

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 42

Luke wrote the Book of Acts. He wrote both his Gospel and Acts to Theophilus, so that all who are *beloved of God* might have an ordered account of the coming of Yeshua and what followed. The Book continues where the Gospel ended, recounting the spread of the Gospel up until the time when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. The Book is easy to read. As we read, let us ensure that we retain our link with the history of Israel and the Covenant that God gave to Abraham. A new day dawned with the coming of Yeshua, but He did not come to establish the Christian Church like the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century AD. He sent His Holy Spirit to gather the faithful remnant of Judah, to whom He added those from the Gentile world who responded to the call to saving faith.

Day 1

Acts Chapter 1. Note the details carefully. Before He ascended to the Father, Yeshua appeared to His disciples at various times, over a period of 40 days. Some of these appearances are described in the Gospels. We do not have more details than this, but we know that Yeshua equipped His Apostles in a very special way to begin their ministry. The chosen disciples were called Apostles, because they were being sent out with the Gospel message. These first Apostles saw the risen Lord. Others have been sent out into the world over the centuries, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to continue the Great Commission that is described in Verse 8. We sometimes use the term *missionary* for this specific calling. Starting in Jerusalem, and moving gradually out into the world by stages, the first Apostles began the work that is ongoing today, as one generation succeeds another. The pattern of ministry is the same for us all, starting where we are and moving out to where the Holy Spirit sends us. Let us not force the metaphor of *our Jerusalem* too far, however. The Gospel began in the City of Jerusalem for a purpose, so that the worldwide Covenant community knows where it began and that it is rooted into the background revealed through the Tanach.

Yeshua taught His disciples through what He *did and taught* (Verse 1). He sent His Apostles to do the same. First they were to wait for the Holy Spirit to empower them. It was not long until the Feast of Shavuot (renamed Pentecost by the Christian Church), which is 50 days from the Feast of Firstfruits which follows Passover. Yeshua fulfilled Passover through His Sacrificial death, and is the Firstfruits of the Kingdom. The Apostles waited for the fulfillment of Shavuot.

They had been commanded to watch and pray, so we imagine them in the upper room, in study and prayer. Peter recalled passages from the Psalms which seemed appropriate to the way Judas had to be replaced. We do not know whether this was inspired or not, because there was another Apostle yet to be appointed, named Paul. We hear nothing more of Matthias, but neither do we hear much more about some of the other Apostles, only that together they were used to strengthen the believing community in Jerusalem. Peter quoted from Psalms 69 and 109. Psalm 69 relates to judgment on the wicked. Psalm 109 is concerned with false accusers. With Judas in mind, Peter read it as a clear description of what he had done in falsely accusing Yeshua, coming to the Verse which said *let another take his office*. From this we can see that the Apostles used the Tanach as their reference point for understanding the circumstances they were in.

Chapter 2. It is often taught that the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples in the upper room. This is a misconception. They went to the Temple for the Feast of Shavuot. That is where they mingled with the crowds of Jews who had come up to Jerusalem for the Feast. The Temple had different areas called houses. The Apostles were together in one place – one house. Then occurred the event foretold by Joel. The Holy Spirit fell first on the Apostles. Remember this was the Feast of Shavuot and Jews from every country came to celebrate the Feast. Shavuot was a memorial of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Horeb in the Sinai Desert (Exodus 19). They would be recalling the account of when fire descended on the mountain and a shofar was heard: all this gave emphasis to the importance of Torah in the lives of the Children of Israel. Now, before them, the same signs were given as the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles. Thus the coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfillment of the Giving of Torah. This also brought fulfillment to the prophecy of Jeremiah (Chapter 31), that the Holy Spirit was given to write the Torah on the heart of God's people.

There were other links to the record of the Tanach. For those who were gathered, God reversed the confusion of Babel, which had divided people of the world into different languages. Now the Holy Spirit was bringing them together again. They all heard the preaching of Peter in their own language. Was this implied through Zephaniah 3:9? Was the language of the Holy Spirit the pure language through which God's people would now be united? Was this also the beginning of the fulfillment of Ezekiel 37, the dry bones coming to life? Many questions arose as a result of the Holy Spirit coming in this way for the first time. Here was the beginning of the gathering of the faithful remnant foreshadowed by the return from Babylonian exile.

