

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 7 in the Book of Acts
The Promise of the Gospel

Acts 2:37-42

"For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:39).

In human terms were we to judge those who crucified the Lord we would probably in self righteous indignation have locked them all up and thrown away the key. This had been the crime of all crimes. 'Closure' for the modern world is claimed to reside in justice being done. God had another 'closure' in mind. Rather God's 'closure' was to be experienced as an 'opening' not a closure. He was not only about to open up the possibility of a future for these people but a future with him and the river of his delights *They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights* (Psalm 36:8). Instead of eternal condemnation God opened his eternal promise of the Spirit. This had immediate and continuing effect.

Great Grace, Great Word

As Peter preached he watched the 'sword' of Christ work in the hearts of the people. A double miracle unfolded. A whole community came to faith and Peter's demonstrated the impact of grace upon his heart.

In our day when the bulk of society has stopped their ears to the Gospel, we are surprised to see a whole community simultaneously hear and respond. But this is the norm not the abnormal for humanity. We were structured for the Word of God to penetrate and bring life corporately and individually. It is abnormal not to hear and respond en-mass. It is abnormal to make excuses as to why we are not going on being filled by the Spirit of God. It is abnormal not to have a heart to hear the Apostles teaching. It is abnormal not to give in an open-hearted way. These are the things we were created and structured to do with full passion and joy. Our lethargy and refusal to hear the word which brings life means we are in deep trouble as a culture, as a community.

Great Grace Cannot be Hidden

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all (Acts 4:33).

Peter assured the crowd that the promise of God was indeed for them. This is a startling revelation of grace. Not even their crimes of crucifying the Lord could deflect the promise of God. In fact under his providence their sin had facilitated the promise. What was the promise Peter spoke of? It was the promise of the Spirit.

The whole crowd gathered would have been conscious that the Apostles had received the Spirit. It had been a public event before their eyes on that day. No doubt the guilt and fear created by their sin would have given them 'good' reasons why they themselves would never be given the Spirit and be renewed as God's people. But that very promised Spirit, before they knew it, had opened their hearts. He opened them to true conviction of sin and to true healing through grace. At the point of their greatest despair God showed them grace beyond measure. We must see that the conviction of the Spirit may cause deep anguish but this anguish is different to the remorse of an evil conscience. God produced sorrow leads to life, whereas the sorrow of the world is deadly. *For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without*

regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death (2 Corinthians 7:10). Many people bounce along in life with sorrow or regrets which lead nowhere. The sorrow of the world is full of self justification. We get caught out, feel bad and then manufacture justifying reasons why we failed. This becomes a repetitive cycle, even for many believers. However, it leads to deeper and deeper despair, never freedom. Through the conviction of the Holy Spirit the people to whom Peter preached were no longer in this cycle. The Spirit cut the connection between sin and self justification by revealing the full freedom of forgiveness. Where the heart is not driven to excuse its sin or attempt to justify it then it is free to fully confess it and fully free to receive forgiveness as grace. The cross became not a reminder of their heinous sin but the promised new world.

The dereliction they felt in their hearts for their sin against Jesus and the Father had itself been judged and the judgement born away from them on the cross. The horror of the wasteland and desert they felt had been tasted and embraced by Jesus. The thirst of their hopelessness had been endured by their Messiah. We may rightly look at this generation of Jews and say, "What grace God showed to bring their hearts back to life with him." Beloved it took no less grace to redeem you and me. We were no less culpable, no less lost in our dereliction than they were. When that reality dawns on Bethel and all other churches then the hearts of this generation will dance to the same tune of love as did those to whom Peter preached. But think about how grace had remade Peter too.

Once the angry justice seeking zealot Peter could now stand and pronounce the forgiveness of God. Once he had wanted God to rain down fire on an unrepentant village (Luke 9:54), now he could accept that God could forgive those who had crucified his Son. God's great grace cannot be hidden in the recesses of our intellect, imagination or theology. When it breaks into our hearts it must and will be seen.

Grace, Flooding Grace

We often study this passage as the model for conversion and baptism or the kind of church life we should all aspire to. In doing so we miss the power and grace of what is going on. As soon as I look to this passage as the model of what we want to make happen in our church I will look for means at my disposal to make it happen. People may feel some constraint to listen and strive to do it. This will lead to religious duty and not Gospel freedom. Nobody in the crowd on the day of Pentecost was getting geared up to make a church happen. Nobody was aflame with love. Nobody looked out with such love and joy on their neighbour that they couldn't help but be with them. Nobody had a heart to hear the truth about their God. So when all these outpourings of grace began to come from them they immediately knew that a great miracle had happened.

The grace which flowed was flowing from the Lamb and the throne (Revelation 22:1-2). When Christ had been crucified he had staked his cross at the extremity of man's sin. He had embraced us and found only dusty wastelands, salt fouled deserts. He 'walked' those waste places, tasting the dust of death to find himself at the end of them. It was from that extremity that the river of grace flowed, filling the wastelands. Peter and the crowd had been flooded by this river. The Tree of life on its banks had healed them and filled them with the continual, abundant delights of God. Not one of those who received Peter's word would ever wake again in fright, or find themselves reminded of Golgotha. When next they looked into the face of Christ there would be no glimmer of reservation or caution, nothing like a sideways glance to unsettle them.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 8 in the Book of Acts
The Freedom of the Gospel

Acts 2:37-42

We examined the spectacular grace which transformed the hearts of those who had crucified the Lord of Glory. To move from crucifiers to fully adopted children was the greatest divide ever to be breached. Peter was God's instrument of grace. He too had come from death to life, from anger to peace, from a fighter of causes to a lover of mercy. In this Christ had given him the 'sword' of the truth about the Father and his ways. The fruit of that grace was clear, actual and practical. By practical we mean it freely gifts us with everything needed for life and Godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

By practical we also mean that the power of grace actually works in the heart to produce what God wants. It doesn't merely present opportunities for us to appropriate. It doesn't stand outside of us demanding to be let in. The whole 'doctrine' of sinners having free wills cripples any understanding of godliness as a gift. Peter spoke of this power from God in the past perfect tense. When Christ calls us (from out of death towards God) he reveals himself in all his resurrected glory and power to us. His calling is to come out of our tombs. As with Lazarus, when the Messiah calls we come out alive. He issues no challenge to rise up and follow him. This would be a futile call. His word galvanizes life into the dead. His calling is not simply to life but into his life. Peter said that the calling of Christ is into his promises. Promises of sharing in his glory and excellence. The glory and excellence of his life is marked by freedom in loving and serving the Father (drawn on by the riches at the Father's right hand, the pleasures forever more). This is where we find ourselves with him. This is what Peter mean we have received everything we need for godliness, we actual become partakers of God's life and being (Vs. 4).

On the basis of what this gift has brought into our experience we are to move freely into all it involves. We saw last week that the promise of God led the crowd at Pentecost into a whole new world of relating and worship. Now alive to God they were free to press out into that world of love as far and as fast as they could.

Peter then urged the believers to, 'add to your faith.' He didn't mean their faith was deficient and needed continual topping up. This would be to think of faith as what we do rather than a focus on the one we trust. Faith is itself empty (not a quality or energy we muster) and is only significant because of its object (the Living God who has promised us all things). The word 'add' means do something generously and exuberantly. So believers are encouraged to freely be about the life they discover in God. Christianity, despite what the cynics say, is not 'an initial spasm followed by a chronic inertia.' What happened on the day of Pentecost was not just an initial spasm. If our life of faith as joy and delight in God has been all down hill since the early 'spasm' of our conversion we have a significant problem. Whilst God is moving us from one stage of glory to another we have been grumbling and discontented, wishing we were back in 'Egypt'.

God's people throughout history show all too often a 'chronic inertia.' Israel even developed 'chronic inertia' in the face of great grace. Liberated from Egypt by pure grace; saved at the Sea from death and re-capture by pure grace, given the presence of

God at all times and his law of love for them, they still often behaved as if they had received nothing. There could be no excuse. Their chronic inertia made and makes no sense any more than ours does. Unfortunately their early habits followed them throughout their whole national existence. At times of trust they knew that their chronic inertia was a curse. They longed for hearts that would be re-made. They hoped for the promised day when God's prophets promised they would all receive a heart of flesh in place of their hearts of stone. Then came a Jewish man who changed it all.

Jesus brought a startling new 'inertia' into the human scene. All too often we have relegated his 'inertia', his delight to be a true man about his Father's business, as something foreign to humanity. This is nothing less than the deviousness of sin. It is an attempt to squirm out from under God's clear Gospel grace. His love actually brings a human being to 'excellence' (2 Peter 1:5). To be excellent in this context doesn't mean beyond real expectations. It means to properly fulfill what we are designed to be. E.g. A knife is designed to cut, a bird to fly and a fish to swim. Human beings are designed to be like Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was not only free in his actions he was free in the context of sinful opposition and failure of others to be what God had made them. At last a human being had been made 'excellent' again in Jesus. When the crowd at Pentecost received the forgiveness of their sins, flooded into all the recesses of their hearts by the Holy Spirit, they discovered that they too had received back the gift of excellence. They were now free to be what God made them. Like Jesus they now loved each the Father and each other. Like Jesus, religion had been abolished, and participation with God had been joined. Like Jesus their living and serving was a matter of joy not a spasm every now and then in their chronic inertia. Like Jesus they could now live in a corrupt world without fear or panic for they saw that through the resurrection their Lord reigned over all and was not simply reigning but moving all things to the Father's goal. This meant that they could live with their own imperfections and the imperfections of others. People don't gather in each others homes on a daily basis without having to deal with imperfections. It is not too much of a stretch to say that much modern church life may well be structured to shield us from having to live in the dynamic of full love and other peoples imperfections. Our times of meeting become clinical and structured against reality because we are afraid of being seen or seeing the failure of others. Pentecost and the outpoured Spirit of grace demolished all this thinking. We maintain it only at great cost to ourselves and in great deviance from grace. Having said that we must underline again that only grace experienced in the heart can change that pattern.

Luke was careful to show in the rest of Acts that Christian freedom was always under attack and must not be heralded as present perfection. The Apostles sometimes argued and even decided to separate company. Some in the church were found disobedient and deceiving, some were afraid of the likes of Paul prior to his conversion and so we could go on. Grace didn't imagine that these things didn't happen. Grace saw them as real and improper but not things that could undo or disqualify the church from the life and ministry of love.

In summary. The freedom which came to the believers at Pentecost was the freedom to:

Live absolutely clear of their previous sin (even the sin of crucifying the Lord). Join the local church. The local church is the place of Father's life and love. It makes nonsense to claim that we are free not to participate in that. To enjoy and therefore participate in fellowship. Remember that John said our fellowship is with each other and with the Father and his Son (1 John 1:3). To give without reserve. This is perhaps

the clearest indicator that we have received Father's grace. His grace reveals him to be the archetypal 'hilarious giver.' Only a heart exploded by the revelation of Father's wealth and willingness to give it all to us will give freely. We may know that it is a good idea to give like that but yet be moved because we see a grudging grace not the grace of Christ

*I had set my face for a grudging grace,
My rags I was half parading;
But I never did look for the crushing rebuke –
To be taken without upbraiding.*

*To be stopped with a kiss in upbraiding myself,
To be stript of the rags that I clung to;
To be treated as more than servant or son,
To be feted and fed and sung to.*

P T Forsyth

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 9 in the Book of Acts

The Refreshing of Christ's Presence

Acts 3

"Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" (Acts 3:19-21).

God is always about the big picture. His attention to the small details is never simply to bless and fill individuals in the present. He promised to give his Son, Jesus Christ the nations of the world. But not just the nations as they are. He promised that he would flood the nations with his Spirit and through the work of his reigning Son bring them to them to his goal We must never forget the wider picture going on in our very days, that God through his Messiah Jesus is *'restoring all things.'*

Luke, full of God's grand restoring plan, records the signs and wonders at Pentecost as the first events in God's restoration of the world. The wind, the flames, the hearts filled to overflowing with the great deeds of God and the publishing of these deeds to the nations through the miraculous proclamation of the people are all part of God's new age. In chapter two Luke uses a similar outline. The wonder of God's miraculous action in healing the man born lame is followed by the proclamation of Peter. Luke's plan is to direct our attention to the rule of Jesus over all things until they are fully restored (Vs 21).

Do we live with this great hope of the restoration of all things? But this restoration is closer to us than we think. It is already happening. How is that possible? Peter tells us. When we repent and see our sins washed away times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord (Vs. 19). This refreshing is God bringing a foretaste of what lies ahead in the total restoration of all things. At Pentecost the people heard the word and believed. Their hearts were freed to love. The expressions of that love were tastes of how it will be in the final restored creation.

So God's love is not "All about me." Only as we see the present blessings of Pentecost in our lives in the light of the future hope will we feel truly significant in God's plan. Only as we feel significant under the sovereign hand of Christ will we press out into the nations with Christ. A worm's eye view of Christ's rule over all the little events of our daily lives is important. It fills our hearts with thanksgiving. It feeds a daily trust and keeps our prayers focused on his glory not our joys or predicaments. However, if we are not careful we will become like our culture and turn everything to be about us. Life then becomes a self enclosed loop. We see nothing significant outside of our job, sports, family and money etc. We turn the reigning Christ into a personalised butler, waiting on our every desire and whim.

The word 'restoration' has a medical background. When Jesus healed the man's withered hand he restored the hand to be a good hand (Matthew 12:13). Mark used the

same word when describing the healing of the blind man (Mark: 8:25). Restoring nations then is all about turning them back into the kind of cultures where all things work together in love. So for the Messiah to heal the nations it must mean that in God's eyes the nations are terribly sick. This means all nations, not just the ones we see are not functioning properly. They are all sick to death, and have been for a long time.

