does not need anything from man. We do not give to Him, he gives to us! He is the sovereign Lord who determined the times set for the nations and the exact places where they should live. He is the God who is not far away, but is near and wants us to reach out to Him. Again Paul holds the attention of his audience by quoting from two of their own poets - Epimenides of Crete and Aratus of Cilicia, applying their words to the living God: "For in him we live and move and have our being", and, "We are his offspring." "Therefore since we are God's offspring", Paul continues, "We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by man's design and skill." He challenges them with the words of their own philosophers to see that the true God is the living God and is the very source of all human life.

I finish our talk by simply quoting the final words of Paul's great speech. You will find them in Acts chapter 17 verses 30 and 31. They are a clear statement of the Gospel, may they come as a challenge to you if God is the "unknown god" to you: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (of their sins). For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed (that is the Lord Jesus Christ). He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

When they heard this some just laughed; some were interested in hearing more; and some believed.

To which group do you belong?

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
11 – Paul in Corinth

We have been following Doctor Luke's account of the life and missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts. This time we come to Acts chapter 18.

Paul has left the Greek city of Athens, a great intellectual centre, and travelled to Corinth a city sunk deep in moral decay and sin. Even the name 'Corinthian' can describe someone who is given over to a profligate and sensual life. The moral state of the people of Corinth is described by Paul in the letter that he would later write to the church that was established in that city. We read his description in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 to 11:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

It was constantly Paul's understanding of the power of the Christian gospel and his continuing commitment to preach it to all men that made him believe with all his heart that it could bring salvation to all be they philosophers or prostitutes. This same gospel is still liberating men and woman today from their enslavement to immorality and dishonesty of all kinds and bringing them, forgiven, into the kingdom of God.

On coming to Corinth Paul met a fellow Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. This godly couple had been exiled from Rome and had set-up temporary home in Corinth working as tentmakers. As Paul's trade was also that of a tentmaker he stayed and worked with them which enabled him to earn a living. These delightful fellow-believers opened their home to Paul and he worked with them each day, but on the Sabbath he went to the synagogue and debated with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles as he had in the other places he had visited. We are told in Acts chapter 18 verses 5 and 6 that when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia Paul devoted all of his time to preaching to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

This preaching was designed to persuade both the Jews and the Greeks present to respond in faith and believe his message. However, Luke tells us that Paul's preaching stirred up strong opposition as it did everywhere that he preached. Paul knew that his responsibility was to take the message of the Gospel of Christ to the Jews first, but that his primary calling was to the Gentiles. In going first to the synagogues he had discharged that duty. If the Jews steadfastly rejected the message that Jesus was their Messiah then he would go to the Gentiles and present the message of salvation to them. This is what Paul did in Corinth.

Thankfully, Paul's mission to that corrupt city brought about very pleasing results. Verses 7 and 8 tell us that even Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord. And not only Crispus, but many of the Corinthians who heard him also believed and were baptised and so a church was formed in that city by the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word, all to the glory of God.

We have discovered as we have followed the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys that he faced opposition and danger as he faithfully proclaimed the message of salvation through the crucified and risen Christ. He had faced further opposition in Corinth, but the Lord gave him a wonderful word of encouragement which is recorded for us by Luke in verses 9 and 10:

“One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’

After all the opposition he had faced, Paul's heart must have been lifted as the Lord told him “I have many people in this city.” The Lord knew that there were others who, on hearing the gospel, would respond in faith and be saved and he needed Paul to continue with his faithful witness. Here is a great word of encouragement to all who witness for the Lord to keep on speaking even when there is opposition because the Lord knows in advance those who will turn in repentance and believe.

Then verse 11 tells us: “So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.”

Paul also understood the importance of grounding the new believers in the Scriptures and so he took over a year to teach and encourage them in their new found faith in Christ.