Yeshua had ascended to Heaven and now He was beginning to gather the faithful remnant, the Israel of God, those who would respond to the Gospel message and receive the Holy Spirit. Moses had faithfully received Torah, taught its principles and passed on the teaching to Israel. Yeshua came and sent His Spirit to fulfill the types and shadows of the Torah in a new and living way. Read Peter's sermon. This is the Gospel message, rooted in the Torah, Prophets and Writings, fulfilled in Yeshua through the giving of the Holy Spirit. *What shall we do?* they asked. *Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the Name of Yeshua HaMashiach for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to*

your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. (Verses 37-39).
Consider these words carefully.

The Temple where Peter preached has now been destroyed, but the area where it stood has been excavated in modern-times and a large number of baptismal pools (called *mikvot*) have been discovered. 3000 men responded to the preaching of Peter and they went to these pools for total immersion baptism in the tradition of the Jews. This was like the baptism of John, but with the added dimension that the Holy Spirit was given to those who rose from the waters of baptism. God heard their prayer of repentance and sent the Holy Spirit to confirm that they were forgiven, to bring new life, inner cleansing, the power to overcome sinfulness and to be at one with the Father through Yeshua. 3000 had been destroyed because of the golden calf (Exodus 32:28) at the first Shavuot, now 3000 were redeemed from their sins at the fulfillment of Shavuot.

Imagine all this! This was better even than the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah. The community grew and strengthened through the study of Tanach, fellowship and prayer, in the context of Yeshua and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Verses 40 to 47 do not describe the beginning of the Christian Church but the gathering of the Jewish remnant to be God's Covenant community. Once they were established and strengthened they would be sent out into the world to be the messengers of God to invite multitudes from all nations to join this community of faith.

Chapter 3. Just as Yeshua had performed miracles of healing and deliverance to accompany His teaching, so the Holy Spirit empowered His Apostles. First we have the account of the lame man. Note that Peter and John were on their way to the Temple. They did not detach themselves from Temple worship, seeing fulfillment of Torah rather than replacement in God's work among them. Later they would not have the Temple and would more fully realize that *the people of God* are His Temple. This was a time of transition, and the Temple ministry helped maintain awareness of how its types and shadows were fulfilled, not replaced, in Yeshua.

The three stages in Peter's sermon are instructive. Verses 1 to 18 establish the background of Yeshua's sacrificial death, now accomplished, fulfilling certain Prophecies. Verse 19 describes the expected response. This is our expectation too, that through repentance and faith we turn to God, being helped through the remaining years of this world through times of spiritual refreshing. Times of refreshing, often called *revival*, have often been given to communities of God's people; we all need such refreshment from the Spirit of God to help us maintain our path of discipleship. This is Yeshua's commitment to us while we wait for His return – the present expectation. The future expectation is in Verse 21. We wait for His return before the Kingdom of God is made fully manifest. The Kingdom waits, in all its fullness, for the return of the King. We receive Kingdom power to maintain our walk and witness until then. Peter understood this clearly and his sermon is preserved in our Bibles to remind us what he was shown.

Chapter 4. It was a wonderful new beginning for the community of faith in Jerusalem, which would grow like a tree across the earth. In a short time the number of men grew to 5000 (Verse 4). If we add to this number wives and children, we visualize a very large community of Jewish believers in Jerusalem already. Yet, just as in Yeshua's day, not all believed. Many religious leaders would not accept that a new day was dawning and that they were not chosen as the initiators of this new move of God. This large and growing community would have been a threat to them. Just as Yeshua provoked reaction so did the Apostles. Yeshua had told them to expect to be drawn before councils (Luke 21:12-15), and so began the fulfillment of what He had said. A person must obey the ruling authorities, providing it does not prevent them from obeying God. On this occasion there was not much that the religious council could do on account of the miracle that had been performed. This then became the first opportunity for the Apostles to stand before the Council and not deny their faith. They were growing into their new ministry under the guidance of God. Their prayers were heard and God confirmed this through the sign of the building shaking. The community of disciples continued to grow and to organize themselves as a believing community within the wider community of Jerusalem.

