

*'Message and Mission' Acts 13 – 28 Introduction to Part 2*

Hello again, Marge Hanna here to welcome you back to the continuing and exciting story of the early church. Thanks for inviting me into your group today! If you were a part of a KYB group who studied the *first* part of Luke's account, then you will know that this term you are in for another treat!

Perhaps you would like to pause the recording and ask the Lord to open our eyes to the truth of his word as we spend the next little while together.

*Pause disc*

If you were not able to study Acts Part 1 you may feel you are coming in on the 2<sup>nd</sup> act of a drama. We will recap a little in a moment, but I would recommend you read the full story in those first twelve chapters. It reads like an adventure with some quite challenging and impassioned speeches that come from both the apostle Peter and, an ordinary believer who has gone down in history as the very first who was willing to lay down his life to get that impassioned message over to the religious leaders of the day especially.

Stephen was that believer, whose role in the young church was as part of a team to care for those in the fellowship who needed special provision of food and the necessities of life. Many of these were Greek widows whose situation could be quite dire in that society. But Stephen was not just a member of the catering committee! He and his co-workers were men of great faith, filled with the Holy Spirit and some were evangelists.

Stephen's passion reflects the urgency that the early church felt in the proclamation of the gospel. He recites their history as God's people and their repeated disobedience to God. They were fully expecting Jesus to return soon, and both Peter and Stephen felt constrained to *confront* the religious leaders and the crowds, with the enormity of their actions in putting to death their long-awaited Messiah. They preached for repentance and belief in Jesus and acceptance that he was in reality their Messiah, the King of the Jews. Pilate had got it right with *that* inscription on the cross which had really angered those same leaders.

Abraham to whom they looked with great pride, was promised by God, that through his descendants all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Just out of interest why don't you pause the recording and check around your group to see where in the world, or around Australia you or your family have all come from. Then I'll share about our group.

*Pause disc*

In our group we certainly are a mix of backgrounds. There's a Scot, then me, from the North of England, one lady from the South of England, only the Brits among you will see the difference! Then there is one from Holland and one from Germany and, a couple of Aussies who may have forebears probably from other different places too.

We take such diversity in a Christian fellowship totally for granted, don't we? We *are* all one in Christ Jesus!

But for the early believers the differences between Jew and Gentile were stark, clearly defined, and ingrained from childhood, and not easily overcome. But as we saw the story unfold in those first 12 chapters it became clear that the early church *had* begun to grasp the fact that Messiah had not only come for the Jews but for all mankind. The Gentiles were included, and yes, this did cause some continuing ripples in the church, as you will discover as you study this term. They had to learn how this 'oneness in Christ' was to be worked out in everyday living, and in their fellowships.

Zealous Jews had long awaited the return of God's presence to the Temple. Disobedience and idol worship of course, had caused the exile to Babylon, some had returned, but as long as they were ruled by pagan powers, they were still 'in an exile'. What they needed of course was forgiveness, but what they mainly *did* was to insist that law keeping could solve the problem and hasten the coming of Messiah and the Kingdom of God on earth. So when Jesus came and heralded the kingdom as its king, most just could not grasp it.

Dr Luke, we discovered last time, *is* accepted as the writer of both the gospel that bears his name, and of this document which we know as the Acts of the Apostles. Some detective work revealed Luke being a part of the action in this second part of *that* document. He uses the term 'we' when he joins the apostle Paul's team in Troas just before they set sail after Paul has a vision from God of the need of the Macedonians. Paul calls Dr Luke in one of his letters "the beloved physician" or in the most recent NIV version "Our dear friend Luke the doctor" so obviously by the time he wrote that, that's what he considered him, and not just a co-worker.

Luke was a Gentile believer from Syrian Antioch, way up north near the border of present-day Turkey. He had spent time in Jerusalem during Paul's imprisonment in Judea, and we reached the conclusion – with some detective work! – that the meticulous research that is clearly evident in the gospel, and in Acts of both people and places, happened most probably during those 2 years. So, when he came to write the account of Jesus' life on earth, he had eyewitness statements and his research to add to the circulating material of Jesus' sayings and actions. Even with all the notes he *had* taken, he would have been relying totally on the Holy Spirit to bring it all clearly to his mind.