Paul, Luke tells us, finally took his leave of Corinth and sailed for Syria accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla, his intention being to return to Antioch from where he had set out on his second missionary journey. The ship called at Ephesus and Paul's friends disembarked with the intention of staying in that city. Paul took advantage of the ship's brief call and went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. Surprisingly, the Jews there wanted him to stay longer, but he could not do so and he returned to the ship promising to come back again to Ephesus, if it were God's will.

The ship's next stop was Caesarea, and Paul took the opportunity to greet the church in Jerusalem. From there he went down to Antioch from where he had been originally commended to the Lord's work. So he completed his second missionary journey.

As we come to the close of today's talk allow me to summarise Paul's great work thus far as an Apostle to the Gentiles:

We note first: His first missionary journey, recorded for us in Acts chapters 13 and 14, indicates his determination to bring the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles.

Second: In Luke's account of Paul's second journey, recorded in Acts chapters 16 to 18, we are shown the various types of problems that arose in the ungodly Gentile world when the gospel was preached.

Paul himself sums this up in his first letter to the believers in Corinth where he writes concerning the gospel in chapter 1 verse 18 and verses 22 to 24:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
12 – Paul's Last Missionary Journey

Last time we left Paul in Antioch with the church that first commended him to his pioneer missionary work. After a fairly lengthy stay in Antioch Paul was ready to set out on what has become known as his "Third Missionary Journey." The story of this journey is recorded for us in Acts chapter 18 verse 23 to chapter 19 verse 41.

We are told that he travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia. These were the places he had visited on his previous journeys. His purpose was to "strengthen all the disciples." This was a vital part of Paul's ministry. We are told in Acts chapter 14 verses 21 and 22 that on his first journey he returned to the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Pysidian Antioch, "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith." in Acts 18 verse 23, the word used in the original for "strengthen" has the idea of "establishing". Paul wanted these new believers to be firmly grounded in their faith so that they could withstand the attacks of the devil and be able to give an answer to those who questioned them about their faith in the Lord Jesus. Paul's purpose was not only to preach the gospel and so win men and women for Christ, it was also to make them true disciples, established in the truth. This must be our purpose today.

Towards the end of his second journey, the ship on which Paul was travelling had called at Ephesus and he had taken the opportunity to visit the synagogue and reason with the Jews. Unlike many of the other places he had visited, the Jews at Ephesus asked him to spend more time with them. However, Paul could not stay, but promised to return if it was God's will for him. This he did on this third journey, returning to the synagogue, as he had promised, to speak further with the Jews there. For three months he spoke boldly about the kingdom of God, but some refused to believe and publicly began to speak out against the message that Paul was preaching concerning the way of salvation. It is evident, however, that some did believe the message and became followers of Christ. Because of the opposition Paul withdrew with the believers and took them to the public lecture hall of Tyrannus where he had discussions daily and had the liberty to preach and to teach those who believed. Chapter 19 verse 10 tells us that "this went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." We see in this again Paul's method of grounding new believers in the Word so that they in their turn could go out and teach others also. As a result of this the gospel spread across the whole region, the disciples witnessing to both Jews and Greeks as Paul had done.

Ephesus was the centre for the idolatrous worship of the Greek goddess Artemis, worshipped by the Romans as Diana. We are told in Acts chapter 19 verses 23 to 26 that the preaching of the gospel had such an impact that many Ephesians turned to the Lord from their idols. This resulted in all those who made money from this idol worship inciting the mob, and Paul and his co-workers were in great danger. Luke tells us that the town clerk took charge of the situation and calmed the rioters with some wise words and so Paul was given protection. After this Paul sent for the believers and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. And what did he do when he arrived in Macedonia? "He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people..." chapter 20 verse 2. Paul was nothing if not an encourager of God's people. Never underestimate the power and the necessity of believers encouraging one another in the faith. This is a ministry we can all engage in and which we all need, no matter how long we have been Christians. Do you show an interest in the spiritual well-being of the believers where you are and do you seek to comfort and urge them on in their walk with the Lord?

The Apostle Paul was a great encourager as we have discovered several times in this talk.