Day 2

Chapter 5. The incident involving Ananias and Sapphira has some parallels with Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10) and other situations when a new era is beginning. We might remember the man who lost his life for gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day (Numbers 15:32-36), and the offerings of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). The Book of Malachi taught us that God looks on the heart of those who bring offerings to Him. A wonderful new era broke out with the giving of the Holy Spirit, but this was not an opportunity to take the principles of Scripture lightly. Therefore, Ananias and Sapphira are to be examples to us. God still looks into our hearts and requires honesty.

The congregation of believers continued to grow and this brought more trouble with the religious authorities. This time a wise word from Gamaliel caused the Apostles to be freed: *if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you be found to fight against God.* (Verse 39) These words echo across all history. From a small beginning the Gospel spread across the entire world to bring multitudes into the Kingdom verifying that this, indeed, is of God. The Apostles did not go free without being beaten, but they counted this an honour to be so treated on account of the Gospel. They remembered how much Yeshua Himself had suffered!

Verse 42 is significant. They taught both in the Temple and from house to house.

Chapter 6. Step by step the community became structured. Elders and Deacons were appointed to cover both spiritual and practical ministries. The Deacons are named. Note that they were not chosen because of their practical abilities alone. Stephen, in particular, is noted as a man filled with the Holy Spirit. The appointment of Elders and Deacons was not a new thing, but a new application of an old order that went back to the time of Moses, when Jethro advised him to appoint leaders who would interpret Torah for the issues that arose in the community, and share Moses' responsibilities (Exodus 18, Numbers 11).

Now we come to the account of the first martyr. Stephen, full of faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit, was arrested because of the false testimony of evil men. Note the false testimony that Stephen was accused of preaching against the customs handed down from Moses (Verse 14). He was not doing this, but showing their fulfillment in Yeshua. He told this to the Council before whom he stood.

Chapter 7. We can learn much from Stephen's speech to the Council, just as we can from the sermons Peter gave. Notice how he summarized what God had done through the history of Israel to prepare the way for Yeshua. This is how to preach the Gospel in the context of the history of Israel. Stephen rebuked those who had brought him to trial and this made him the first martyr. Sometimes Stephen is called *the first Christian Martyr*, but this takes him out of the context of the believing community of Jerusalem, who were called by other names, such as *the people of the way* or *Jewish disciples of Yeshua*. The term Christian had not been invented!

Now the young man, Saul, came to the fore for the first time. He witnessed of the death of Stephen, who gave up his life willingly for the glory of the risen Messiah.

Chapter 8. Saul had been tutored under Gamaliel. He was a young zealous Hebrew, from the Tribe of Benjamin, who knew the Torah in detail. He did not understand it as being fulfilled by Yeshua, despite Stephen's powerful exposition. In his misguided zeal he was causing havoc among the believers. Persecution was increasing, but there was no restraint on the advance of the Gospel. The second phase of growth was beginning, with Philip going to Samaria, and others who were scattered going far and wide. Sometimes we may think that the disciples were getting too comfortable in Jerusalem so the Lord "raised up some persecution" to get them moving into the world. This is not so. There was trouble for them in Jerusalem from the start. It was simply God's timing to move the Apostles further afield at this time. The growing persecution did not hinder God's work but enabled it, showing that such persecution would not silence the Apostles.

More lessons were to be learned. Baptism in water was not always followed by baptism of the Holy Spirit, showing that discipleship is not a matter of ritual. Neither can the gift of the Holy Spirit be bought and used for personal gain.

The incident with the Ethiopian reminds us that God prepares a person for the Kingdom and sends His anointed ministers to fulfill His purpose. Philip was obedient to the prompting of the Spirit and found the Ethiopian reading exactly the right passage from the Tanach. The Ethiopian needed someone to show him how Yeshua fulfilled the Prophecies of the Tanach, transforming what he already knew into New Covenant understanding. He was immediately baptized with the confession of faith recorded in Verse 37. Philip had done all that God required and he was miraculously taken away, leaving the Ethiopian to continue his journey under the direct guidance of God.

These were first-time occurrences of major points of teaching. If we meditate on these incidents, the Holy Spirit will show us their relevance for today. The work of the Apostles continues into our generation from the starting points 2000 years ago. Multitudes of us now share the ministry of the Gospel in countries all over the world.