The crippled man Jesus healed in front of the Temple had been handicapped for 40 years. What Luke described was an unexpected, instant, total healing, all in the name of Jesus. As a cripple the man had become a beggar. His routine was established. Every day his friends would carry him to the Temple gate. Every day people would walk past and drop a coin or two into his basket. Few ever looked at him. No culture treats its desperately poor well. That is part of their sickness. They are too busy with themselves. To look truly at a person is to engage, to communicate care, to enter into a relationship. One's heart has to be secure in love to do this. One's heart has to be secure in the power of Christ's love to enter into a beggars world. Does God care about beggars enough to heal them before they promise to stop begging?

The cripple knew nothing but a world lying down and a demeaning world of the beggar. It seems fair to say he had long accepted his 'crippledom'. Peter's love was secure in two ways: The power of Jesus to break open a person's world and bring full healing, and the presence of Jesus with intent to bless. So Peter spoke with these two things strengthening his heart. Ministry is not based upon personal self confidence or personal charisma. Peter and John were 'uneducated and untrained.' Only a present Messiah Jesus could engage this man's issues and restore him. Israel and its leaders had passed by for forty years. After all who can help one whom God has seen fit to bring into this world as a congenital cripple, they thought? Why should they stop and look at such a one when they had so many things to do every day? Was this man's forty years of begging a reflection of Israel's crippledom? We don't know if that was part of Luke's point. We do know that it was the dramatic restoration of this man's legs which enraged the leaders and galvanized their hatred and oppression of Christ and the early Church (Ch 4).

Healing of sore backs, headaches and other obscure ailments is one thing. This man was something else. Old limbs, withered and useless leaped and danced for joy. The heart so long depressed in disease and begging cried out in the Temple the true praise of Jesus. Suddenly what the Prophet had said was happening in front of their eyes. *The lame will leap like the deer* (Isaiah 35:6). What else would we expect when the great and mighty Day of the Lord had come and the life giving Spirit was being poured out on all flesh? We are part of this great age. Have we come to Christ and been 'refreshed'? Refreshed, restored like this lame man's legs so that we too find ourselves "Walking and leaping and praising God"? Do we have the confidence in our hearts that Peter and John had in theirs? The confidence of knowing God's love? The confidence of knowing the presence of Christ? The confidence of knowing the heart of Christ for cripples and beggars of all descriptions?

God's promise in this age is to refresh his people with the knowledge of the presence of Christ. Let us be refreshed continually and then we will live with this wonderful prospect always before us that we are part of the final restoration of all things.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 10 in the Book of Acts

Praise & Prayer under Pressure
Acts 4:23-31

Suffering and opposition often bring a new urgency, even a new humility to our praying. But it is also true that because our hearts get distracted we need to be taught how to pray. After all praying is not a formula but the cry of a heart which trusts and enjoys the Father. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). They had observed him praying on many occasions. They wanted to pray like him. In this passage, Luke showed how the early church prayed. The outpoured Holy Spirit was filling their heart with the love of the Father as Jesus knew it so they prayed like him.

The infant church was under great pressure. The healing of the lame man (Acts 3) and the preaching of Peter and John had stirred up strong opposition. To human wisdom it seemed that the church was in danger of being destroyed. Peter and John, after spending a night in gaol (4:3), were brought before the highest court in the land, the Sanhedrin. This court ruled the internal affairs of the Jewish nation. To be brought before this court was serious indeed. Luke later said that the Sanhedrin was driven by jealousy. They were dangerous men. Threatening Peter & John they sent them away. So on one hand the authorities were trying to stop them whilst on the other the people were all glorifying God for the healing (4:21). When released the Apostles went straight back to 'their own'. Their attitude in prayer shows us that the new hearts given by the Spirit were strong in faith. We note the following.

- They came together as God's people (4:23). They saw each other as "Their own". No cultural differences were preferred. As yet the Christians were not called a Church. That would come later (5:11). It seems that every culture has its own version of individualism. God's love had turned these believers into brethren. They loved togetherness and saw the arrogance of individualism. Togetherness was produced by the Gospel, not by programmes and events.
- When Peter and John joined them they simply reported what had happened (4:23). Neither the Apostles nor the people made the events into a big drama. They did not react as victims, attempting to get sympathy from their friends. The spirit of a 'victim' is driven by the fear of not being truly Fathered by God. Opposition and suffering of themselves don't create victims. It is the accusation by Satan in the difficult times which, if believed, brings a victim mentality. He will always be accusing God of not caring for us. What brought these people together? The joy of knowing the Father and his Lord.
- They prayed together. After hearing Peter's report of the opposition and threats they prayed. They didn't try and 'get a handle' on the events or spend endless hours in idle discussion about 'what ifs' and 'if only'. We note the following about the spirit and content of their prayer.
 - *They lifted their voice as one* (Vs 24). This doesn't mean they all prayed at once. It shows that their hearts were together. Together in a sense of weakness. Together in a sense of having no human answers to the powers against them. Together as the Father's children. Together in their understanding of who was in control. It is obvious from their opening cries that they had all been studying the Scriptures. This was the norm, their hearts desire (2:42).

- The Holy Spirit always leads us to dependence on the Lord. Their opening cry was “*O Lord*” (Vs 26). The word ‘Lord’ refers in this instance to God and not Jesus. It is a Greek word used by a slave of their unchallengeable master. The sovereign Lordship of God was not just a religious or even theological fact. It was based squarely upon the truth that God was the Creator (Vs 24). As Ruler over nature and all history flowing from it the Christians came to One who was ruling over their current suffering. All of Scripture leads God’s people to this certainty. So apart from the refreshing of God’s word we will lose sight of this most important reality. Then the evil one’s accusations will find their mark and stick.
- The Holy Spirit also opened the Scripture to them in order that they would be prepared to face suffering and not draw the wrong conclusions from it (God doesn’t love me any more). The Scriptures had clearly warned that the nations would violently oppose Christ (Vs 25, quoting Psalm 2). They were able to see that what had happened to Jesus and what was happening to them was what God expected (Vs 27). They need not be upset and distracted by it. God’s sovereignty over all things is not mechanical but because it is indispensable in his plan of love.
- Having seen the threats of the rulers, from God’s view point, they were able to leave those threats with God (Vs 29). Notice how their hearts are not angry or seeking vengeance. They did not pray as they had earlier that God would rain down fire on their enemies. They simply left the action with God. In other words they trusted him to be aware and to act in accordance with his love and plan. The threats were made to Peter and John and the Church but because they all belonged to God the threats would be taken care of by God. Prayer (and life as a believer) thrives on the spirit of dependence and trust.
- The concern of the Christians was not therefore about what might or might not happen to them. We worry so much about these things. Their heart was full of what Jesus had given them. Their spirits were so full of how the Father of their Lord was their Father, that all they wanted to do was to speak boldly about him. The word often translated boldness or confidence is the word meaning freedom to speak freely because you were a full citizen in the city. It also became associated with moral freedom. The one who is morally free (conscience cleansed) is free to speak. These believers wanted God to continually remind them that they were fully members of his Kingdom, washed and clean so that they would speak boldly.
- Their prayer finished on a high note of faith. They fully believed that the risen Lord would continue to do miracles and signs (Vs 31).

Three things happened after their prayer. The place shook (God was reinforcing his presence in power to them). They were filled with the Spirit and then spoke boldly (Vs 31). The congregation experienced a growing sense of unity (Vs 32). The Apostles were strengthened in their witness to the resurrection (Vs 33). Great grace was upon them all (Vs 33). Their community of love became more and more openly evident (34f).

What a wonderful demonstration of the fruit of God’s gift of prayer to his people.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 11 in the Book of Acts

Focused by the Word of God
Acts 6:1-15

The remarkable testimony in the early days of the church is not so much the miracles and the love and worship which flowed from the people. It is the flourishing of the Word of God. This was what the people saw as the most important element in their life as the church. In our previous study we noted how fervently and whilst under much pressure they prayed for boldness to speak the word of God (4:31). I want to jump over chapter five for this study. We will return to the drama of Ananias and Sapphira later.

We like to think that the main agenda of God is what we feel and see Him doing. This is not so. His main agenda is to accomplish His plan and glorify His name. Of course when we understand what that means and how it includes us then we are most blessed and satisfied in our relationship with Him. God glorifies his name by making us his beloved children by grace. God glorifies his name by making the nations the Bride of His Son. So His glory and our blessedness are not to be separated. As He opens to us all that He must do to accomplish this and communicate it to us then we begin to be humbled and enthralled by grace. Before that His grace is simply another adjective we use to describe God in an abstract way.

So for the Apostles, and the newly formed people of God, the word of God was not a written code to be studied as one would study Shakespeare. What the Apostles saw spreading was not just written facts about Jesus. It was the Lord Jesus Christ, present with his people, proclaiming the truth of His Cross and resurrection. A written code can be published and mechanically spread, the spoken word of God was His two edged sword, penetrating to the depths of a human being.

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

No doubt both Jesus and the Apostles looked to the Old Testament as the word of God. However, the preaching of the word for them was not simply the reading of those Scriptures. Likewise for us, we must never attempt to make God's word into a written code. We are people of the Book and for all faith and practice we must be solely dependant on the Scriptures. But the Lord is still proclaiming his word in a dynamic, 'spreading' way. Through the Holy Spirit he declares himself in the hearts and consciences of sinners. Through the Holy Spirit he declares the glories of His Father's love to the depths of our beings.

The spreading of the word of God was and is by God's initiative and through the ruling power of His Messiah Jesus Christ. Acts is the account of this sovereign action of God. Over and over again the spreading of the word is seen as the miracle of God's rule over the nations, the politics and the broken paganism of man, through His Son.

Through a struggling insignificant band of fishermen and rebels saved by grace God actually got his word out of Jerusalem to the world. Through the subduing and enriching of Paul, the chief anti-Christ, anti-church scholar within Judaism, Christ goes out to Europe and Asia minor and eventually to Australia. Opposed by politics, paganism and religions, and just when it seems the word will be snuffed out, the situations created to destroy it become God's way of spreading his love. When it

seemed that strife from within the community formed by God's word would be the end of the ministry God intervened and by direction and judgement in love purified his people to be directed and focused upon and by the word again.

The passage before us is a clear example of this.

A division had arisen in the Church (6:1).

We read this as a minor glitch, a small matter. In our day when everything is challenged and opposed and doing anything with a sense of unity is seemingly impossible we may fail to see why disunity in the church is death. The church is the visible presentation to the world of the effectiveness of the word proclaimed by Christ. Christ speaks from a community of love not as a lone ranger. He does not spread His word independently of a loving community. Luke said that there was a cultural problem apparent to all, both in and out of the church. A murmuring or whispering of discontent and fear had started. It was the Greeks or Greek speaking Jews against the homeland Jews. So here was the conflict. They were a community formed by the love of God in which there was no needy person amongst them (4:32-35). When by oversight or intent this changed and the change was seen along cultural lines the truth of God's life changing love was challenged. The complaints of the Greek speaking Jews was probably a complaint against the leadership of the Apostles as they were the ones distributing the food (4:35). So this was a significant opposition to the power of the word preached by Christ.

We note the disunity happened at a time of rich blessing. No doubt the evil one subtly attempts to destroy the word, the seed of the Kingdom, from within as well as from without. This means that without being paranoid the church must always be sensitive to issues of disunity, lest the evil one gain a foothold.

The Apostles were in danger of becoming distracted from their main task by a good ministry. The disunity would be overcome by simply serving all the widows without fear or favour. This was a good work, but would have consumed the Apostles. In this way Satan would have stopped the spread of the word: very cunning indeed. The Apostles were given by Christ to unlock the Kingdom through the preaching of the word. To do anything else, be it good bad or ugly was to be distracted from their calling. The church obviously saw the preaching and teaching of the Apostles as God's direct gift to them and the world (6:5). It was not like today where preaching and prayer are often relegated to less importance in the light of attractive music, dynamic worship leaders and a vast organisational activism which overcomes the necessity to pray. There is a beautiful dependent simplicity produced in the hearts of sinners by God's grace. In the face of that most of the disunity and discord in the church simply dissolves.

By addressing the issue of disunity the church was opened to greater blessing and unity. The church appointed the so called 'deacons' to enable the preaching and praying of the Apostles. Growth in ministerial appointments is not a matter of democratically sharing the load or the leaders being good at delegating or God forbid, giving people a job to keep them involved. The servers had a heart for love, compassion and unity. Problem solved by serving. That grace flowed and healed was apparent as the word of God spread (6:7).

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 12 in the Book of Acts

Beware! God is Present
Acts 5:1-11

The way human beings live can be defined in one of two ways, one of two stories. These stories are opposite and contradictory ways of going about life. They are driven by the way we believe God accepts us and is pleased with us; That is how we become able to stand before Him. One way accepts that it is God who makes us right with Himself. He it is who creates us anew out of nothing. The other story or way of life assumes that we are free to find Him and please Him, and although this quest is a difficult and demanding religious exercise we can accomplish it. Some Christians attempt to combine these ways. The cross of Christ does not allow this.

Through Jesus Christ God declares that He has come to us, found us helpless and dead in our sin and made us His own. Through our moral striving we declare that we are the masters of our own search for God and we will do the right things to impress Him and become acceptable to Him. Even more destructively, for those caught in the way of religion, God's laws are presented as the means by which we will work to find God and be acceptable before Him. So we highlight the contradiction between the good news of Jesus and what the Bible says is the way of working for our salvation. The bombshell of the Gospel is devastating to this way of religion. God declares that nothing we do, even when it is the law he has given, makes us any more acceptable, any closer to Him or any more holy than when we started. In fact, when we walk in such a way, trying to impress God and others with our obedience we end up worse off, not closer to God. The bombshell God delivers in the good news of Jesus is that His acceptance of us is absolutely, totally and eternally apart from (without the support) of doing good things.