Similarly when he finished the first scroll and commenced the second he had all the information he had gathered from those who had met Jesus *after* his resurrection and had been present when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and had *heard* those impassioned speeches that we have recorded for us. Theophilus to whom he addresses both parts of his document, got first, an accurate and reliable account of Jesus' life on earth *with* his disciples, and then in the Acts, of Jesus' life from heaven now *in* his disciples by the Holy Spirit. All recorded, carefully and methodically by Dr Luke most likely during the time Paul was imprisoned in Rome awaiting trial.

## What makes this manuscript so important to us?

Can you imagine a Bible without the Acts? We would be hard-pressed to understand the letters Paul, Peter and others wrote without all the history of those first 30 years of the church to refer to. We would have nothing to help us understand what had happened on the Day of Pentecost and without Peter's sermon on that day and on other occasions, how would we know what the apostles taught the crowds and how they answered the religious authorities? How would we account for the spread of the gospel?

Scholars have been concerned over the years that the first part of the Acts was very Semitic, Jewish in tone. Well it probably would be, wouldn't it, if most of your notes and all of your memories are of those two years living and travelling in Judea and Galilee? And the people he met would've been a real influence too.

This second part is very much more Greek, Hellenistic in tone, which is hardly surprising as the writer, Luke, actually came from a Gentile town in Syria and has spent a couple of years with Paul himself available while he was writing, influencing his style, as he fills in the details for Luke of his mission to the Gentile world over the years. They *are* after all, now *in* Rome. Luke most likely assisted in the daily tasks of caring for Paul, for example shopping in the markets. He would have worshipped with believers in their homes – unlike Paul, Luke would have been free to do so – all in this very cosmopolitan centre. It was all bound to influence his style!

Paul anticipated that his trial result would be positive and was planning to reach those 'ends of the earth' areas with his heart set on going to Spain, probably after a promised visit to Philippi first.

Who knows what he knew of the regions beyond the Rock of Gibraltar. As explorers turned right out of the Mediterranean, and sailed North up the coast, where would it lead? Eventually to my homeland although the gospel probably reached Britain more over land than the treacherous sea route. Now that really was the 'ends of the earth' to the people of the Middle East, but within the scope of Roman conquest.

Some commentators wonder if Luke had in mind in writing this second book, its possible use as a defence for Paul at his trial. He records several instances where Roman officials were friendly, well, not antagonistic, towards Christians, some becoming believers, and some not willing to convict Paul or others of breaking any Roman law. The Jewish religion had been considered lawful since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the official view was that Christianity was just the purest form of Judaism. This was *not* always the view of the populace, who regularly taunted and even persecuted the believers in Roman settlements, as eventually Nero did horrifically in Rome itself.

## **Now we will do that 'recap' of the story so far, going from Jerusalem to Antioch**

As we studied the first part of Acts we *were* taken on a very exciting journey:

- We started in Jerusalem with the church 'in waiting' after Jesus returned to heaven.
- Jesus, now in the glory of heaven empowered his church with the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- We heard of the church's fellowship, its growth, its teaching, and signs and wonders by the apostles.
- Also of increasing opposition, then the death of Stephen, and the resulting scattering of the believers to Judea and Samaria.
- And events which showed us the early expansion of the gospel.
- Stephen's co-worker Philip's ministry, the gift of the Spirit to the Samaritans, and new life for an Ethiopian.
- And then Saul on his way to Damascus to arrest all believers in Jesus, was himself arrested, not by the authorities, but by the very One whose followers he was determined to wipe out.
- He was humbled, blinded, but when his physical sight was restored, and his spiritual eyes were fully opened, he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and was baptized.
- Preaching in Damascus, spending extended time alone with God then going to Jerusalem, with his life threatened in both places.
- We saw Saul back in Tarsus for about 10 years, probably working in the family tent-making business and possibly reaching out to his local area with the gospel.
- Luke records Peter's mission in Judea, miracles, and visions, and Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit much to Peter's and the Jerusalem church's surprise.
- Then, we have the young church at Antioch, Barnabas co-opting Saul, and the pair of them pastoring the mainly Gentile believers there.
- The church is developing and changing.
- With a severe famine back in Judea causing real hardship to the believers there, gifts are sent with these pastors and some other believers from Antioch down to Jerusalem.

- King Herod commences a wave of persecution, the apostle James dies, Peter is arrested, and then miraculously delivered.
- After the Lord strikes King Herod and he dies for his sinful acceptance of worship as a god, Luke records that the word of God continued to increase and spread.
- And their mission accomplished, Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch.