Day 3

Chapter 9. Saul intensely persecuted the believers in Jerusalem. So determined was he to destroy this sect of Judaism that he asked for letters of introduction to Synagogues in Damascus, the Capital of neighbouring Syria. Then occurred the *Damascus Road experience*, where Paul was touched by the grace of God, so that his zeal for persecuting the congregations of believers turned to zeal to strengthen them. This incident as been used, over the centuries, as an encouragement for others to take the same dramatic turn in their life. Nothing is impossible for God. Saul came to understand the grace and mercy of God. With the same revelation as the disciples had on the road to Emmaus, Saul was able to use his training in the Scriptures as a foundation from which to bring understanding of the Gospel message. He was God's choice as an Apostle to the Gentiles. His writing has been preserved in the Bible for all time so that his ministry continues wherever the Gospel is preached. Saul, once an enemy of the believers, now became an enemy of the Jews who did not know Yeshua. He used the name Paul for the majority of his ministry.

Peter was the prominent Apostle to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles.

Chapter 10. While it was Paul who would later lead the ministry to the Gentiles, Peter was used to open the door. The vision of the sheet with unclean animals was the beginning, whereby God prepared him to meet Cornelius in the town of Caesarea, a sea port on the Mediterranean Coast. The Prophets had spoken clearly about Yeshua bringing salvation to the Gentiles as well as to Israel. Simeon understood this (Luke 2:31-32), and the Great Commission (Acts 1:8) confirmed this. Abraham was appointed father of many nations (Genesis 12:3, 17:4-6). The New Covenant in Yeshua's Blood was given first to Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:33), with the intent of also including those from the Gentile nations who come to saving faith, when the Gospel goes out to all nations. Up to this point, the Holy Spirit had used the Apostles to build the Covenant community among the Jews. Now it was time to move forward into the world, yet Peter had innate prejudice to overcome. All his life he had known that Jews were to be God's Holy people, set apart through all the practices of Torah. By contrast, Gentiles were considered unclean. Gentiles ate all kinds of food forbidden to the Jews, so the vision of the animals on the sheet was a symbol of uncleanness. God was not using this vision to change the Torah principles of clean and unclean animals. He was using it in a metaphoric way. This was to challenge Peter to accept that Gentiles would now be brought to faith through the cleansing power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God brought about the meeting with Cornelius and showed the meaning of the vision by the way these Gentiles believed the Gospel message and received the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 11. The new era began. Peter told the other Apostles that God had now opened the door to the Gentiles. Meanwhile the Apostles, who had been scattered due to persecution in Judea, went to far-off cities proclaiming the Gospel to the Jews living there (Verse 19). Congregations

formed, including a prominent one in Antioch, a city in modern-day Syria. Barnabas, a disciple with a great ministry of encouragement now became the means of Saul being brought from Damascus to Antioch. At this time the first opportunity arose for congregations outside Judea to send help to their brethren in Judea, where a famine beset the Land. This was a means by which Barnabas could introduce Saul to the believers in Jerusalem. On his own Paul would have been feared as the one who had brought great persecution to them.

Chapter 12. More trouble erupted in Judea. This time Herod persecuted the believers and James, one of Yeshua's first disciples, was martyred. Peter was imprisoned, but his earthly ministry was not over and he was released with the help of an angel. The wicked King Herod, like many of the Roman Emperors, liked to be considered a god, but suffered due punishment: he was struck dead by an angel (Verse 23). Still the Word of God spread. Now was the time for Saul to begin his ministry. He and Barnabas took a young man named John Mark with them back to Antioch, which became their home base for a time of preparation. Read all the details carefully.

Day 4

There are many ways we can read the Bible. This year we are weaving together the main themes, ensuring that we are well-rooted in our Covenant heritage. We are building a good understanding of who we are and what the plans the Lord are as we move into the future of this world. Another approach to Bible study might have been to develop various themes more fully, moving from Book to Book to trace those themes. Yet another approach might be to read the Bible with a particular ministry in mind. We all have our special calling and ministry and we must use the entire Bible to strengthen us for that ministry. In future days, no doubt, you will devise other patterns of Bible study.

At this point in our studies we begin to follow the ministry of Saul more fully. He travelled from place to place establishing congregations. He went first to the Jews, who lived in small communities in various cities, and then turned more fully to the Gentiles. He became known as Paul at this time.