But now the righteousness of God has been revealed independently and altogether apart from the Law, Namely, the righteousness of God which comes by believing with personal trust and confident reliance on Jesus Christ (the Messiah) (Romans 3:21-22 (Amplified Bible).

This is the great offence of the Gospel and the reason why the human ego will always squirm when it is confronted by God's mercy and grace. To seek acceptance before God by doing good moral things leads us either into despair or presumption. The sad incident Luke described in Acts 5:1-11 illustrates the latter. Ananias and Sapphira presumed that by putting on a show of their moral goodness, outwardly demonstrating a sense of generosity, they would be impressing God and the church.

Luke begins their story with a "But". In that way he links it with what has just gone before. God was present, declaring His love and mercy and demonstrating His power clearly as people were transformed to love as God loves. Being freed from their guilt and fear they lived transparently, seeing and responding to the needs of others. Barnabas had been transformed by the Gospel. He had freely sold some land and freely brought the proceeds to the Apostles (a sign of full submission). His motivation was not to appear good or justified. His heart was not saying, "If I do this good thing God will be able to accept me." During the East African revivals a common catch cry emerged. "We want to live in houses without ceilings or walls." Where human hearts have been released from the curse of doing good things to

impress God then true sharing and transparency flows. Not only did the church live transparently with each other but with a sense of being totally open to the presence of their Holy Father.

None of this was true for Ananias or Sapphira. Like Barnabas they owned land. But that is where the story changes. Instead of freely selling it they sold it with a view to getting the approval and acceptance of God and his church. They were driven by insecurity. They believed that God's blessing followed their sacrifice. They were driven by a different story, a different gospel. They forgot that God was present by grace and seeing everything they did. So when they decided to bring just a portion of the proceeds they got from the sale, but make out like it was the full amount they were confessing that their hearts were not truly free. They must keep some back for their own advantage. Their 'god' could not be trusted to provide for them. Their 'god' demanded that they could only stand before him if they did or were seen to do good things. Yet all the time they were making out that like Barnabas they were good and free givers. In deceiving the Fellowship they were attempting to deceive God (Vs 4). External law keeping assumes that the only people watching are ones fellow humans. It thinks that by impressing them God too will be impressed. But Barnabas did not bring his gift to impress, or to obey some moral law to give. He brought the money freely. That is his heart had been set free from working to impress. It is this freedom which demonstrates the life and loving of the early church and the church today.

Peter's response to Ananias was direct, prophetic but measured (Vs -3-4). He simply pointed out that they did not need to sell the land. The church was not prescribing that all sell all their land. They didn't need that kind of 'law' as their hearts were now free. He showed that their thinking was driven by the evil one's view of God and the church. He hated the freedom of the Gospel and as he had hated the free relationship of the first couple with God and introduced his lie to destroy it. Here too he has convinced Ananias and Sapphira that deception is necessary in this world if you are going to succeed.

God's Judgement

The immediate death of Ananias and later Sapphira can be explained away in natural terms if we will or if we 'need' to. It seems we will always be offended by God's judgement that, "*The one who sins is the one who will die*" (Ezekiel 18:4, see too Romans 6:23). In the case of Ananias and Sapphira this judgement was immediate and not so called 'normal.' Those who believe that by their searching and obedience they can please God and stand before Him will be deeply offended at this point. It seems like an over the top, unfair, immoral thing for God to disregard the so called attempted goodness of Ananias and strike them down. Or even for Him to make the penalty for such a 'minor' offence so heavy. After all who of us could ever be 'safe' from such judgement? The answer to our fear of course is only found as we trust the mercy of God in Christ and relinquish all attempts to impress God by our obedience to his laws.

Great fear came upon the whole church and the community. God was seen to be present. Nobody could mistake that this was God's church and established for His glory. But the glory of His grace and truth was not destroyed by the image of His judgements. Only those still seeking to establish themselves using His church need fear.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 13 in the Book of Acts

God's prophets: Loved & Hated Proclaimers.
Acts 6, 7

Stephen, a man full of grace and power, soon drew opposition from the establishment, the Jewish Leaders (6:1-15). His arrest, 'trial' and execution caused the final persecution and scattering of Christians from Jerusalem. As with the death of Jesus, much more is going on than simply a good man caught up in political intrigue. These are the 'end days'. The true battle rages not at the level of flesh and blood. It is a spiritual battle. All out opposition to the Bride of Christ is directed at this small group of believers. This does not mean spiritual warfare as portrayed on TV and in the Movies. It simply means that the evil one will always be seeking to destroy the word of Christ going out to the nations. He knows that the word about the cross of Jesus is his deadly enemy. So as those who speak out what we know Christ has done in us and for us it should not surprise or alarm us when we feel the effects of that battle.

Stephen's final moments show us why he was so hated by the Jewish leaders. What Jesus had prophesied was true, His followers would be hated as He was (John 15:18). The hatred for Jesus and Stephen was not based upon any illegal or untruthful deed they had done. It was the result of their resisting the Holy Spirit; of listening to the evil one convince them that their system of religion was better than the grace and love of the Gospel. This turned otherwise religious and 'good' people into animals that fell upon Stephen like a pack of wolves and beat the life out of his body with rocks. But instead of silencing Stephen they caused the word of God to be spread.

Stephen's 'crime' had been to serve the Greek widows in love and compassion. His serving had overflowed into the wider church and community. The Lord Jesus Christ had blessed with clear and wonderful signs of His presence in what Stephen was doing. Not having anything real to accuse him of, Stephen's words were twisted into lies. The hatred of Stephen's accusers was deepened whenever he spoke. "*They were unable to stand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking*" (Acts 6:10, ESV). This was because Stephen was a man of grace and thus God's power, not because he was naturally powerful, loud or persuasive.

Before his death God enables Stephen to stand before the Leaders and give the longest recorded proclamation in Acts. He didn't seek to justify himself against the false charges. He spoke simply about the long and terrible history of Israel rejecting God's prophets. From the Patriarchs, Moses and David to the time of Jesus Israel had largely spurned and killed God's prophets. This hardness had ended in them crucifying God's final Prophet, His Son in the flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. In that sense Stephen was showing them that they had retained the hardness of heart of their fore-Fathers, and crucified the Shepherd-King the Father had sent. This judgement (God speaking the truth into their hearts), hardened them even more and they fell upon Stephen. The scene which followed was sickening. Wherever the anger of man seeks to vent itself against God the scene is horrific. But it is also a vision of the Glorified Messiah. As occurred in the horror of the Cross, God was showing much more than blood and gore and the drama of gasping final breaths when Stephen died. Whilst his life ebbed away, God opened heaven and revealed the true scene, the reality of who and what His Son was about.

The Messiah revealed

According to the Scriptures God always call a person into His immediate counsel before they can be His spokesman. Stephen, through the Gospel had received such a call. What Stephen had know through the Gospel by faith, now opened in reality before him. God opened heaven and showed Stephen His glory, the resurrected Messiah, Lord over all, including the angry men about to kill him. Jesus had prayed prior to His death, "*Father, glorify Thy Son so that the Son may glorify Thee*" (John 17:1). The Father had done that and now Stephen could see it.

As Stephen declared what he saw, God confirmed him as a true prophet. A true prophet declares that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, raised from the dead and ruling at God's right hand. But this Lamb of God was also standing (the posture of the Judge, Isaiah 3:13). In their terrible hardness and guilt they must tear Him down by killing Stephen. Their lies and hatred were exposed, by the Lord Himself.

This vision also vindicated Jesus as their true Prophet as He had prophesied that they would see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (Mark 14:61-2).

To be stoned outside the city was the punishment for blasphemy in Moses time. The leaders, caught out in their lies, were still driven to carry through their murderous desires, not the truth. As they stoned him Stephen prays for their forgiveness. This is the greatest revelation that the Gospel of Christ had changed Stephen's heart. The glory of the Father's loving had filled Stephen's heart. His prayer could only have flowed from that love. Stephen was living in the grace of the Cross of His Lord.

All God's people after Pentecost become prophets for they have been united with Christ and taken into the free and open fellowship (counsel) of the Father. Out of that they spoke of what they knew. They spoke it because of the impact it made in their dry and sinful hearts. Leslie Newbigin writes,

There has been a long tradition which sees the mission of the Church primarily as obedience to a command. It has been customary to speak of "the missionary mandate." This way of putting the matter is certainly not without justification, and yet it seems to me that it misses the point. It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like a fallout which is not lethal but life-giving. One searches in vain through the letters of St. Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his reader that they ought to be active in mission.

Conclusions

- Sometimes evil may seem to overwhelm the saints but the real verdict from heaven is very different.
- The battle against us is really against the word we have been given and is burning in our hearts.
- The battle will often come as accusations and half truths and fabrications about what we have declared.
- Where we establish our own image of God and His church we will always hate the prophets, and plan their demise (like Saul).
- Nothing can overturn the glory of God in the person and place of His Messiah and Lord.
- That the Lord's servants may be called to a stoning is part of living by grace in the last days. It is not an indicator of an absent Father, quite the opposite.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 14 in the Book of Acts

Scattered, or Sown by the Lord?
Acts 8:1-13

When Jesus told the crowd by the Lake, “A Sower went out to sow” the Disciples had no idea what that would mean for them later in their ministry. Little did they expect that along with the word of God they too would be the ones being ‘sown’? The Kingdom, Jesus said would be spread by the sowing of the word. The word in Acts was spread by the sowing of believers into distant lands.

In the early church this sowing was caused by persecution. Many of the believers, particularly the Greek speaking group to which Stephen and Philip belonged, became ‘refugees’, moving out into the nearby countries such as Samaria. Later Luke tells us they were scattered much further than Samaria.

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews” (Acts 11:18).

Luke said that through persecution the believers were ‘scattered’ (Acts 8:1, 4). Twice he used the word in the opening part of Acts 8, the chapter in which he begins to describe the Gospel going out to the nations. Previous to this the church had been growing mainly within Jerusalem.

*Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all **scattered** throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been **scattered** went about preaching the word.*

Luke could have used one of two words for *scatter*. One means to simply be spread out, dispersed. For example, if you drop a handful of frozen peas they scatter. This is a random, unintentional scattering. The word Luke used, however, has the idea of being scattered in order to be sown. A farmer scattered the seed by hand as part of the task of sowing the crop. The soil had been prepared and the right time for sowing the seed had arrived. The distinction Luke intended by using the word he used is important. Luke is showing us that the dramatic departure of believers from Jerusalem under great suffering and the threat of death at Paul’s hand, was not a tragic oops on God’s part. It was not an event which left God wondering what to do next. These were not events beyond His control that left the believers in no-man’s land. They had been specifically taken up and planted by His hand into foreign soil. There the risen Christ would sow His word as He had promised.

What difference does this distinction make for them in their strange and foreign land? Is the sovereign hand of God simply a theological issue, a puzzle for us to solve or does it create a new and living attitude of worship, joy and trust in our hearts. There is a way that each generation comes to analyse, discuss and argue about the sovereignty of God which accomplishes nothing. It is like pushing a boulder to the top of a hill, only to find that it chases us down to the bottom again. It appears from what happened in Samaria that for them to be scattered and sown was not the recipe for

dissatisfaction under God's hand, quite the opposite. It meant much for them, and much for us too.

Where we assume that God has little or no purpose for us in our present occupation, or our current location then all manner of philosophical contradictions circulate incessantly in our brains. These contradictions are aggravated when suffering comes. Apart from comprehending what it means for God to sow us we will give our whole attention to self interest and self securing. Our daily life will seem divorced from the plan and purpose of God, leaving our hearts subject to all manner of self pity and victim mentalities.

Many believers still operate under a two tiered view of the universe: the ordinary and the spiritual. They see little connection between the plan and purpose of God and what they do from Monday to Saturday. Then Sundays or church meetings become the 'spiritual' part of their lives. Another confused idea associated with this 'two level' view is to feel that if I am to be any use to God I must either drive people nuts in my job by 'witnessing' or opt out of my job and become a 'full time Christian worker'. We treat the Gospel as specialised information which must be distributed by professional 'holy' people. If only we would see the relational aspect of God's plan. He plants us according to His will and with all the fulness of Christ's gifts to bloom in that location. Unless we have directly chosen a pathway of evil then we must rest in the fact that we are where we are because of the Father's planting. If He wants us in another location or occupation then as a faithful Father He will make that clear. God doesn't always use persecution or suffering, as He did in the case before us, to re-sow us into different locations and ministries. However, if we have an understanding that all such dislocation is evil and to be escaped or delivered from, then we will be very confused in the cut and thrust of life.

All our old images of God leaving us in the dark (for whatever reason), or making us walk the torturous tight-rope of trying to work out His will, or expecting us to work it out using mechanical lists of pro's and con's, must give way to the truth of His faithful Fathering. Let's consider the blessing through suffering that these early believers knew as God re-sowed them all over their world.