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The first document Luke wrote was the gospel of Luke where we read of all the acts and words of Jesus while he was on earth. Now we read of his continuing work from heaven by the apostles and disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Luke's account we have come from Jerusalem to Antioch. He now chooses the material he has at his disposal carefully, deciding what to include in this second part, of the second document.

### **So the story continues**

You will notice very soon that the content is almost all concerned with the spread of the gospel from Syrian Antioch *westwards* into mainly Gentile territory and by the apostle Paul. He *does* always go to the Jewish synagogue, if there *is* one in a place he visits it first, but often can't continue to preach and teach there due to the opposition he receives from his fellow Jews. Gentile folk were often *more* receptive to the gospel than members of the Jewish communities in those pagan, Emperor and false god-worshipping cities. Some of these Gentile converts were from the 'God-fearers', these folk had become associated with the local Jewish community and so did worship the God of the Jews.

### **The Changing emphasis**

We have noticed that Dr Luke has changed the focal point of the story from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch. As you can see from the map you probably have in the back of your Bible, that's up in the North East corner of the Mediterranean. You'll probably find other maps there, helpfully plotted and labelled. They could be useful this term as you travel with Paul on his missionary journeys.

Luke wants us to see the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem - the capital of the Jews – to Antioch, and then from there finally to Rome – the capital of the known world.

He also wants us to see the changing status of Saul, now using the Greek name Paul, probably as his main ministry is to the Gentile world of the wider Roman Empire, and maybe even his second given name, we don't know.

There is also a change of leadership, you will pick it up as Luke tells in Chapter 13 of their missionary trip to Cyprus where it is the now 'Paul' who does the preaching and while in Gentile territory Luke changes his description of the team from Barnabas and Paul, to Paul and Barnabas! (He does, in Chapter 15 in Jerusalem revert to the previous order!)

Paul becomes the main character in Luke's story, but of course Barnabas and others continue their work of spreading the gospel as Jesus had commanded them to.

**Paul's circle of friends, some of his co-workers and the people you will meet are very interesting.**

### **First Paul himself**

Perhaps we need to think a little bit about that experience he had on the Damascus Road. The word 'converted' as we *do* describe Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, could give the impression of turning from one religion to another. But Paul remained a Jew, one who recognised Jesus as the Christ, Messiah, and one who had been foretold throughout the Old Testament, the fulfillment of all God's promises and purposes. Jesus of Nazareth, the one whose followers Saul had hounded, arrested and had put to death, was indeed the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecy, and that with his coming the Kingdom of God had appeared. Now it was not to be the *temple* that was the focal point of God's presence with his people, but the hearts of men and women where the Holy Spirit lived and through whom he worked in the world.

God's Kingdom had begun its work on earth with Messiah's coming, his life and teaching, his death in our place on the cross and his resurrection and ascension. But it's not yet complete. When Jesus comes again in glory it will be. It's that "now and not yet" concept. That runs all through the New Testament.

The small groups of believers that Paul left behind as he travelled were those who were now loyal to the King of the Kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ, right there in the midst of a society fiercely loyal to Caesar or a local ruler. A recipe for some conflict? Very likely!

It was difficult for Jews to accept Paul's message that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, the Holy One of God and the fulfilment of all their scriptures. For them it was so much more than a personal relationship now possible with God through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Although of course it was that *most certainly*. This for them was not a 'new religion' any more than it was for Paul. But it was a lot for them to get their heads around! Many simply could not. And among the Jews to whom he preached were those who took great exception to the message and the messenger.

But what about Paul the man? Luke really does not give us much detail. We know he came from Tarsus in modern-day Turkey, a very large city and trade centre 20km inland from the Mediterranean coast. In Paul's day it was known for its agricultural trade and of course was a Roman economy. Paul, born there, had Roman citizenship. He tells us in his letter to the Philippians that he was a zealous Pharisee, and a true Jew. He was a student of Gamaliel, a doctor of Jewish law who actually

spoke up to prevent the apostles being condemned to death out of hand in Acts Chapter 5 and he was listened to by the council. God in complete control!

Paul's family's business was tent-making and so he would have learned his trade as a very young man, and it came in handy as a very portable occupation. Load your tools and set up wherever you stopped for a period of time, and there was always work available! So it was that Paul was able to minister free of charge to all the churches he founded and spent time in. He boasted that he had never been a burden on the fellowships but had always paid his way, for himself and his co-workers on a visit. The Philippian church seems to be the only exception to that, and they 'adopted' their founder Paul and considered his mission, their mission, and supported him prayerfully and practically on many occasions. Every missionary needs one of those churches!