Paul made four main journeys. Sometimes on these journeys, he wrote letters to various congregations. We have some of these letters in our Bibles and they deal with a range of issues relating to the establishment of order in the congregations. It is at this point that we might, in the future, choose different approaches to our Bible studies. We might as it were, pause with Paul at each of the towns visited to study His teaching there. Consider this when you devise your next Bible reading plan. For our purposes this time we will complete our reading of Acts before turning to the remaining letters in the New Testament, and then we will complete our studies in the Book of Revelation.

As we read the account of Paul's journeys remember who he was and how he ministered. He never divorced himself from his Jewish background. When he went back to Jerusalem he observed the Feasts as a fulfilled Jew, from the Tribe of Benjamin. The Christian Church emerged from biblical Judaism. As time went on, the Gentile branches dominated the Covenant family and neglected the original heritage. Paul was adopted as if he had been born a Gentile, divorced from his background. In a similar way, Yeshua was somewhat redefined as a Greek or Roman god. As we read about the way Paul fulfilled his ministry to the Gentiles let us have this in mind, so that we may repair any breach in our own thinking. While Paul turned specifically to the Gentiles, Peter, James and other Apostles continued with their own ministry to the Jews, so that the entire body of believers, one in the Lord, were being built together in the different areas of the world. Paul found resistance from certain Jews, but not from all. Paul's journeys were to enable Gentiles to be included, with the Jewish disciples, into one community of believers from all countries of the world.

The Christian Church took the title *Apostle* and gave it the new name, *missionary*. There have been many Christians who were called to the ministry of the apostle, and have been sent out in the same way that Paul was sent. The title *missionary* brings to mind many wonderful accounts of what God has done throughout the world. Nevertheless, we must be careful that the term does not redefine Paul's ministry in a way that uproots it from where Yeshua planted the first seeds of

the Gospel, among the Children of Israel. Paul is often said to have accomplished four *missionary journeys*. We will call them *apostolic journeys*.

The apostolic journeys can be traced on maps of the Mediterranean region. Paul's journeys went step by step outwards from Judea into Syria and the countries to the North West, predominantly in the modern areas of Turkey, Greece and southern Asia, finally ending in Rome. It is instructive to study this on a map. Often such maps are in the back of our Bibles. The timing of the journeys and when his letters were written are approximate. There is considerable agreement from scholars as to the timing of the journeys, but some disagreement on the timing of some letters. Differences of opinion do not affect the overall picture of Paul's ministry.

The first apostolic journey was between approximately 46 AD and 49 AD, taking him from Antioch to Cyprus, Perga in Pamphylia, Pisidian Antioch (a different Antioch from Syrian Antioch), Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, back to Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch again, Pamphylia, Perga, Attalia, and back to Antioch in Syria. Paul's letter to the Galatians is thought to have been written in 48 or 49 AD while Paul was on this journey. In approximately 49 AD Paul and Barnabas returned to Jerusalem for consultation with the other Apostles.

Acts Chapter 13. Saul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and settled there until the Holy Spirit set them apart for the work that they were now to do. It is instructive to study the manner of this call and commission. It was initiated by the Holy Spirit, confirmed by the fellowship and commissioned through the laying on of hands of the elders. Study the details of their ministry as they began to travel from place to place, preaching the Gospel, teaching from the Torah and establishing groups of families into communities of disciples. They went first to the Jewish synagogues, confirming that God's purpose was to integrate believers from the Gentile world into communities of disciples which included both Jews and Gentiles. In the synagogues, the Jews had maintained the traditional readings from the yearly cycle of Torah and Prophets (Verse 15). Just as Yeshua had done in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), Paul and Barnabas preached to the Jews, showing how the Tanach was fulfilled through Yeshua.

Three groups of people are mentioned at Antioch in Pisidia. First there were the Jews, who met in the synagogue. These Jews followed the teaching of Moses, but needed to understand fulfillment in Yeshua. This would bring new life to the people and light on their studies. Secondly, there were the Proselytes (Verse 43). These were also known as *God-fearers*. They were Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and who had joined the Jewish community. They were allowed to become members of these communities within certain parameters. They retained their identity of being Gentiles and were not expected to keep all the teaching of Judaism. They took part in the Sabbath and Feasts and kept what was known as the Noahide commands. These went back to the time after the Flood (Genesis 9:1-17). In considering the legal requirements they would ask of God-fearers, the Jews codified the precepts of God's Covenant with Noah into seven laws. We need not study this in detail now, but it has a bearing on Acts 15. These *God-fearers* or *Proselytes* were not seen as full converts to Judaism but were accepted into the Jewish community. The third group in Pisidian Antioch, the Gentiles, remained outside of the Jewish community. The Jewish Synagogues were prominent in many towns and cities and Paul began his ministry among the Jews and God-fearers, reaching out first to them and then to the Gentiles. It is reasonable to