- They could have left Jerusalem with a spirit of confusion, dissatisfaction, even despair. It is never comfortable to be threatened and thrown out of what we call our homeland, our place of security. It would be easy to make all manner of false conclusions about what God was doing in the midst of these events. If their hearts had not been fully graced, freeing them from all guilt, then their conscience could have manufactured many unhelpful images of God. They could have been left befuddled and bitter, thinking that their lives had been wasted. Or they could have simply drawn together with other 'refugees' to form a 'little taste of home' and never have shared the word with those amongst whom God had sown them.
- The scattered believers could have begun to look for reasons why this terrible 'mistake' in God's plan had occurred. If they falsely believed that all suffering was evil, and belonged in the realm of the evil one then their hearts would never come to rest, and their ministry would have diminished. The glory of God would have been hidden. Whereas God's plan is to show His glory in every situation, even those which appear most difficult. This has been clear throughout the history of His children. *To grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified (Isaiah 61:3).*

- They could have blamed & criticised Stephen for being so outspoken and stirring up opposition. The violent persecution which had made them refugees was stirred up directly as the result of Stephen's death. So often when we forget the faithfulness of the Father in calling us to our present situation, and promising His loving presence, we begin to be resentful, blaming others for our pain. How quickly we can define our lives as a dead-end or wasted time. Always restlessly looking for an out.
- They could have just endured their new location, always desperate to be back 'home'. In other words their witness would have been that they did not belong with their neighbours and neither did the word of God.
- Knowing that the Lord had picked them up and planted them in their new scene brought significance and purpose to their every moment. If we imagine that our life is like the frozen peas, dropped from God's hands or at Satan's whim, scattering us into unwelcome places, then we will know no joy and share no joy. But we read, "*There was much joy in that city.*" God's amazing grace in sowing us into our present life may sometimes be through suffering but it will always produce joy. The apparent joy was their delight in the presence of God and knowing He was fully with them and for them.

Conclusions

- Have we become lost in a world that sees no relevance of God in daily life?
- Have we been seduced to think that God has nothing to do with where we find ourselves, at work or play?
- Have we become disheartened, working long and hard to get wealthy or to impress the world, whilst seeing no connection between what we are doing and the plan of God for creation?
- Do we see that Bethel is the planting of God, and in calling us together the Father intends that this is the place where we can bloom, not rot?

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 15 in the Book of Acts

Astonished and Enslaved by Magic or Healed and Filled by Christ?
Acts 8:6-24

Simon Magus was the most popular man in Samaria. He astonished everybody by his magic and sorcery, from the youngest to the oldest. So much so that the people called him 'The Great Power of God.' Captivated by his powers they couldn't but pay attention to him. Simon himself was caught up in his own importance and constantly claimed to be someone great. Simon's influence had been going on for many years (Acts 8:9-11).

In our 'rational,' educated and 'scientific' driven cultures we might dismiss this story as simply a sign of the age in which the Apostles lived. However, the truth is that with all our education and rational thinking we are still subject to impostors like Simon, and we are still enslaved by the spirit which gripped Simon's heart. It could be argued that such people now have worldwide followings because of modern technology. Superstition, magic, sorcery and such like have been present in all cultures since the first couple left the garden. No system of thinking, power or politics has stopped it. Of course everybody enjoys the skill of the magician who can trick us by sleight of hand and mirrors. Such things are harmless. But where the magician or Shaman sets themselves up to be as God, making so called connection with the spirit world, giving wisdom and guidance about life death and eternal things, serious danger exists. The problem is this.

- We were structured to relate to our Heavenly Father and draw our knowledge of life from Him in a spirit of delight and trust.
- Nothing or nobody else in the universe can replace Him.
- In attempting to secure our lives and future by other means leads us into bondage.

This bondage is many sided. It means:

- We attempt to relate to a Fatherless world and our hearts suffer the pain of that.
- That by refusing to have God father us we come under his judgements. This is not to be considered as spiteful judgement but simply being given over to suffering the pollution that comes from refusing His love.
- That we open ourselves to the world of evil.

Desperately wanting to be worshipped as God, the evil one can only draw that worship from us in illegitimate ways. I mean, he has nothing beautiful to make our hearts desire and enjoy him so he must attach himself to those things which oppose or ignore the Father and His love. He may be found then, attached to and encouraging any thing or person which sets itself up independently of the Father and His Covenant mercy.

What Philip found in Samaria was such a scene. Luke draws the clear distinction between the world playing at religion and the presence of the Messiah working powerfully.

The world is brilliant at astonishing and impressing but light on reality. Designed by and for the Father, His love is the only power which can heal, restore, keep and fill us. When Philip came and preached the Gospel this was apparent to all. Astonishment and mere impressiveness gave way to actual healing, liberation from evil powers and much joy resulted. In the place of being puffed up with personal accolades the

Christians came declaring a Serving Messiah. In the place of sweeping people along with trickery Jesus actually helped them. Simon was not in fact 'The Great Power of God.' He himself had to face that in the presence of God's reigning King.

Simon's message was not good news; it only seemed like good news. Now in the presence of the Father's King, flooding lives with Father's love, the need to follow a man like Simon was removed. Magic arts, superstitious practices and sorcery only attract us if we are living in a Fartherless world.

The magic of the world puffs up the individual. Even after a profession of faith and baptism Simon still retained the lust for being impressive, being a somebody. Much has been written about Simon's conversion. He made a profession of faith and was baptised (Acts 8:8). However, it appears his heart was never changed. He retained a heart still driven by the need to be impressive, to be able to control the divine powers.

Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:13, 18-19).

Simon saw the same signs and wonders but ended up looking at Philip because his heart was not seeing the doer of the sign. This can be true for all kinds of Gospel revelations not just signs and wonders. John Piper's illustrates this point. "The simplest way I can think of to illustrate what went wrong with Simon is an experience every mother of toddlers has had. Suppose you have a one-year-old child sitting on your lap and suddenly in the window there is a beautiful bird and you hold out your hand to point at the bird and say, "Look, look at the bird." What does the child look at? He looks at your hand and the sign you are making with your fingers. He might even try to imitate the sign by putting out his index finger." The same phenomena is found in John 2:23-25.

Simon still believed that he could be the distributor of the Holy Spirit as if by the magical laying on of hands. He thought that he could buy the power of the Gospel. Nothing had changed. He still wanted to make an impression and be the one lauded. It is not difficult to see how often the church adopts similar ideas. If only we can put on a show, especially if we can do things which cannot be explained, then people will be convinced. Convinced about what is the question? It is a very dangerous exercise to try and elevate Christian leaders as heroes. It is very dangerous to seek leaders who appear magical and heroic, and trade upon that.

Peter's (recently come from Jerusalem) rebuke was strong (Acts 8:20-23). Peter consigns Simon and his money to corruption. Such a heart has nothing in common with true ministry. Simon showed he was still gripped by sin and bitterness. Having to impress people will always lead to bitterness. Either we will become bitter because we are not truly 'recognised' or someone more impressive will come along and we will lose the top billing. In the Old Testament 'gall of bitterness' describes a person's heart that has gone after idols and leads others to do the same.

Conclusions

Nothing can compare with being known by and then knowing and loving the Father.

Are we looking for the Gospel to simply impress or change our hearts?

Do we long for recognition and popularity, and seek to get it at any cost?

Do we treat our superstitions as simply harmless, but fail to see how they control our lives by fear?

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 16 in the Book of Acts

The Spirit and the Mission of Jesus
Acts 8:26-40

Being scattered by persecution, Philip and many other Greek speaking Christians found themselves in Samaria. Culturally and spiritually this would have been the last place they would have chosen to live. But as Luke said, God's scattering was with a view to sowing them in that country for His loving purposes. So this was not just a 'second best' arrangement for them. They were not now out of the so-called centre of God's will: Quite the opposite. The rule of Christ over Satan and the power of sin must be felt amongst all nations. Even the Samaritans, who had always chosen to walk in opposition to God, would be graced by the good news that Jesus Christ was their King. Many were released from their bondage and freed from their sin. Whole cities rejoiced because of the power of Jesus.

Philip was in the middle of this revival in Samaria. Amidst opposition, the Gospel was bringing life to that troubled and superstitious land. Peter and John had come down from Jerusalem with the "*Keys of the Kingdom*" (Matthew 16:13-19), and many had received the Holy Spirit. Then in the middle of this wonderful outpouring on all of Samaria Philip was called away to the desert to meet a single person, a high official of Ethiopian. In the encounter between Philip and this Ethiopian we see the Holy Spirit at work in guidance, evangelism, the central truth of the Good news of Jesus and Baptism. In this study we will focus mainly on the issue of guidance.

The Guidance of God and the Holy Spirit

Our primary sins are not the things we do or don't do. These follow the deep sin of our heart. The Bible shows that our deepest sin is our refusal to know and submit to God as our Father. When the true Son of the Father came amongst us this is what His presence revealed. We did not know God like He did, and our lack of knowledge was a chosen thing. Our deep suspicion of the Father, and all He has created and planned, makes guidance a tricky thing for sinners. Unless we see and love Him as Jesus did, then we will doubt His love for us and His guidance may appear as undesirable or irrelevant. We may turn guidance from a relational thing of Father to child, into a mechanical thing of cause and effect. We will then be driven by circumstances, both good or bad, to indicate what we should do, or more significantly, what God is thinking or not thinking about us. When the Holy Spirit floods our heart with the truth of how Jesus knew and loved the Father, then guidance becomes a wonderful blessing.

The Father's guidance of His children, seen in Acts chapter eight, is varied indeed. It seemed that **circumstances** forced them out of Jerusalem. Philip was directed by an **angel** (messenger) from God, and then was guided by the **Holy Spirit** to speak to the Ethiopian Official. So we have circumstances, a spoken message from God and then the inner direction of the Holy Spirit, all used by the Father to guide His children. The important fact is that they recognised that the Father was their sovereign Father and Holy Father. So in all these things they knew He was faithfully for them in love.

Led by circumstances

Circumstances may or may not be the guidance of the Father. Our tendency is to make bad or uncomfortable circumstances an indicator that we should look for somewhere else to go or something else to do. Whereas good circumstances are taken to be God's blessing upon what we are doing, and so we decide to continue with what we are doing. This principle falls down in Acts eight. It seems to be OK when the people were forced out

of Jerusalem by persecution. But it is contradicted in Philip's case. When he was in the middle of a great revival in Samaria with many people being blessed, God directed him into a desert to meet one single person. Circumstances on that occasion would have almost demanded that Philip stay where he was. But Philip was not driven by circumstances, he was tuned in to the Father's heart.

Led by Messages from God

Philip was directed away from Samaria by an, *Angel of the Lord* (Acts 8:26). Sometimes this title was given to the Son of God. Those who saw this Angel of the Lord referred to Him as God. At other times it simply means a messenger from God. In the case of Philip it seems he simply received a message from God through an angel (messenger). This was not some internal hunch on Philip's part, but a direct direction from God Himself. Philip did not have to interpret anything or analyse a set of vague circumstances and come up with a 'message from God.' He simply knew it was the will of his Father that he leave Samaria and go down into the desert. There were no instructions given about what he had to do. We notice that Philip didn't turn this event into a big drama. He didn't say, "The Lord has directed me to leave Samaria, this is going to be very hard because I don't know what I will be doing, but I will go anyway." This would have been to make doing the Father's will a duty or a sacrifice, something which placed Philip in a risky place. The love of the Father had captured his heart, he couldn't think of any other place he'd rather be than on a road in the desert. So his obedience was not a costly thing; something to boast about; something to burden him.

It appears in the Scriptures that God doesn't often speak directly to us through an angel. However, on many occasions when angels came to people in the past they didn't come in shining white robes and wings, but appeared as people just like them. So then we may have been spoken to by angels far more than we think.

Led by the Spirit

When Philip set out for Gaza on the desert road he had a couple of 'surprised by joy' moments. The first one was when he came upon the Ethiopian Official. The second was soon after when he heard this African nobleman reading from Isaiah. Luke said Philip was directed by the Holy Spirit to join this Ethiopian. How did this direction come? Was it spoken so as Philip heard it? It could have been. But it seems more likely to have come in the following way. When Philip had become a Christian God had sent His Spirit into Philip's heart. The Spirit convinced Philip of his forgiven sins, flooding his heart with Father's love and peace. The Spirit did not leave Philip at that point but stayed continually to keep Philip in the Father's love. This meant that Philip had a heart for the Father's will. So as he came upon the Ethiopian his heart was led by the Spirit to join himself to the Ethiopian. The idea behind the word Luke used for 'join,' was to stay in contact until God had done what he wanted to do). So Philip '*ran over and joined*' the Ethiopian. Some have called this guidance a 'holy hunch.' Whatever we make of that, it seems that Philip knew what the Father was saying because he knew the heart and will of the Father. We need not make this kind of guidance into a deeply mystical event.

We must not make a 'model' out of any single way that God direct us. The key to guidance of all forms is a loving and respected relationship. This is so of guidance from God. In this the Holy Spirit is central. He it is who shows us the Father, fills us with the Father's forgiveness through Jesus, and keeps us in the Father's love as a treasured child. So the guidance question is simple. Have we received the Holy Spirit? To receive the Spirit is to humbly receive all that he shows us about Jesus and the Father.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 17 in the Book of Acts

The Miracles of the Father's Glory in the Mission of Jesus
Acts 8:26-40

Last week we considered how God led His early church into His mission. The leading of the Father is primarily with a view to His glory. Because His glory is the greatest blessing for us we will discover that there is no contradiction between God's glory and our happiness and joy.

When God called Philip from a place of great blessing in Samaria into a desert way in Gaza it was for God's glory. This study is about the different aspects of that glory and how that glory touches us all.

The Glory of the Father who keeps His Promises

God had always promised to bring the nations into communion with Him. Possibly as much as 1800 years before Jesus, God promised Abraham that He would bless the nations through his descendant. Paul showed that this descendant was Jesus. The blessing Jesus would bring as Lord of the nations was the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3).

In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, (Genesis 22:18).

Around 1000 years before Christ, the future Messiah is promised the nations who will call Him blessed

'Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession (Psalm 2:8, see too Psalm 72:18).