Paul's third journey continued and he finally arrived in Greece where he stayed for three months. Accompanying him were seven fellow-workers in the gospel whose names are

recorded for us in verse 4. Paul dearly loved and appreciated those who pioneered with him in the spread of the gospel. They were men from all over the areas where Paul and his fellow evangelists had planted churches. On leaving Greece, Paul followed the advance party of these men to Troas where, on the first day of the week (the Lord's Day) they came together to break bread. It is more than probable that they, along with the local believers, participated in the Lord's Supper - the remembrance of the Saviour in his death as instituted by the Lord Himself, as described in Luke chapter 22 verses 14 to 20.

Paul and his companions stayed seven days in Troas and then Paul set off on foot for the port of Assos while the others went by ship and took him on board there.

Paul was anxious to get to Jerusalem, but he wanted to meet with the elders of the Ephesian church one last time and so he called for them to come to the next port which was Miletus. He gave a very moving address in which he reminded them of the faithful way in which he had ministered among them and declared the gospel to both Jews and Greeks. He reminded them that they were God's appointed shepherds of the Lord's flock in Ephesus and like a true pastor himself, Paul gave these men some very sound advice for their leadership of God's people. He told them that they must first keep watch over themselves. As leaders in the church they would especially be open to many trials and temptations and so they must keep close to the Lord and ensure that in their own walk with Him they were examples to the believers under their care. Then they were to keep watch over and be true shepherds of God's blood bought church, guarding them from the false teachers that would seek to draw the believers away after them. We see Paul's deep concern for the Ephesian Christians as he reminds them that for three years he never stopped warning them night and day with tears. (chapter 20 verse 31). This reminds us of the great responsibility that elders in our churches still have today. We should constantly pray for them and seek to encourage and support them in every way we can, just as the great Apostle did.

Luke records the closing scene of this touching meeting. It is full of emotion: "When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship." (Verses 36 to 38).

Having followed Paul on his missionary journeys, we have seen him as a champion of God's truth and as an evangelist without equal, and we have recognised him as a pastor. He dearly loved the people he brought to salvation, and they loved him. Even in his letters to these churches, when dealing with matters which required censure, we see over and over again his loving heart.

Leaving Miletus, Paul and his companions set sail for the Palestinian mainland landing eventually at the port of Tyre. Although Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem because of the danger to his life his answer to the concerned believers was: "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus", such was his commitment and his love for his Lord.

This final visit to Jerusalem ended with some sadness for this great servant of God. A band of militant Jews from the province of Asia stirred up a religious riot in which Paul was seized and dragged from the Temple and would have been severely beaten except that he was rescued by soldiers from the Roman garrison. Even in this situation Paul asked permission to speak to the crowd and in Acts chapter 22 verses 1 to 21 we have his clear testimony to the work of God in his life. This again incited the crowd and only his assertion that he was a Roman citizen saved him from a flogging by the soldiers. A lesson surely to us all that God can and often does use the least likely of people to deliver his servants.

We should not be surprised when we read of Paul's personal suffering and persecution for he himself expected it. In his great commission as an Apostle of Christ he was told: "This

man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Being a faithful servant and witness of the Lord Jesus Christ does not mean that we will not suffer hardship or persecution, but like Paul we can be sure of the Lord's presence and grace in every trial helping us to overcome.

Paul
God's Appointed Apostle to the Gentiles
13 – Paul's Last Testimony

I would like us to look back over Paul's experiences as a dedicated servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and see what further valuable lessons we can gain from his godly example.

In Acts chapters 24 to 26 we find Paul under arrest by the Romans for his own safety because of false charges brought against him by the Jews. He has been brought before the Roman governor, Felix, who could find no charge to bring against him and decides to keep him under guard. Two years pass and Paul finds himself in front of the Jewish king Agrippa with a further opportunity to defend himself. Paul does this by rehearsing the story of his conversion, from one who vehemently persecuted the followers of Christ to one who had a vision of the risen Lord on the Damascus road, and who had become a follower himself.