suppose that he anticipated building fellowships of disciples first among the Jews. Into the groups of Jewish disciples of Yeshua, would be added converts from among the Gentiles. If this was the view, it was not to come about so easily. Paul realized that he would have to fulfill his call to the Gentiles by accepting the limited response of the Jews, and moving on. This was a beginning of the separation of disciples of Yeshua from the synagogues. The consequences of this separation have gone on up to today.

It is often thought that Paul turned away from the Jews at this point. Verse 46 seems to imply a decision to change his strategy. We can read a lot into it, seeing Paul as annoyed with stubborn Jews and now abandoning any ministry to them. This was not so. As we continue to read the Book of Acts, we find that he continued, in each community, to first preach the Gospel to the Jews. He did not lose his vision of believing Gentiles joining communities of Jewish disciples of Yeshua, even when he found resistance. The statement in Verse 46 was specifically to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch. He decided not to restrict his ministry to the Gentiles because of poor reception in that particular synagogue. He began again in each new town, going first to the synagogue. Some of the new groups of disciples were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. In our day, we have the results of 2000 years of growing separation between Jews and Christians. After all these years, there are many issues to consider as to why this happened and what might be done to repair the breach. Paul's hope was that the Gospel would be the means whereby Jewish communities would be brought to new life in Messiah, afterwards extending into the Gentile world. This hope was not realized, but it should now be *our* hope, to see the Body of the Lord fully united in Him towards the end of the age.

Chapter 14. Paul and Barnabas continued from place to place, with varying receptions, often finding great hostility – after all false prophets were to be stoned, according to the Law of Moses! Notice the reception at Lystra, where Paul was called Hermes and Barnabas Zeus (Verse 13). Notice their reaction (Verses 14-15). The Christian Church has been beset by Greek and Roman imagery for many centuries. There is a constant spiritual battle going on to resist pressure to syncretize the Gospel out of its Hebraic background into a Greco-Roman milieu. This brings with it images like the gods of Greece and Rome and an integration with Greek philosophy. A minor illustration of this is in the use of the term hermeneutics, which is a scientific approach to preaching. Paul was called Hermes because Hermes was thought to be a messenger of the gods. Hermeneutics, therefore, implies some acceptance of this idea. Paul tore His clothes at such thoughts!

Chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas experienced what Peter had also experienced in the family of Cornelius. The Holy Spirit was beginning to move upon Gentiles as well as Jews. The problem was parallel with that which arose in the Synagogues when God-fearers desired to become members of the Jewish community, believing in the God of Israel. Read the details of this Chapter carefully. They are relevant to our own day when we are once again asking similar questions. In our day we have inherited the consequences of the rift between Christians and Jews that began in the

synagogues such as Pisidian Antioch, now exacerbated by anti-Semitism and syncretism with philosophies of Greece and Rome.

A frank discussion developed in the council of Apostles and Elders. Several factions emerged. There were those who found it difficult to see beyond the external manifestations of Torah, and others who had seen the workings of the Holy Spirit irrespective of such observance. The principle of observance was central to the discussions. What *must* new disciples from a Gentile background do to be included in the community of the Lord's disciples? The Holy Spirit inspired the council to the conclusion. The four injunctions of the letter to be sent to the new believers from the Gentile world were similar to the rules for the God-fearers. It was a form of the Noahide laws. These laws also appear elsewhere in Torah (Leviticus 17 and 18). Each of these four injunctions was associated with worship of false gods. In effect, the letter contained 4 things to be observed in order that new converts would not be trapped into following by false gods. The letter could be paraphrased to: *be careful not to follow practices by which satan traps you. If you do this, then you will be free to respond to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and grow in the faith.* The Holy Spirit's ministry is to write the Torah on the hearts of believers. Therefore, the letter from the Apostles to the congregations did not cancel the principles of Torah, but showed trust in the Holy Spirit to fulfill the promise given to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Circumcision in the flesh was not required, because this was to be fulfilled through circumcision of the heart for disciples from Gentile backgrounds. Thinking back to the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, this letter would have been perfectly acceptable here, and also to new congregations springing up. It was a master-stroke of inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