So the nations will 'see' the salvation of the Lord

⁷ *How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace and brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation, and says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

¹⁰ *The LORD has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations,
That all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7, 10).*

Acts 8 is the account of these promises coming true before the eyes of the early Christians. Your presence here at Bethel today, over two thousand years later, is the continuing fulfilment of the Father's promises. All God's promises are "Yes" because of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The Glory of the Father's Timing

With God, timing is everything. Not because He likes to keep a strict diary, but because as He works within our hearts He brings us to important moments. Moments He has prepared for us to see and receive His blessings. The Father had brought the Ethiopian to such a moment in time. He had become interested in religion but not found God. God, however, had found him and was working in his heart. This was a miracle of grace. But the miracle was even greater. At the time this Ethiopian's heart was ripe to know God, God's man Philip, busy and blessed in Samaria was about to be part of God's saving moment for the Ethiopian on a dry and dusty road. It seemed that the Ethiopian would return home from Jerusalem none the wiser about God's love found in Christ. Then, as we saw last week, the Father directed a willing

servant to meet this Ethiopian in the desert. So the Scripture is true, *The steps of a man are established by the LORD, And He delights in his way* Psalm (37:23) and, *I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps* (Jeremiah 10:23).

What does it mean that our times are in Father's hands? It means we may expect meeting points with Him that will change our lives. It means that when He brings God's servant to us, at the right time, we too will ask the right questions like the Ethiopian (Acts 8:34). The right questions about God are those which come from a heart humbled, at the end of trying to justify itself, or excuse itself.

The Glory of Father's Heart surgery

Notice the progression in the heart of the Ethiopian. He went from seeking after a God he didn't know, to reading about the true God and yet not understanding what he read, to seeing and believing the message that God's Son, the man Jesus, whom he would have heard about in Jerusalem, was the Lamb of God who took away all his sin. This is not a journey that a human being can make on their own.

We notice too that the Ethiopian did not have to be nagged into faith, or challenged to become a believer. That would have meant that the Father's timing, heart miracle and Gospel was not really powerful. No, this man's heart had been changed and he sought Baptism. This is the fulfilment of the promise in the Psalms, that God's children will volunteer freely (be freewill offerings) in the day of God's power (Psalm 110:3).

We notice that Philip preached about Jesus as God's Lamb. This is most important. The Ethiopian's conscience must be cleansed. Only then would his heart be free.

The Glory of the Father's confirming Blessing.

There is a beautiful principle involved in being blessed by God. Every blessing makes the heart full and desiring more. The Psalmist said it this way,

What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the LORD (Psalm 116:12, 13).

To lift up the cup of salvation is to worship God with a full heart for God has given us a full cup of salvation. To call upon Him is to say "I know you are my Father, and I know your love for me!" In other words the Father wants our hearts not our busyness. By Father having our hearts, we too become significant people like Philip. Then the Father will link us with those whom he has prepared.

How did the Ethiopian say, "*What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the LORD?*" He didn't use those words he simply asked for Baptism. Baptism was the Father's blessing that would bring new and continuing grace into his life. This was God's blessing, saying that as surely as Jesus died as God's Lamb, and took our guilt away, so surely is that blessing going to hold us forever.

So Baptism is much more than something you do to show others you are a Christian. Like the Lord's Supper it is Father's gift to fill and keep our hearts eager for more.

So with Paul we cry, *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!*

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 18 in the Book of Acts

The Conversion of Saul (Paul)
Acts 9:1-19

Luke has been slowly introducing Saul (Paul) to his readers. But the man we met is a strong hater of God and one who has rejected God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel. He was a man in a rage. His anger burned strong against Jesus and His followers. He had watched, maybe supervised the terrible stoning of Stephen. He hated the idea of the Cross. In his understanding the Messiah would never be one crucified on a cross. The thought of this phoney Messiah, Jesus, being raised from the dead filled him with scorn. Every thing about Jesus contradicted his understanding of God and God's Messiah.

Saul was the one who had been responsible for persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem until many had to flee to near-by Samaria and further a field. When he heard that this led to many becoming Christians, and being freed by Christ from their slavery to sin, he became angrier still. So he set off from Jerusalem to arrest, bind, and bring back believers in Damascus to Jerusalem, to be punished. When Saul and his party were almost in Damascus, Saul's whole world was confronted and destroyed. Not because Saul was looking for change. Not because he had come to a cross roads in life and decided that he should give his life to Jesus. The whole incident is all about Jesus breaking into Saul's life. It was all about Jesus and His plan for Saul, not Saul's plans for Him.

Jesus confronts Saul (Paul)

The first thing Saul became aware of was a blinding light. Later, when Saul was telling King Agrippa about the moment he explains that the bright light was Jesus Christ (Acts 26:16). Saul fell to the ground, blind (this only happened to Saul, his companions did not fall down and were not blinded). In other words this was Jesus dealing with Saul alone.

Then the Lord began to do two things; identify Himself to Saul, and then reveal to Saul just how far from the truth of God Saul was. First He asked Saul, "*Why are you persecuting me?*" Saul didn't think he was persecuting anyone at that point. He thought he was doing God's righteous business in getting rid of this dangerous group of people who called themselves 'The Way'. So the Lord's question confronted Saul in two ways: The identity of the one speaking to him, and how that one was connected to the Christians calling themselves The Way? Being blinded and struck down, Saul would have known he was dealing with God, not another human being. What he didn't expect to find out, when the one speaking identified Himself, was that it was none other than Jesus of Nazareth. Suddenly Saul's heart was exposed. The one speaking to him was God. The one speaking to him was Jesus of Nazareth. The one speaking was the Messiah. The one speaking was the Leader of and one with the Christians whom he had hated and sought to destroy. He saw, in one ego shattering second, that instead of being a good servant of God he was exactly the opposite.

Then Jesus commanded Saul to rise and go into Damascus and wait for further instructions. What a reversal. Instead of raging into the city as one who thought he was a strong person, doing the right thing for God, he had to be led in by hand, blind and humbled. Saul began his first walk by faith.

For three days Saul sat in a blind, darkened world. He fasted from food, probably as a sign that he was deeply changed by his encounter with Jesus. Food would have been a diversion from thinking through all that was flooding his heart. He had met the Messiah. The Messiah did not destroy him but directed him mercifully into Damascus for something that, He the Messiah, was going to give Saul. How his heart must have struggled with how wrong he had been and yet how gracious the Messiah was.

The end of the encounter came in a beautiful and significant way. One of the Christians in Damascus, who Saul was going to bind and drag back to Jerusalem, possibly to die, was called Ananias. The Lord now spoke to him in a vision and told him that Saul was in town praying and needed a pastoral visit. At the same time the Lord gave Saul a vision of a man called Ananias coming to restore his sight. Ananias was at first a little afraid. Even a blind Saul still held fearful images in the minds of the Christians.

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." (Vs 13, 14).

The Lord, in an act of deep friendship and compassion (a person tells his friends what he is doing (John 15:15), tells Ananias that Saul is His chosen person to take His name to the Gentile Kings and to the Jews. Ananias goes straight to Saul, calls him his 'brother' and lays hands on him. So it was that Saul's conversion was accomplished and he was healed as he received the Holy Spirit flooding into him.

Saul's Conversion and the conversion of all Believers.

The conversion of every sinner is a unique event. We cannot make a model of how God converts one person and apply that to all. Some say, almost apologetically, that they did not have a dramatic conversion like Saul. As if the kind of dramatic events Saul went through means that he was better converted than them. They seem to feel that dramatic conversions are given to special people who are set aside to do great things for God. Paul, however, didn't go about sharing his testimony as the way of convincing people about the Gospel. We make the following points about every conversion.

Every conversion is a dramatic event. By dramatic I mean it involves changing a person from being one who hates God into one who loves the Father. It is dramatic in the sense that it brings a person to the end of themselves. That is we come to see that we have nothing by which to impress God or persuade Him to bless us. It is dramatic in the sense that it takes Christ to come to us and convince us that we are terribly lost and completely enslaved by our sin. In the presence of Christ, whether surrounded by a blinding light is unimportant, we see our terrible weakness and need, and feel our failure deeply. He speaks to us as He did to Paul. His questions bring us to the truth about Him and the truth about ourselves. Like Paul our hearts are truly humbled. We change from being a driven person, driven to be somebody in our own strength; driven to prove that we can live apart from our Maker, and live brilliantly. Like Saul the presence of Jesus leads us to receive the Holy Spirit and be restored. Like Saul conversion brings such a flood of God's grace into every part of us that we want from that time on to receive more and more. So like the Ethiopian we considered last week, Saul couldn't wait to be Baptised for Baptism was Christ affirming to Paul that all the blessings he had received were real and true and created to keep on filling Saul for eternity. Like Saul conversion brings us immediately into the Fellowship of the Church. Conversion, whatever form it comes in, brings all of us into all of this.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 19 in the Book of Acts

Saul, Transformed to Lover of The Lord
Acts 9:20-31

Christianity is not based upon an idea or a set of truths, but a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. He was human like us in every way, yet pronounced to be God's Son with power at His resurrection. God has made claims about His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Every person in the world must ask themselves where they stand with regards to Jesus. If God's claims about him have been shown to be true then we must kneel before Him and receive all He has to give. Unlike other religions who follow different teachers and gurus, God intends that we know His Son as a brother. If a father wants to reveal himself and all the depths of his love then logic says he would ask one of his children to do this. So His Son became truly human to do this. Paul claimed that it was this man Jesus, the Son of God, who met him and changed his heart from a hater and opposer of God to a brother of Jesus, and thus a true servant of God.

So the first thing Paul did was to tell people that Jesus was indeed God's Son. The Sonship of Jesus and the Fatherhood of God were to become central features of Paul's teaching. To know the Son as a human, a human, being God's Son, is to see the Father (think about this sentence carefully). To see the Father like the Son does is to experience two powerful things. We see how far from the Father we had been living; and secondly we see how much the Father has done to draw us back to Himself.

Paul had been a driven man. We may be driven people, driven to be successful, driven to be wealthy, driven to be powerful, driven to be top in everything, only to find that being driven by our own desires never fills us, never satisfies. We need to enter into the full joy of what Paul found. He was loved by the Father.

If we go to the final verse in our scripture passage this morning we discover that those who begin to know the Father as Jesus does come together in a group unlike any other group in the world. It is a group that grows and feels and behaves like a body, a community of love, not an institution of man. Words like peace, growing to maturity, loving fear and comfort are used to describe what is going on in this church.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase (Acts 9:31).

These are strange words to describe a group of people. We become so used to business model words to describe all our groups. Words like, quotas, profit, financial outlook, strategic planning, describe the kind of success and growth wanted in business. But the church is different. Because it is built by the Son of God it is all about Fatherly, family, relationship goals like peace and comfort and maturing as a family. This is the kind of growth that we must all seek in the church. The gifts of the Son of God work for this kind of growth. His gifts to the church are people who open up His word to the church, the word of true 'sonly' love and behaviour. That is, we are built up into what the Son of God is all about (Ephesians 4:11-16). The Holy Spirit too, gifts each Christian with the inner grace to grow together in the love of the Father. The Spirit supplies love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22, 23). Before knowing God's Son, Paul

enjoyed none of these graces. Left to itself the human heart is sinful and seeks to establish itself. Fear or pride drives it to use others not serve others. It sees itself as master of its own destiny. It believes it is a sign of weakness to need other people let alone God. It has goals to reach which it believes will give it meaning and satisfy its deepest longings. But apart from feeling and enjoying the sonship that the Son of God enjoys, our hearts simply keep on being driven but never filled.

After Paul's conversion, he straight way started to tell others about God's Son. This was not a duty but the overflow of love that he received from the Father. Christianity is never about duty and religious conformity to a code of practice. The business world has to operate under threat and pressure and forms of bribery (more money if we succeed). We must never think that because the church is an organisation that we use the same tactics to grow. The only thing that can create the true freedom, the true spirit in the church, is to know the Father as Jesus of Nazareth does.

So the Church grew in peace. Partly this peace was the result of Paul's conversion. He was the major cause of the suffering and pain that the growing church had been feeling. After his conversion much of the persecution stopped. But the church knows a greater peace than just the absence of suffering. It is a group of people who know peace with the Father. Their conscience no longer drive them to work to justify themselves. So their hearts are free to receive Father's unconditional love. A peaceful person is one, who like Jesus of Nazareth, is able to communicate love to another. If we are seeking to justify ourselves in the sight of others (making ourselves look good), then we will not be listening to them or truly relating to them. Peace is enjoyable for it opens up the giving and receiving of joy from the Father and all His children.

Luke said that **the church was strengthened, built up.** Later in the verse he spoke of growth in numbers. Here he was meaning inward growth. Being introduced to the Father and His goals and ways by Jesus, we have a whole new life to grow into. The expressions of love, joy, peace etc, mentioned above, cause us to grow together in the way we were created to do. This growth brings a sense of delight as well as great encouragement to grow more. This growth is created and developed by the Father Himself, for it comes through His gifts, we simply receive and enjoy it, and move out freely in obedience. Most business models of growth leave people tired, frustrated and depressed. Father's church is the place where we can be truly human and love it.

Luke says the church **walked in the fear of the Lord.** This does not mean that the church lived in the fear that the Lord might suddenly do something horrible or painful to them. It does not mean that they lived in the fear that He was judging their every move and being critical, for they knew that there was no condemnation for those who are His brothers. Their fear was one of love. Above all else they wanted to do what pleased Him and therefore what pleased the Father. This was the way their heart was now operating as individuals and the church. So they were always encouraging each other in the will of God.

The church experienced **the comfort of the Holy Spirit.** Paul would later write, *The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us* (Romans 5:5). So moment by moment we are comforted by the love the Father has for us. This is the song of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In every situation in which we find ourselves, the Holy Spirit will be showing us how much we are loved, protected and directed by the Father's love.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 20 in the Book of Acts

Jesus Christ Heals You!
Acts 9:32-43

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase (Acts 9:31).

An amazing miracle had happened. With Paul no longer stirring up persecution the Church knew a time of peace and continuing growth. Note, these two, persecution and blessing, are not mutually exclusive like we tend to think today God's love had prevailed over terrible hatred. Growth of the Church had flourished against every attempt of the world to extinguish it, and Christians, by the grace of being caught up in the judgements of God, had willingly spread out into the world outside Jerusalem.