It is assumed, at any rate, when he was travelling on his missionary journeys, that he was a single man. Whether there had been a prospective or actual betrothed wife in Tarsus before his encounter with the Lord Jesus and his new life as a Christian believer began, we do not know. But as a man possibly in his late thirties or early forties in that society, it was an unusual situation to be unmarried so late in life! He may have known the heart break of the loss of a close relationship due to his new-found faith. Strict Jewish families would not allow a daughter to become –or remain– the wife of such a heretic as he would have seemed to them.

Paul is considered by some to have been a hard man, maybe not particularly attractive physically. But to suggest that he was unfriendly or unapproachable or a misogynist is to fly in the face of the evidence. The wide circle of friends we know from both Acts and his letters whom he cared for and, who, in turn, cared for, and about him, shows us otherwise! Many were women, and influential in the church and held in high regard by Paul.

He probably would not have been an easy person to be around, his standards for believers were extremely high in both practical and spiritual matters, but his deep concern for all his converts and the churches he founded, as well as other churches comes through so very clearly.

## **Barnabas**

In Acts 4:36 we read of a Levite, Joseph from Cyprus who was called by the apostles a 'Son of Encouragement'. This was Barnabas who later vouched for Paul's authenticity as a follower of Jesus to the believers in Jerusalem when *they* had grave doubts about this very well-known persecutor's credentials!

We should never forget the grace and forgiveness that all these believers displayed towards one of the chief perpetrators of the scourge that swept many of their friends away after Stephen died. Especially on Paul's last visit to Jerusalem when Luke was with him, we see him as he sat among them, greatly admired and respected as the Apostle to the Gentiles. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ was certainly displayed in the fellowship they all enjoyed.

Barnabas had of course brought Paul to Syrian Antioch from Tarsus to join him in teaching and pastoring the mainly Gentile young church there and then re-introduced him to the apostles on their subsequent trip to Jerusalem, with the financial gift.

On the first missionary journey Barnabas is portrayed as the 'junior partner' in the team, which many of us would have found a very difficult position to accept, in the circumstances. He had, says one writer a "special degree of grace celebrated by one rhymester this way..... *It takes more grace than I can tell  
To play the second fiddle well*"

Barnabas lived up to his nickname, even to the point of *not* going on the second missionary journey with Paul, who would not take the hapless Mark who had bailed out early on the first trip for reasons unknown, and gone home to Jerusalem. His dear cousin Barnabas gave him a second chance, for which we are very grateful as he was God's chosen writer of the first Gospel account written.

The 'second fiddle' continued to teach and encourage although we know little more of his experiences.

**Silas** became a co-worker when Barnabas and Paul had this major falling-out over that inclusion of Mark. He was a member of the Jerusalem church, he was also a Roman citizen, and like Paul he was Jewish. He was a close companion of Paul during their second journey that took the team over to Europe, and was in the Roman jail at midnight in the stocks, singing praises to God in Philippi, when the earthquake struck. Now you'll enjoy the reaction of Paul to the authorities the next day, in the story in Acts 16 when you come to it.

A much younger believer, **Timothy** is thought, with his mother and grandmother to have become believers on the first missionary trip when Paul was stoned and left for dead outside Timothy's home-town of Lystra. On Paul's second visit, he was invited to join the team that went on to Europe to preach the gospel there. This was the beginning of a very close relationship with Paul and other members of the team.

He is probably the closest one of *all* to Paul who regards him as a son in the faith and one can get a sense of the bond between them. We read about him in Philippians 2:19–24.

Perhaps you would like to pause the recording to turn to that now. You could discuss for a few minutes the various commendations that Paul gives about Timothy as he plans to send him to the church at Philippi? He can't go himself as he's in prison in Rome. It's Philippians Chapter 2 verse 19–24.

*Pause disc*

What a commendation!

Timothy was involved with Paul to the very end of the apostle's ministry as his letters to his dear young friend show us.



**Priscilla and Aquila** were Paul's host family in Corinth, and were tentmakers like him. They had recently arrived from Rome where it is presumed they had become Christians. Had those returning from the Pentecost experience in Jerusalem introduced them to Messiah Jesus? or had some who fled there at the time of the great persecutions after Stephen died, or later when Herod became very aggressive? We don't know, but as Jews they had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius.