The key principle of the New Covenant is *freedom* for each of us *to learn*. The bounds of this freedom were defined in the Apostolic Council. Verse 16 and 17, which is taken from Amos 9:11-12, was the Apostle's confirmation that what they were now seeing was the promised work of the Holy Spirit. The *Tabernacle of David* was David's Sukkah, his temporary dwelling place on this earth. This Tabernacle was now being extended to the pilgrims and strangers of all nations, and the metaphor was being fulfilled in Yeshua. It was assumed that Torah would continue to be taught in the Synagogues (Verse 21), now interpreted through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in terms of fulfillment through Yeshua HaMashaich.

With this matter now settled, the Gospel continued to go out in power, with clear principles on which the communities of disciples could be built. A dispute in Pamphylia, concerning John Mark caused Barnabas and Paul to go in different directions (Verse 37-41). Paul told the men in Lystra (Chapter 14, Verse 15), *we are men with the same nature as you*. A little of this humanness showed through! This has a way of encouraging us today. We also let our humanness show through at times (to our shame). A new disciple called Silas now accompanied Paul, while Barnabas took John Mark with him to Cyprus.

Chapter 16. So began Paul's second Apostolic Journey. Between approximately 49 AD and 52 AD, he visited Antioch and areas of Syria and Cilicia, also journeying to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Phrygia, Galatia, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, and back to Antioch, which was his home community. He visited new places and also returned to

ones where there were existing congregations. At times he performed the ministry of evangelist (one who proclaims the Gospel message), at times preacher (one who speaks the Words of God in the manner of a Prophet), sometimes a teacher (bringing understanding to the Tanach in context of the revelation of Yeshua), sometimes a pastor (a shepherd to the flock). In all ways he sought to build up the body of disciples, scattered as they were in various communities around the world. Some of the towns that Paul visited gave rise to letters to the disciples there. The two letters to the Thessalonians were written in 50 or 51AD while on this second journey. Read the details of this journey for yourself.

During Paul's time in Derbe and Lystra, he identified a young man named Timothy. Note how Paul encouraged young men like Silas and Timothy. Just as Yeshua prepared his disciples for the work that they would later do in His Name, so Paul was careful to help young men who would continue with various ministries when his work was over. The incident of Timothy's circumcision (Verse 4) does not mean that Paul was going against the Jerusalem Council. He knew full well that circumcision in the flesh was now fulfilled for both Jew and Gentile through circumcision of the heart. Nevertheless, the external sign of being a Jew in the physical line from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was to be maintained according to the command of God to Abraham (Genesis 17). The Jews are to remain a distinct people. They are visible signs to the world of His faithfulness to the Covenant. Therefore, the circumcision of Timothy was because of respect for the Jews in the area.

Notice the principle of the Macedonian call. Paul was not at liberty to go just anywhere, wide though his ministry was into the Gentile world. Like Yeshua, he was to be doing only what the Father was doing, so he learned to move from town to town only as led by the Spirit.

Day 5

Chapter 17. Continue to consider the account that Luke compiled of Paul's ministry in the different towns and cities. In Thessalonica, there was a good reception in the synagogue at first, but then some resistance. In Berea there was a much better reception from the Jews. They searched through the Tanach to test out what Paul taught about Yeshua's fulfillment of all Scripture. In Athens, Paul caused more response, this time from the Greek philosophers. He drew reference to their own ideas of an unknown god in order to help them to consider the truth about Yeshua. Missionaries in various cultures of the world have adapted this inspired technique in many circumstances, to find openings for the Gospel.

Verses 26 and 27 present an inspired understanding of God's purpose in scattering the nations at the time of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). It is appropriate that it was spoken in Athens. In our day there is a move to reunite the world into one system, restoring the values of Greece and Rome. This is a false unity which will result in the antichrist system. The only true unity is through Yeshua HaMashaich. This was shown in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came down on the Jews from every nation, breaking the separation due to different languages.

Paul's preaching drew some people to saving faith and stirred up indignation among others.