So it was that Peter, head of the Church, left Jerusalem to do two things: Bring Pastoral care to the scattered Church (8:1, 9:13), and join with them that together they might keep on declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Lord of Lords. These believers were probably the converts of Philip when he journeyed from Azotus to Caesarea (Acts 8:40, show on map).

Whereas the other Apostles stayed in Jerusalem, Peter began to take up the Lord's command to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. But as we will see, Peter's heart would yet be opened further to the Gentile world in a most significant way (Acts 10).

Luke records three final stories about Peter in the next two chapters of Acts. After this he disappears from the scene and the focus turns to Paul.

1. Two miraculous acts (The healing of Aeneas, and raising Dorcas from the dead, Acts 9:32-43)
2. The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion (Acts 10).
3. Peter's miraculous deliverance from imprisonment by Herod (the King of the Jews), (Acts 12:1-17).

In each of these stories Luke shows us the startling truth for all humanity. Jesus of Nazareth, God's resurrected King, is Himself present, dealing with the enemies which grip sinful humanity. Enemies such as disease, death and all kinds of political scheming to destroy the work of God. So the ministry of the Church is seen as Jesus Christ present in power rather than the Church giving a word about Christ. A word which we then take and make our own, or seek to find a way for it to be powerful in our life situations.

Aeneas and Dorcas (Acts 9:32-43)

Luke's first story involves a cripple and a dead believer at Lydda and Joppa, a few days walk west of Jerusalem. Aeneas had been crippled and bed-ridden for eight years, and Dorcas had recently died. In both incidents, the presence of Christ to heal and bring life is simple and powerful, cutting through the enemies which bind the

hearts of sinful humanity. Each encounter has much to say about the passion of Christ to restore humanity and how He works to do this. The impact of His love upon a world terribly bound and corrupt is stunning. In those days as well as today the world was denying its bondage, even camouflaging it as good. It was imagining that it could control its own health and destiny. It was more intent on making an impression than actually changing things at the centre. Enter Jesus the 'no fuss' Messiah.

Aeneas had been terribly crippled for eight years. He was bed-ridden and totally dependent on others (Vs 33). Maybe that is why Peter sought him out? It seems likely he was a believer (see verse 31). Peter's words to Aeneas are very simple.

Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up (Vs 34).

Today we must have an explanation about everything. We demand that everything must make sense to us. But Peter simply described what was now true for Aeneas because Jesus was present.

Jesus was healing Aeneas as Peter was speaking. There was no working up of Aeneas to have faith or have more faith. This healing, as with all God's healing, was a sovereign, gracious act of His love. It delivered full healing to Aeneas. He did not have to claim healing to keep it. In other words Jesus was freeing Aeneas not only from his crippledom, but from any religious pressure to make himself better, or keep himself well. All he had to do was make his bed!

With Dorcas, the scene was more extreme. Dorcas had been dead for at least a day when Peter came. She had been prepared for burial. Previous to this there is no record of people being raised from the dead since Jesus had been resurrected. Peter was greeted by much mourning and weeping. Death is the final great confronting enemy. The mourners were clinging to the memory of Dorcas by displaying all the fine work that she had done whilst alive. She was a noted woman of good works. She had, *abounded in deeds of kindness* (Vs 36). Without discounting the grace of her previous kindness and love Peter ushered the mourners out of the room. Nothing Dorcas had ever done, either good or evil, was going to determine the ministry of Jesus to her. The giving of life is utterly God's doing. To be dead is to be utterly at God's mercy. We note with due seriousness, that as sinners we all are described as dead towards God. Peter simply spoke to Dorcas and said 'Get up.' Peter could not give life, only declare that it had been given by Jesus, present in the room. The word 'arise' is often used of the resurrection of Jesus. So as Jesus had experienced resurrection and now had the power over death, so He gave Dorcas the same experience. So she opened her eyes and sat up. The simplicity of Luke's description avoids all ideas of human exhibitionism and impressing the public by great drama. No doubt many were deeply changed when they heard about it, but it was not used by the Church as a means to impress people. It seems they did not put Dorcas on 'display'.

These were miracles which demonstrated the presence of Jesus the King. They were not miracles to convince the world that they should go to Church. They must deal with a risen Christ. As today it seems that not every dead believer can be raised or every cripple like Aeneas restored. We must live by faith that the risen Christ knows when and how to exalt His name. We must, however, like Peter, understand that He is still present and may still call upon us to declare His present healing and His present restoration to new life.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace

Study 21

The New Wine of the Spirit of Jesus (1)

Acts 10

The Church acknowledged that the ministry of the Church was really the ministry of the risen Lord. But how far was He going to go? Already, through the sovereign hand of the Lord, seen in the political schemes of His haters, the Gospel was spreading out at great speed. The Apostles in Jerusalem were amazed and yet still confused about what this movement of the ministry away from Jerusalem really meant, for the Church as they knew it and more particularly for them. What Luke describes in Acts 10 is the Lord's great grace upon the Church. Instead of just ignoring them and doing His own thing the Lord graciously yet powerfully opens their hearts to the 'dogs', the Gentile people.

Here was their dilemma. How could they take the gospel to the Gentiles when they thought that they were not permitted to even sit at the same table as them? How could they share the community of love, created by the forgiveness of sins, when they viewed the Gentiles as unclean and likely to pollute them if they got too close?

Jesus had warned the Jews that the ministry of the Holy Spirit was like active new wine which could not be contained within the old rules and taboos which had built up in Jewish religion (Luke 5:37,38). Sinful humanity has always taken the fresh, creative and lively words of God, designed to be heard in a warm and free relationship, and turned them into rules which kill the spirit of love. As long as Peter and the other Apostles had lingering doubts that they shouldn't mix with non Jewish people then they were not truly free to preach and teach the good news of God's unconditional love. These were religious/cultural problems which were seated deeply in their hearts. They would only give way and be changed under the strong, clearly revealed grace of God.

Luke gives us a clear and methodical explanation of this revelation of God's grace in Acts 10. The end result was an open door to the world, and the leaders of the Christian Church embracing the glory of the height and length and breadth of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. When Peter was called back to Jerusalem to give account of what had happened the Christian Leaders glorified God in a way that showed how grace had changed them in their depths.

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."(Acts 11:18).

This was a unique, one off event, the Gentile Pentecost', which God did to bring His love to you and me. However, there is much to learn about how God changes our deeply held religious and cultural ideas. All of us are strongly affected by our culture. And yet all of us find it impossible to see just how much we are affected. Others may get an idea but only God knows how our hearts have been gripped by narrow and restricting idols and beliefs. Every culture is a fallen and sinful culture, for it is made up of sinners. So every culture will have deep issues against the truth of God. It is not enough for us to be challenged to change let alone made to feel guilty if we don't do what God wants us to do. Something much deeper must grip our hearts.

Two men are central in Luke's account; Peter, head of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, and Cornelius, a Roman Centurion living in Caesarea. God dealt with each

one individually but with one common purpose; to open both Jewish and non Jewish hearts to the community of love created by the gospel. Each man had to be opened by grace to see and hear the other in the presence of Christ the Lord. Each man represents a whole culture; Peter the new Jewish Christian Church and Cornelius the Gentile world. Each man must be confronted by the glorious extent and power of what Christ was doing. They must be surprised by the wideness of God's love so as to have their hearts captured and filled by that love. This morning I want to focus on Cornelius.

Cornelius the Centurion

Cornelius lived in Caesarea, the centre of Roman power in Judea. Cornelius had become formally linked with the Jewish religion. This was an unusual thing for Roman soldiers who generally despised the Jews and despised living in Judea. But God had been at work in him and was drawing him towards the central focus of true Judaism, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Cornelius would have been doing the outward things of Judaism, things like food laws and times of prayer. But he needed to hear about the good news of forgiveness of sins, and for that he must listen to the gospel as proclaimed by the Apostles. Luke records that Cornelius was a strong and genuine believer in Judaism. But this was not enough. One thing was evident however, Cornelius had been prepared by God to listen when He spoke. This is a great mercy.

Whilst in afternoon prayers, Cornelius was visited by an angel in a vision (a messenger from God). This was a startling event for a Roman Centurion and an unthinkable event from a Jewish perspective. Cornelius was astonished, that is he experienced a mixture of fear and awe. But he knew it was God speaking to him and simply asks what it all meant. It is interesting that the Lord's exchange with Cornelius is much simpler than his dealings with Peter. It seems that Peter had further to move than did Cornelius in being open to the blessing of God upon the Gentiles. The deeper our religious culture grips us the further from grace we find ourselves.

It appears, from the servants of Cornelius, that the angel told Cornelius to send for Peter and listen to what he would say (Vs 22). That is, Cornelius must hear the good news of the gospel from Peter. Only through the truth about Jesus the Messiah, that Peter and the other Apostles knew, could Cornelius get the full blessing promised to the Jewish nation.

The next day when Peter came, Cornelius was waiting for him (eagerly). He had called all his relatives and friends (Vs 24). He fell at Peter's feet in adoration. He was expecting God to speak. Peter gently told him to stand up as he was simply a man not God. They then shared the remarkable story as to how God had brought them together (we will consider this from Peter's point of view next week).

Peter began to preach, declaring that God was not a god to show favouritism to any one race or culture. He declared the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus to be Lord of all. Then as Peter was explaining that all their sins had been and remained forgiven because of these events the Holy Spirit flooded them all. They all believed (that Jesus had graced them with forgiveness), declared the glory of God in tongues and were all welcomed into the community of God's love in Baptism.

The bridge to the Gentiles had been accomplished. What God had promised at the birth of Jesus was being fulfilled, He would be a "Light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 22
The New Wine of Jesus (2)
Acts 10

Acts chapter ten describes the Gentile Pentecost. Jesus was not just a Jewish Messiah. He had been raised as Lord over all. The Father had given Jesus of Nazareth, His Son, Lordship over all the nations of the earth as He had promised in Psalm 2. What would Jesus of Nazareth do with all the nations? He would open their hearts to know the Father as He does and thus draw them together into a worldwide community of love. To do this the Holy Spirit must flood the nations with the only truth that could create this community, the word of forgiveness from Jesus Himself. In acts 10 God opened His door to the Gentile nations in two ways; In the hearts of the Apostles, and the hearts of Gentiles. Both had hearts which must change. Both had hearts which would only change through the power of God's grace. Last week we considered Cornelius, the Gentile in the story.

Today we look at Peter, the head of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. He must be shown the full unconditional love of God for all nations. Then he could speak the full gospel of love into those nations: Then he could lead the Church out into those nations to embrace them as Christ had embraced them.

Peter and the New Wine of Jesus

When Jesus washed the Apostles clean from all their sins the resulting life and love was not able to be contained in their old Jewish religion and customs. To be cleansed was to enter into the life of God. Nothing about religion and their religious culture could understand or 'contain' that life. God's life cannot be forced into laws and taboos. God's way of relating cannot be imprisoned in the customs and ideas of man. Peter had grown up believing that the Gentile nations were unclean and that close contact with them would make a Jew unclean. So he is in a strong dilemma. The gospel of Jesus created a community of love in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47). All manner of Jewish people from all social groups had been made one in love. Prostitutes, wealthy men and women, religious leaders, blind, demon possessed, all had become part of the community of God's family. But the cultural/religious issue that made the idea of all the Gentiles entering into this community without first becoming Jews was a difficult thing for the Apostles to see beyond.

So how could these Jewish believers take an unconditional gospel to the nations when in their hearts they still believed it was conditional on being a Jew? How could people who still believed, in varying degrees, that it was impossible for them to participate freely in the family life of Gentiles, take a gospel to them which promised such a relationship? The answer of course is that they could do neither. The Gospel is proclaimed from a community of love, not a bunch of individuals with good ideas about God. If the Church is not a community of love then the preacher's voice is silenced.

Peter is confronted by God's Grace

Here is the scene. The previous day, Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in Caesarea, had been told in a vision to send for Peter. The purpose of calling Peter was so he could hear the full truth of what God desired for him and the nations. Just before the

servants of Cornelius arrived, Peter too had a vision. Now Peter was in Joppa, staying in the home of Simon, a converted tanner. Orthodox Jews had long regarded tanners (those who make leather from animal skins) as unclean. So Peter had come somehow into the freedom of the Gospel. He was about to go into the full light of its full freedom. But before he did he must face the crisis of changing his old beliefs and taboos.

Peter was praying at lunch time on the roof of Simon's home. It was there that God gave him a strange and disturbing vision. Heaven opened before his eyes and God lowered down a great sheet. In the sheet were animals of all descriptions. It would take the heavens to be opened (a revelation directly from God) to change Peter's heart. The creatures Peter saw were those named in Genesis 1:20, 24. Now some of these had been declared unclean by God in Israel's early days. Eating laws had continued so Peter would have been confronted, seeing the animals, clean and unclean all together. He knew that this was a vision from God. So was God contradicting His law? But the offence to Peter became much more confronting when God commanded him to kill and eat any one of these animals. God was clear with Peter. He had made and blessed and therefore blessed all these creatures. None was unclean. What then of the Jewish law? What God had given for a certain time had been turned into a rigid eternal law. It was this that was keeping Peter from freely going to 'unclean' people.

God repeated this scene three times for Peter. But as the servants from Cornelius arrived Peter was still perplexed as to what it all meant. So the Holy Spirit told him directly that he should go and meet them and accompany them without misgivings. That is, Peter must trust that the Lord was in all this and not go freely without fear. It must have been on the way that the full truth of what God was saying in the vision dawned upon Peter. "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unclean." In the vision God declared that all He makes is holy and good. Soon He would show Peter that He was going to cleanse the Gentiles through the Gospel in the same way he had cleansed Peter.