It is Paul's statement to Agrippa, found in verse 19, that is a challenge to us all. He said: "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" - "I was not disobedient." This in itself records the governing secret of Paul's life as a follower of Christ - as a Christian believer. This was the source of his amazing energies, so fearlessly expended in the cause of his Saviour. Paul never swerved from the path of service which his Lord had set before him. Such obedience involved him in sacrifice and loss and led him into paths from which mere human nature would have shrunk back. Behind his unquestioning obedience to Christ's will was the all powerful dynamic of his personal devotion to the One who had loved him and given Himself for him.

We should let this truth grip each one of us: that it is not by the volume of our activity and zeal that true Christian faith is attested. It is rather by the simplicity and directness of our obedience out of love for our Master who said to his disciples, "If you love me keep my commands."

There is another lesson to be learned from Paul's testimony, recorded for us in Acts chapter 22 verses 12 to 16.

He recounts how Ananias, the disciple from Damascus, said to him: "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear the words of his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard."

The knowledge of God's will includes all that any one needs for life and godliness. Paul was not disobedient to the Lord's will for him. We have seen in his life that the will of God embraced the three things referred to by Ananias, which are likewise vital to every believer. They are:

First: "To see the Righteous One". Saul, as he was, had a wonderful, personal revelation of the living Lord Jesus in that blinding light on the Damascus Road. His intimate communion with the Lord Jesus Christ did not stop there but developed and grew until he could say in later years "For me to live is Christ!" This is the primary qualification for the service of the Kingdom of Christ - a living, growing relationship with the Lord. Christ must be seen, first of all in salvation, before we can be his witnesses. Then we are to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3 verse 18)

The second thing was that Paul was to "Hear the words of (Christ's) mouth." He was to receive direct from the Lord the instructions as to what would be required of him as God's servant. He quoted to Agrippa the words spoken to him by Christ:

"... I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, do that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26 verses 15 to 18)

Third: He was to be a witness for Christ of all that he had seen and heard. And all that he would see later. A witness is someone who has actually seen and heard something happen. Paul had a personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus that day on the road to Damascus, and he continued to experience the power and grace of God in his life throughout his journeys. Because of this he was well qualified to be a faithful witness for Christ. It is not possible for anyone who has not had a saving encounter with the Lord Jesus, who does not know Him personally, to be his witness or to speak for Him in truth.

In summary then: vision, fellowship and service together make up the life which is abiding and valuable in the cause of Christ.

When writing in his letter to the Galatians, Paul would teach us that the proofs of his devotion to Christ and his cause were to be seen in the scars in his body gained through his various stonings and beatings. He refers to them in refutation of the charges of insincerity brought against him by his enemies, and as proof of his Apostleship. The student who is devoted to his master will re-echo his voice and reproduce his spirit. So it is with the servant of Christ. Devotion to him ensures that we inevitably become like him of whom we constantly think, with whom we constantly converse, and to whom we submit every choice we make. In all this the Saviour's disciples come to bear the marks of the Lord Jesus.

In his letter to the Ephesians, written from prison at Rome, in chapter 3 verse 1 and chapter 4 verse 1, Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." In reality he was a prisoner of the Roman authorities and yet he does not regard himself as in any sense their captive. He is there because Christ has himself appointed this experience for the discipline of his soul. The Lord has chosen this Roman prison as the sphere of Paul's present service. This prison experience became one of the most fruitful periods in Paul's life of service in the spread of the gospel and the building-up of the church through his writings. Writing to the Philippians about this time in prison, being chained to a prison guard, he told them: "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

So, Paul's life was drawing near to the end. Writing to Timothy, his son in the faith, he could say, in 2 Timothy chapter 4: ".the time of my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

So we come to the end of this series looking at the life of Paul, God's great servant whose influence on the church and the spread of the gospel goes on today through his inspired letters found in the New Testament of the Bible.