Chapter 18. Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome at this time. Paul and Silas discovered this when they next went to Corinth. Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were tent-makers. Paul carried on his trade there, to earn his own income. *Tent-making* has become a metaphor for any minister of the Gospel who earns his own living whilst pursuing his ministry. This means that he will not need financial support from local believers, accepting just their hospitality. This tradition of learning a trade was past on by the Jewish rabbis, who sought to be practically as well as spiritually minded.

Notice that Paul had his hair cut at Cenchrea. We do not know everything that Paul did, but there are hints here and there of his continuing to be an observant Jew. He had taken a vow, which we assume was a nazirite vow, according to the principles of Torah (Numbers 6:4-5). He would not have cut his hair for the period of his separation to the Lord. That period came to an end in Cenchrea (Verse 18), where he had his hair cut. He made his way back to Antioch via Ephesus. Note, again how he reasoned with the Jews in the Synagogue (Verse 19), never missing an opportunity to minister to his own people and not detaching his ministry from its foundations.

Chapters 19 and 20. Paul's Third Apostolic journey, beginning again in Antioch, was from 52 AD to 56 AD. On this journey he returned to a number of the existing congregations to strengthen the disciples. He went to regions of Galatia and Phrygia, to Ephesus, regions of Macedonia and Greece, Troas and Miletus. He ended this journey in Jerusalem. 1 and 2 Corinthians and the Epistle to the Romans were written during this period.

Read the details of Paul's continuing ministry. He was approaching the end of his travels, and knew that he would be seeing some of the disciples for the last time. In Chapter 20, Verses 25-38, Paul declared himself free of the blood of any man. He had ministered through great trials and not fallen short of his commission from God. It is not easy for any of us to claim this, but it should be our goal. His parting from the Ephesians was very moving. He was determined to get to Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) Verse 16. He also knew that trouble was ahead.

Day 6

Chapter 21. Should Paul have gone to Jerusalem? Was he being stubborn to ignore the prophecy of Agabus (Verses 10 and 11)? Perhaps he was following in the steps of Yeshua who resisted the pleading of His disciples not to go up to Jerusalem (Matthew 16:21-23). We do not know. All we know is what we read in the account of Paul's return to Jerusalem and his arrest. Previously, Paul had been the enemy of Yeshua's disciples: now he was their friend and seen as an enemy of other Jews.

Chapter 22. Paul took this opportunity to witness to the risen Lord. How appropriate that this was at the Feast of Shavout, the time when the Holy Spirit first came down on the disciples. Since that day in Acts 2, the congregations of Yeshua's disciples had formed in Jerusalem, Judea and in many cities of the Gentiles. Now Paul had come back to testify to all that the Holy Spirit had done, and how he had obeyed the Lord's command to minister to the Gentiles. Just as Yeshua was drawn before the Sanhedrin, so was Paul. Paul's situation was complicated by the fact that he was a Roman citizen. He was a member of the Tribe of Benjamin by birth. He was from a family that could afford to buy Roman citizenship, thereby ensuring protection from Rome.

Chapter 23. Paul testified concerning Yeshua in every circumstance. Now, he was in a fearful situation, but saw it as opportunity, perhaps remembering the Lord's teaching (Luke 21:12-15). He appeared before the Sanhedrin and then before the Roman authorities. Read the gripping account for yourself.

Chapter 24. The corruption between the Jewish authorities and Rome was evident as the account of Paul's trial proceeded. We must take note of this in preparation for the coming days. If a form of Christianity is led to compromise with the antichrist system there may be trouble ahead for true disciples of Yeshua. Let us take heart from Paul's circumstances. We must not deliberately put ourselves into situations that cause unnecessary trouble, but if the Lord leads us to be His witnesses in various circumstances that arise, then we must be bold like Paul.

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Chapters 25 to 28. The final four Chapters of Acts follow Paul on his final journey, this time to Rome. This takes us up to 62 AD. While in Rome he completed his writings, including Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. We cannot be sure of the exact manner of Paul's death. It is thought that Peter was taken to Rome in 62 AD. Paul, at this time was under house arrest, and some people think he may have travelled to Spain before being imprisoned again in 64 AD. Both Paul and Peter are thought to have been crucified in Rome, both in approximately 64 AD. The only details of which we are sure are contained in the Bible. Take time today to read the remaining chapters of Acts, and consider carefully any lessons we might learn from this important period when the Gospel became rooted in Jerusalem with branches extending throughout the world.