Four days after God appeared to Cornelius Peter entered the home of this Gentile soldier. Did he enter with unresolved fears? Did he enter with an attitude which said, "I'd rather be some place else? Did he enter with an attitude which said, "I am someone special, here to teach you all something you don't deserve? Or did he enter the home of Cornelius freely? Did he stand free before the crowd that had gathered? Well thanks to the revelation of God he stood freely. He could now speak freely about God's love for God's love had given him freedom from all fears and all taboos, and all superstitions. So they could hear freely. But most importantly Peter was no longer afraid of other people. Religious and cultural laws make us fearful in case we do something 'outside' the law. We become constantly mindful of 'what others may think'. Or even worse we continually live in the fear of what God is thinking about us. So in all our actions we have our mind fixed by fears, we become focused on man and particularly upon ourselves. Paul claimed to be "free from all men" (1 Corinthians 9:19). Only then could he serve others as a true slave (not out of duty, but freely).

So it was that Peter, and those Christians who came with him, stood in the home of Cornelius and demonstrated what God's community of love looked like and behaved like. Therefore when Peter said, "I certainly understand that God is not one to show partiality" (favouritism on the basis of nationality, culture or religion), everybody in the room felt the door of God's Family love open. Then as Peter preached the forgiveness of sins the Holy Spirit swept all of them into that same Family.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 23
“Repentance that Leads to Life”
Acts 11:18

Repentance may be one of the most misunderstood blessings of God in modern Christianity. Contractual rather than covenant thinking, firebrand evangelists and sinful hearts combine to create a very low and corrupt view of repentance. Contractual thinking about the Gospel sees repentance as one of the things a human has to do to get right with God. Repentance then is seen in terms of feeling sorry for your sins, leading to the idea that the more intense the sorrow, the better will be the repentance. The firebrand evangelist makes repentance into a heavy burden laid upon the guilt of sinners under the threat of God’s wrath. They treat it as a simple decision of the will, calling on sinners to turn from their sin and follow Christ. John the Baptist has often been portrayed in this light. No doubt John was a man of passion, but it would be wrong to see him as a wild-man, yelling and stamping his foot at Israel. But the popular culture around repentance is not formed simply by such wrong thinking and zealous evangelists. As sinners all our images and understandings of God love are askew, even opposite to reality. We have believed a lie, or more correctly we have believed the word of the deceiver and liar. One of the symptoms of unforgiven sin is remorse. Remorse is very different to repentance. Remorse is the pain of drowning under the guilt of sin when that sin is made obvious. As someone has said it is the pain of being ‘caught out.’

The classic addict, of whatever variety, is caught not only in their addiction but remorse. Unable to stop their addiction they feel increasingly burdened and ashamed. Despite being painfully aware of their slavery, they continually promise to change and make it up to those they have hurt, only to relapse and begin the cycle again. Remorse then is a terrible thing. It cannot deliver the power to reform the heart. In fact remorse can only lead to failure and death; it has no power to deliver life. On the other hand, as Luke made clear, repentance from God delivers a person right into the life of God. We will return to this great blessing later.

Cain, Saul and Judas were men of remorse. For Judas we know that his remorse was strong enough to drive him to death. These men were enslaved in a dreadful cycle.

Apart from God giving repentance we remain in what has been called ‘the guilt trip’ or ‘guilt cycle’. Sadly, even believers, unaware of the full love of God, remain in this cycle. They may even suggest that this is how God wants it to be, this is His way of getting us to reform. Their wrong logic is like this; the more we feel guilty about our sins, then the more likely we are to try harder to escape and denounce them.

The evil one will seek at all costs to throw us onto our own supposed strength. The last thing he wants is for us to depend utterly on God. This guilt trip creates a roller-coaster existence which sees and draws nothing from communion with the Father. We never feel reconciled to Him. Rather we are all the time living under the curse of a tender conscience that has never submitted to the full grace of what it means for God to justify a sinner.

So why is it that the Scriptures directly link repentance with knowing life?

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

The first point we make is that a human being only experiences true life in relationship with the Father. As true Son this was our Lord's great lesson to us. So Luke links repentance directly to entry into God's life. It does not merely lead us towards life with the Father but delivers us right into it. The gift of repentance is the gift from Father in which He shows us how things are between us by grace.

God planned to share his life with the Gentiles. So He changed their hearts from stony hearts (ignorant of His Fatherly love) to hearts of flesh (Deuteronomy 30:6, Ezekiel 11:19). So repentance from God casts us onto what Father has actually done, first on the Cross in His Son and then by the Spirit in our hearts. Remorse casts us back onto ourselves to mend our ways in order that we might bring ourselves into grace.

We do not simplify the meaning of repentance to turn it into a step we do to lead us to God. This might 'make sense' to sinners as it seems to give them the power to make a decision and come to God. However, what good is such simplicity if it is wrong and leaves the person outside of God's life?

So repentance is that gift which enables our minds to turn and see the goodness and grace of the Father. As we have often said, it is our images of the Father which determine everything about our relationships and our emotions. Every sinner has a corrupt and therefore corrupting view of the Father. God tells us that we are hostile in mind towards Him and His way of life. Guilt will always produce broken relationships and anger. So because we are addicted to sin, driven by the images of God which simply produce remorse, and constantly on the guilt trip cycle, we are absolutely dependent upon God to create a new heart and mind according to the truth. This comes about through the Holy Spirit taking the things of the true Son of the Father and bringing them home to us. Suddenly all that we thought was true of the Father, all we thought was true of the way He wants us to relate to Him is demolished. All our religious images of God which threw us back on ourselves are mercifully killed, destroyed.

Do we see then that where religion inflicts its old images of a legal god, or of a god who only partly gives himself to us, or partly forgives and accepts us, or of a believer who has to go on proving to God that they are worthy of His love, we will never enjoy being in the Father's bosom, we will never feel free in the Father's life of communion? We have never received God's gift of repentance leading to life.

Do we see then that to 'simplify' repentance, take all the miracle, all the sovereignty of Father's love out of it is to not only mislead but point people to death.

Repentance comes then as the true Son Jesus speaks the truth about His Father. This truth demands that we change our whole mind and heart. What then is our part? Much indeed! Ours, as liberated slaves, reclaimed addicts, is to embrace the truth about the Father in the words of Christ. Ours is to receive the truth gladly, without the intrusion of religious demands and laws. Ours is to believe the stunning wideness of the Father's love. Ours is to enjoy the Father's presence, to the maximum the joy of waking from our burdensome religion of duty and demands. Ours is to luxuriate in the Father's home family), never again fearful of rejection or oppression. Ours is to apply ourselves within the freedom of Father's love to the joy of holiness.

Legal repentance, remorse leads to none of this.

Have you received the repentance that leads to life? Or are you slopping along in the pigpen of remorse and the evangelical guilt trip?

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace

Study 24 (Acts 12)

If only I could have been like Peter!

Strange title! We may look wistfully upon events like Peter's release from prison. Our mind works something like this. "If only God would show Himself dramatically to me like He did to Peter then I would find it easier to know He is present." We convince ourselves that it would help us trust Him, and it would give us something to share in a powerful way with others. People would be able to relate to what we said. Or more damagingly we may look wistfully back to these days feeling that Christ is somehow not able or willing to do these things any more. We may even divorce the activity of Christ in the early church from His activity today. As so called refined and educated people we convince ourselves that we deal with God on a different level.

Of course it is easy to overlook the danger and suffering in which Peter lived constantly. He was the next one Herod planned to execute. We might like to experience his miraculous escape from gaol, but would we be enthusiastic about living constantly under the fear of death? What would we make of God's faithfulness under such pressure? How would we understand that we had been taken out of the Kingdom of darkness when it seemed to have so much impact on our lives?

How then do we approach a story like this? What is God saying to us? How does the Spirit apply the truth revealed here to people who live in a totally different situation, with none of the threats and persecution Peter knew? I want to examine three ways we may apply this passage.

1. We may simply take it literally. That is, if ever we are in gaol for the gospel, God will do this for us. The problem with this is the witness of Scripture. God does not always release his servants who have been thrown into prison. There is not a formula for faith in this story. In the great chapter on trust in Hebrews this becomes confrontingly clear.

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect (Hebrews 11:32—40).

We see that God gave some such as Abraham, David etc direct promises that He would fulfill in their present lives. As they trusted in Him they saw His promises fulfilled. Others received no such direct promises of specific victories, but were given a future hope of a better world. These seemed, in their lifetime, to find no miraculous intervention by God. They suffered terrible things. But they are included as one with those who experienced by faith God's direct intervention for

the future. “Faith recognises that it is the future not the past that moulds the present” (William Lane).

Peter had seen what looked like the same contradiction in his day. Today, Peter would have been a candidate for ‘survivor guilt,’ had he not been trusting the Father. Stephen and James had been martyred, but he had been miraculously saved. Yet neither Peter or the Church seemed to be confused by this.

Where we expect our faith to be established and sustained by circumstances in this life we will be confounded. We may even be on the non-trust treadmill of needing God to prove He still loves us.

Again it comes back to the question, “Have we been granted from God the repentance that leads into life? When we see the truth about the Father as Jesus sees Him then we are assured of the eternal realities of His plan. When we see the truth of how Father loves and operates we have good hope (confidence) of entering into all the Father has prepared for us. Our certainty is not a few wonderful moments in the past, it is the actual presence of Jesus Himself in those future realities. God’s school of wisdom includes both His presence in suffering and His miraculous intervention in some of our suffering. His intent is for us to focus on what He has prepared for us.

2. We may spiritualise the story. By this I mean, turn it into a general promise from God that whatever ‘prison’ we find ourselves in, whether it be a real prison or simply any form of struggle in which we feel bound, God will send His angel and set us free. This interpretation is based upon a general truth. The Father is with us and does care about every moment of suffering. It goes wrong in two ways. It presumes that all suffering is either negative or evil. And so it ignores the lessons of what we need to learn through suffering. Secondly it forgets that we must not demand to live in perfect comfort in this life. We have a future ‘city from God’ in which all suffering and evil will have been eradicated. To demand that of this present life is to ignore the reality of what Christ is doing now and where He is taking us.
3. According to our Lord’s example we must learn in all situations to cry first of all, “Father! Let it be done according to Your will.” In some circles this is considered a cop-out on trust. It is said that we should have faith that God wants to deliver us from every suffering, and immediately. Far from being a cop-out of trust it represents the trust of a child of God who recognises that they cannot see the whole picture. Those who argue from a mechanical view point, saying that the Church prayed and Peter was released, must ask this question; didn’t they pray for Stephen and James?

There may be times when the Father gives a direct promise of an immediate intervention. If that is given then we walk trusting for that to happen: The ‘prayer of faith,’ mentioned in James 5:15, may be such an example. What we must be cautious of is interpreting our desire for instant release and the promises of God.

Peter was released from prison but still had to face the suffering, persecution and death the Lord promised him in this world (John 21:18). His hope must be in the glory prepared for Him: The glory that Jesus of Nazareth entered into through His resurrection. That is the only hope which secures us in the present.

“Faith recognises that it is the future not the past that moulds the present”

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 25 (Acts 13)

Paul Enters the Battle

Luke has been focusing on two deeply connected things;

- How the command of Jesus to take the Gospel out from Jerusalem to the nations was progressing.
- Exposes the continual battle from within and without the Church as this expansion happened.

Enter Paul, the Apostle to the Nations (Acts 13:1-3)

In a very short period of time the Lord had transformed Paul from a hater and persecutor of Christ and His Church into a beloved member of that same church, and His chief proclaimer of the Gospel. In this chapter Paul is set aside by the Church, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to take up the major evangelistic work to the nations. His commissioning is a small window into how the Church functioned. We see the gifts of Christ to His Church, present in a local fellowship: Prophets and teachers who led the Church in worship and the direction of the Lord.

It was a multicultural congregation. There was no such thing as a culturally exclusive Church. Not only would that be a direct contradiction to the Gospel, it would be a blockage of grace and stagnate as a community of love.

We note that the Holy Spirit was heard in the Church. He directed them specifically. We note too that His direction was on the basis of God's calling (Vs 2). They didn't appoint people into ministry because they were keen or because they wanted to keep them in the Church, or because they simply wanted the congregation to grow. What a coup in today's church administration thinking if they could have appointed Paul as Senior Pastor of Antioch. They could have had a mega-church in no time. They were not insecure conservers of comfort, or ambitious glamour seekers. They sent the best they had away.

Paul Goes to Cyprus Acts 13:4-12)

The missionary three, Barnabas, Paul and John Mark, didn't wait for financial support, they simply went to Cyprus (birth place of Barnabas). As we see later, Paul was quite happy to support himself in the ministry.

Paul's principle was, "To the Jew first and then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). This had been the covenantal priority of Jesus Himself (So he and Barnabas went to the synagogue in Salamis. This did not mean that Paul was prejudiced against the Gentiles but was simply following the merciful order that God had established; as we will see in chapter thirteen. The gracious preaching of Christ to the Jews first in the synagogues over Asia and Europe resulted mainly in their rejection of the Gospel and Paul turning to the local responsive Gentiles (13:46f).

Paul, Barnabas and John mark were not the first believers to go to Cyprus (11:19). So presumably they would have linked in with those believers already there. They travelled the whole length of Cyprus. The Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, was stirred by the Holy Spirit to hear the word of God. This is a remarkable mercy as his pagan background, and his recent association with the false prophet Elymas, would have filled his hearts with lies and deceit about the true God.

The exchange between Paul and Sergius Paulus was the first in a long list of opportunities that the Holy Spirit would give Paul to speak to leading authority figures all over Asia and Europe.