They moved to Ephesus with Paul after his time in Corinth where they came in contact with **Apollos** a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt. He was a man of culture, quite possibly a travelling salesman, who knew the Old Testament Scriptures well, and whose knowledge of Jesus was accurate as far as it went but needed the God-ordained intervention of Priscilla and Aquila. This would ensure the ongoing preaching ministry in which he was engaged, possibly alongside his business, was accurate and therefore really useful in the spread of the gospel. He was obviously endorsed by Paul and had a useful and productive ministry in Corinth after Paul left. He is one who is suggested as a possible writer of the letter to the Hebrew Christians.

And of course, there is **Luke** himself to whom we owe a real debt of gratitude for his careful investigations and meticulous recording of "all of the above". He never mentions himself by name in the document he so carefully researched for our blessing.

**In his letters to the young churches** Paul mentions many others, **Titus** for example, another young man, a Gentile convert most likely from Antioch who was also very close to Paul's heart. The believers at **Philippi** were dear and valued friends and supporters over many years. **Epaphroditus** whose life was threatened with illness during a trip to Rome to bring Paul financial aid and personal assistance, he was one of their fellowship.

In his letters you would come across the runaway slave **Onesimus**, whose name means profitable. Paul uses that as a lovely play on words in his diplomatic and pleading letter to Onesimus' 'owner' **Philemon**. He is a believer who Paul is sure will take back, without punishment, this man who also has become a believer and has been 'profitable' to Paul in his time of need. There is a church that meets in Philemon's home which Paul wants to visit soon on his hoped-for release from prison in Rome.

There is **Mark**, now mature, forgiven and restored to Paul as a valued worker.

And so the list goes on – people and places that this apostle's ministry has touched and changed forever. The main thrust of all Paul's ministry among them is for Christ to be made known, and for them to grow to be like their Saviour. As the Holy Spirit indwelt them they were empowered to reach out into *their* communities with the gospel message, and the church grew numerically and believers grew in their Christ likeness.

## The Churches of Acts

Luke will introduce you to the churches Paul founded and you will visit the places that they travelled through leaving behind those small groups of new believers who they endeavoured to re-visit as God gave them opportunity.

- Cyprus, Lystra, Derbe, Iconium in Galatia, Ephesus;
- Over to Europe to Macedonia: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth;
- By shipwreck on Paul's way to a trial in Rome, Malta;
- And all the unnamed places in-between!

And from each of these places the gospel would continue on its God-ordained journey, down those excellent Roman roads linking the known world of the Empire, and making it possible for us, from all the ends of the earth to gather here today in our KYB group.

### It is an **unfinished story**

You will feel the book has a very abrupt end. So, will you continue the story? Will you continue to take the message of the gospel down the roads that God has ordained for *you* to travel just as surely as he did with Paul, not forgetting the people next door in your street and the members of your family? But you may ask "How can I introduce someone to Jesus?"

Richard Bewes comments that there are as many ways of introducing people to new life in Christ as there are people. He tells the story from many years ago of his dad who was trying to sell his car "Are there any problems with the car?" asked the would-be purchaser. "Only one" said his dad "This car needs a weekly service" "A *weekly* service?" "Yes" Dad replied with a perfectly straight face, "This particular car likes to go to church every week. You'll find if it has a weekly service it will behave beautifully!"

Sunday came and there sitting in the church congregation for the first time was the new owner of dad's old car. The service over, Dad hurried across: "Glad the car's behaving well!" "Well, yes, it is, and I think it may continue to do so" came the reply.

The next Sunday brought a repeat visit, and the following Sunday.....

How can we reach and touch the hearts and minds of family, friends and neighbours as we live among them as a believer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can we share the good news of new life to be found in Jesus?

Let's pray together

Heavenly Father we thank you for your written word that tells us of the gospel reaching out from Jerusalem to Rome and as a result to the farthest parts of the earth. Lord, we thank you that it reached us, and now we live 'in Christ' and look forward to the day when he will return in glory and gather up his people from every tribe and every tongue to praise you for eternity.

Help us to live daily committed to the task of making you known in our homes, and neighbourhoods as well as to the millions who yet have never heard of you and have no portion of your word or broadcast in their language. Please give us, like the early believers, obedience empowered by your Holy Spirit, to go into all the world and preach the gospel, making disciples who will in turn reach out in *their* families and communities.

We ask these things in the precious name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour, for his glory and praise. Amen.