The Terror of False Prophets (Acts 13:8-11)

Wherever the word of God is proclaimed the evil one is eager and active to inject another word. This can be as simple as deflecting us in our worship and study times by trivialities, through to the kind of full frontal attack that Elymas made upon Paul and his team. Note the attack was against Paul and Barnabas in as much as Elymas was seeking to turn the proconsul away from the truth they were preaching. Luke calls Elymas a magician (sorcerer, calling on occult powers), and also Bar Jesus or son of Jesus. As Paul spoke God's word to the proconsul, Elymas was strongly attempting to distort and twist his words.

The evil one has only ever been able to twist God's word, "*Make crooked the straight ways of the Lord.*" He has no authentic word himself, not one that can accomplish anything other than destruction. Wherever we entertain in our thoughts or discussions questions and distractions which take us immediately away from the simple truth of God's revelation we are playing into the hands of the evil one and may in fact be operating as false prophets at that moment. In modern culture, where we have been indoctrinated to question everything this can become a serious issue for Christianity.

Elymas had attached himself to the Governor's court. He had a vested interest in keeping the proconsul under his false word. It is significant that Luke mentions that the proconsul was an intelligent man. We often associate the occult and sorcery as only appealing to so called 'ignorant' or uneducated people. But where the fear of death reigns then anybody is likely to fall prey to the Elymases of the world. We tend to camouflage our contact with sorcery in sophisticated cultural ways.

The objective of Elymas was to deflect Sergius Paulus from the word which produces trust. Faith as trust is not first agreement with a creed or statement. It is the hearts response to the truth that God has revealed, ie. His completed forgiveness and full reconciliation us to Himself.

Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit. This special filling of the Spirit was with a view to dealing with the opposition of Elymas in God's terms, not man's. Elymas must be exposed by God not simply a clever word from Paul. He was not just an 'expert' as the name Elymas suggests, he was an agent of the devil. This meant that God alone could deal with him. Unlike the true Jesus, this impostor was an agent of death not the bearer of salvation. He could only deliver perversion not conversion. Promising to give wisdom to the proconsul he could only deliver lies. So Paul called him a deceiver, son of the devil not in any way like the true Jesus.

The strong but temporary judgement of God upon Elymas was linked with his folly. Those who choose to call darkness light and light darkness lose the light they once had. This man's judgement was to be made actually blind; and thus in total need of others. Would that bring him to see his error as it did for Paul himself? Luke doesn't say, or feel the need to explain.

Through the words spoke by Paul and the "*hand of the Lord,*" upon Elymas, the power of Christ became clear to the proconsul. But it was the teaching of the Lord that amazed him and brought him into trust.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace
Study 26 (Acts 13:13-41)

Beginning and End of the Gospel

Paul and Barnabas Preach in Antioch (Turkey) (13:13-41)

Paul is now the leader. John mark has gone back to Jerusalem. The covenant principle of “To the Jews first” is evident again. When they arrived in Antioch they spoke first in the synagogue. Paul’s sermon was addressed to both Jews and God fearers (Vs 16). The God fearers were Gentiles who had not yet become Jews.

This morning we consider the structure, the heart and thrust of Paul’s message. Where did he begin and where did he end? This may help us in our sharing of the Gospel in our day. But rather than getting a ‘method’ from Paul, we need to see what had captured his heart and the truth out of which he spoke. Where do we begin in our sharing about Christ? What do we see as the power (goal, fruit) of the Gospel?

At the end of this chapter Luke reminds us about the state of the Apostles hearts “*They were continually filled with joy and the Holy Spirit*” (Vs 52). The Westminster Confession says, “Chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” One has said that the true thrust of this Confession is, “The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever” (John Piper). So, far from being a glib comment at the end of a chapter, or a goal for believers to aim at, this was what marked the daily life of Paul & Barnabas. What’s more it was at the core of what they proclaimed, both in their manner of presentation and the promise of the Gospel they shared. As we will consider shortly, the ‘end’ or goal of their Gospel was freedom

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses (13:38-39).

One thing cannot be refuted. Those who were once slaves to death, the world, their sin, guilt, the devil and the flesh, and are freed from these terrible enemies are filled with joy. It is this joy which makes relational holiness and hearty worship possible. Should we think that we can live in the Kingdom of God and be filled with anything less than the joy of the Lord ? Should we relegate joy to a bonus, and ‘extra’ but not directly related to how and what we share about Christ? On another mission Paul insisted that the team was working together for the joy of the Corinthians “*Not that we (Paul, Silas & Timothy), lord it over your faith, but we work together for your joy* (2 Corinthians 1:24). Jesus had insisted that involvement in the Kingdom of God was not simply a decision of the will, a clinical obedience to a written or internal code. Rather it was the joyful, urgently delighted embrace of the beauty of all that God is to us (Matthew 13:44ff). “*For the joy of it*” must mark every aspect of our walk of faith; our service, our worship our sufferings etc. But where did Paul begin his preaching?

Paul’s starting point for preaching

We must acknowledge that this varied according to his audience. However, in one way or another he always began with God. On this occasion, speaking to Jews and those who were interested in Jewish things he started with *The God of this people Israel* (13:17). What’s more he went straight to the sovereign grace of God’s election, providence and redemption, and that all in one sentence?

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it.

The relationship between God and His people starts with God and with His loving choice to relate. God follows this electing love with purposeful action which saves and keeps. We may not always open our conversation with such 'theological' words, but the truth they reveal must always be our starting point in sharing the Gospel. Our Lord always related to people believing that His Father had been and was at work in them and in their circumstances. We must take Father's blessings as a first priority and more seriously than we take our situations and ourselves. This goes against the popular world view where everything begins with us and what is happening to us. No doubt our Lord and the Apostles showed great compassion for those enslaved by sin. But the compassion we need is not simply that of another human being. We need to see the compassion of our Father/Creator.

Paul proceeded to highlight the narrative (love story) between God and His chosen ones. The Gospel is God's narrative before it is ours. He directed his listeners to the primacy of God's activity. At every turn it was God who was not only in control but actively directing their pathway. Read the section and note how often Paul said "*He did...*" "*God did...*" "*But God...*" These God directed statements come to full pitch in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (Vs 30). The cross, seemed to show most clearly to the Jews, that God was not involved in vindicating the man Jesus. But Paul specifically proclaimed that not only did God raise Him, but He was the promise given to Abraham, and the fulfilment of Psalm 2 (God's raising up of a Son to sit on the throne of the universe). Again, we don't often need to spell out the mechanics of God's saving plan and its fulfilment when we are witnessing. However, if it is not permanently and livingly real for us, we will not be filled with all the goodness of God. This will reveal itself in a shallow and easily deflected 'gospel'. Like the Apostles, our Gospel does not start with Jesus. It begins with God from before the world began and is revealed in His promises to Israel. We must see everything in the New Testament through the lens of the Old and vice versa.

Psalm 2 and 16 are both central to the understanding of Jesus of Nazareth.

For those present with Paul at Antioch Paul's exposition should have exploded with the light of God's love through forgiveness (they begged to hear more Vs 42). God had promised that in the Day of the Lord (Messiah) He was going to bring new hearts to Israel through the washing away of their sin (Jeremiah 31:33, 34, Ezekiel 36:22ff). So because God had made Jesus Messiah and enthroned Him through resurrection, then this was assuredly the day of forgiveness. Paul was proclaiming a full and accomplished forgiveness. Just as surely as no Israelite remained in Egypt after God delivered them, so too no sin remains to condemn us because of the cross of the Messiah.

Paul concludes with a stunning crescendo. To accept the washing of forgiveness from Messiah brings home total freedom from everything which enslaves us. The use of the law is fraught for sinners. We see this played out in our society. A growing multitude of laws only seems to aggravate not restore social equality. The Jews had been using the law of Moses to justify themselves. It had not only failed but made their situation worse. *Set free* (Vs 39) is literally justified. *And through Him everyone who believes is freed (justified) from all things, from which you could not be freed (justified) through the Law of Moses.* The law directs us to Jesus. Nothing we perform can justify us. We must die and be raised again with Christ. Only then can we die to the curse of the law. We must believe this (Vs 41), or be left in the curse of not being justified before God.

Bethel Christian Church
Growing in Grace

Study 27 (Acts 14:22)

Continuing in the Faith

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

(Acts 14:21-22)

In under ten years Paul established churches across Asia Minor down through the Greek peninsular and as far as Rome. All this was done on foot and without Emails, Facebook, Twitter or Google. Whereas we form missionary societies, Paul established churches. That may sound like a splitting of hairs but they are worlds apart. What seemed like a good way to proceed with modern missions has proven toxic and problematic in many situations up to the present day. The missionary society becomes the long-term intermediary between the preaching of the word and the establishment of an indigenous church. Consequently they are looked upon by the locals as foreign powers: Foreign powers bringing their own cultural form of Christianity. Foreign powers come to do the work of the Gospel: Powers to whom they are simply servants. This was the observation of Rolland Allen back in the 1960's and probably remains true in many situations today.

Paul left the churches formed under Christ's leadership to form its own expression within its culture. Rather than implementing the culture of the 'missionary society' they were free. He did not come to them representing the Antioch Missionary Society. Neither did he set up authority structures linked back to his sending church. He did the unthinkable and trusted Christ to do what He promised, "*I will build My Church.*"

We may think that Paul 'struck it lucky' as he travelled, finding people hungry for the Gospel, so it was easier for him than for us. However, his travels were constantly marked by severe conflict, death threats, imprisonment, persecutions from his Jewish countrymen, loneliness and deep concern for the churches. Or we think Paul was a giant, a hero of super-human proportions in courage, knowledge and faith. I suspect that this would incense Paul if he were here today. He was a man gripped by the supremacy of Jesus of Nazareth; Supreme in the power of love and the beauty of grace: Supreme in His gift of a new humanity: Supreme in His ability to keep sinners holy for life with His Father: Supreme in Lordship, working all things together for the glory of His Father. So Paul was free to preach, love, encourage and leave because of Jesus. The Church was about Him not Paul. It was built up by His presence and His gifts applied and activated by the Holy Spirit. It was in this light he returned to the three churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. His encouragement was for the young believers there, "*To continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."*" In this way Luke said he was, *Strengthening the souls of the disciples.*

Paul's understanding of Christ's church and his role is revealed in what he said when he returned. He exhorted them to continue in the faith, and through many sufferings enter into the Kingdom. He presumed upon two certain facts. 'The faith' was something objective and established apart from their experience of it. And being strengthened as believers meant understanding the problem of suffering and the nature of what lay ahead.

So Paul was aware that:

- God had begun something in them that was real and lasting.
- They were to simply continue in that.
- To be strengthened in the faith is always in the context of suffering
- We are defined by what is ahead not what has been or is.

So if my encouragement to you this morning is going to work it must be based upon the same realities. Otherwise I will be trying to make you in my image. What a shocker? What a tyranny? How often have I gone to a place to build my church? My frustration and anger when it doesn't get built like I want it to would indicate that it has been often. How often have we sought to turn the church into expressions of our cultural preferences? Do our 'missionary methods' establish churches or simply the cloning of what we are comfortable with, what has been familiar to us? How often have we simply sought to make people into our image or the image of our idea of church? Would it seem even sensible let alone important to leave a new group of believers after a few months and trust that they would grow as Christ's church? Are we seen as the "Missionary Society" by the visitors who come to us? Do we simply preach Christ so people are actually changed or do we feel we have to train people how to become good believers? Are we attempting to move new believers into our cultural form of the Church? These questions are not anti Bethel or anti Siew Kiong or Sam. They are the questions that Paul's actions demand we answer.

Paul directed the believers directly to God. By opening Himself to them in the Gospel God gifted them with simple trust to see Him and believe that He is really good. Paul was not attempting to train them in Christian activities. He was saying, "Look at what God has begun in you." "Now stay in the joy of that." Was your guilt washed away? Were you brought into the Father's home? Was everything that is true of Jesus true for you? Well it still is. In the presence of the suffering it still is.

Paul could face terrible suffering in their midst, they could feel the terror of watching that as well as the horror of rejection and mocking by their Jewish visitors, their pagan neighbours and Roman officials. In all that they could still be confident that 'the faith' they were in was God's doing not theirs. It was not determined by their mood or circumstance. So theirs was no mere adherence to the 'doctrines of the faith,' they had seen the great treasure in Christ. They had felt the great treasure of knowing His merciful presence without fear. So all their suffering was **with** Christ. If we see our suffering as primarily **for** Christ we will either quickly tire of it and seek to avoid it like the plague, or become the martyr in a form of 'costly' Christianity. If we treasure Christ and know His presence then all suffering, persecution illness, conflict, ridicule, death threats will be seen with Him.

Paul trusted that the believers he was encouraging had actually entered into treasuring Christ. Piper says, "When you are insulted and the miracle of joy happens in your heart, you're unusual. The world has never seen anything like this. It cannot do it. But if you do it, the world will awaken. "Where is that joy coming from? It's not coming from their circumstances." When good deeds are done at great cost to you and everyone expects self-pity but there's only joy, you just might say it's from God."

Finally, Paul was encouraging them that there was a Kingdom to enter. Remember, we are not talking about heaven, about golden streets and pearly gates. The Kingdom is the reign of the Treasured One to deliver us into the humanity He Himself became. Paul was saying that our sufferings don't deflect us from knowing His rule, they become the doorways into seeing that rule more clearly. Paul's churches had entered into that rule (trusted Christ to be responsible for their sins). But the full experience of that rule to come. Jesus of Nazareth was waiting for them in the

immediacy of the Father to rule over a renewed heaven and earth. What they would be at that time defined who they were in their present suffering. At the Summer School Deane reminded us that we don't find out who we are by simply looking back to creation. Humanity in the garden was not the final exhibit. What Jesus did with humanity is the true and matured exhibition of true humanity. As he entered into that through suffering so will we for He is with us.