

BOOK OF ACTS SUMMARY

After two years of studying the early books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Joshua, we then turned to look at the Book of Acts variously called the Acts of the Apostles or the Acts of the Holy Spirit. There is a clear parallel and a connection. The Book of Acts is the dynamic expression of the 'inanimate' model presented in the OT.

In the early books of the OT the purpose of God is clearly set out. He calls into being a People for Himself who are to be distinctive as tangible witnesses to Him and are to function as His people. *"I will be to them a God and they shall be to me a people"*.

In becoming that they were redeemed from bondage through the Passover. Led through the wilderness, taught to be, and told to practise being, a holy people described by Moses as **distinctive** – positively exemplar: and were given a land in which to be so. But they failed. Based on external characteristics such as physical indication (circumcision and nationality) and ritualistic worship, such as the sacrifices and sanctuaries, they proved to be unable, rather, they wanted to *"be like all nations"* by forfeiting their distinctive.

In the Bible, that is followed by what had been promised the people throughout the OT – a Messiah, a Saviour, an Example, an Enabler: One who fulfilled all of God's purposes; One with whom God was *"well pleased"*; One in whom dwelt *"all the fulness of the Godhead, bodily"*.

In the NT (which includes the story of Jesus) it is made clear that this incarnation was temporary in its manifestation but eternal and far-reaching in its effect. Put in NT language it was (this) Christ **in** you. God, in His providence, transferred the responsibility of being His

people, "*the habitation of God by the Spirit*" to human believers collectively defined as **the church**.

Acts is the story of that church.

It begins with the link to the Gospels and the full story of Jesus outlined there. He was the bodily 'container' and expression of God in human form. But His earthly existence was to be limited in time: He referred to it as His 'hour'. During this manifestation of God He gathered disciples around him and initiated them into the concept of the kingdom – a society governed by, and loyal to, God on earth; and clearly separate and different from those around them, but not exclusive: they were still "*in the world*".

As time went by it became obvious from his teaching and discourse with them that he would depart and bestow responsibility on them. They found it difficult to comprehend – especially the prospect of death and crucifixion – so that it is natural that during the transition period following his resurrection that he reinforced the underpinning concepts of being witnesses (on earth) to Him. It was a task way beyond their capabilities so he instructed them to wait until they were endued with power from on high when the Holy Spirit would fall on them.

That is the essence of Acts 1

Chapter 1

The first chapter of Acts is an important link in the narrative. While the rest of the book is the story of the early church and the way it carried out the great commission this chapter deals with essential preliminaries, what was needed before they were 'let loose' as it were.

It features two main sections, with a significant interlude. In the early part it is concerned with Jesus and his contribution. Luke

Chapter 1: Preparation

- Jesus
- The disciples

reminds the intended recipient of the narrative – Theophilus – that he has already dealt with “*all that Jesus began bot to do and teach*”. In the latter part of the period, the 40 days, Jesus gave clear evidence to his disciples and others that he was alive. He had risen from the dead and, as we subsequent appreciate what that meant, paid the fatal price of sin and lives victorious. Their trust I him as the Messiah was vindicated even though the details were somewhat different from what they had imagined. It now made sense and they were fully convinced. The second contribution of Jesus was to each them, mainly about the Kingdom of God, and their role in being empowered witnesses to it when he was gone.

The interlude referred to above is just that: his ascension. AS predicted and forewarned, he was now going to leave them and depart to heaven. He task was now transferred to them but not without being assured of his presence and being enabled by his



Spirit. His return to earth *'in like manner'* means that their period of being responsible is an interim one. They not only have to *'occupy till I come'* and be consistently active but they will also need to give an account as good stewards.

On their return from the Mount of Olives where they had witnessed the ascension, they did two things. The first was instinctively gather, as was their normal practice, for prayer in Jerusalem. They were devoted to God and the witness of Jesus and, as Paul was to say in Romans, did not concern themselves with themselves by *"not living unto themselves, but unto Him"*. Since becoming believers (there were about 120 of them) it was their custom to meet continually to pray and be concerned with God's will and purpose. In that process they were informed by the Scriptures and what they had learned from the Lord Jesus.

The second thing they did, in the light of their knowledge of Scripture, was to decide to appoint a successor to Judas. That information included a clear understanding of the criteria such a successor should meet. Satisfied with that they proceeded to 'cast lots' to decide which one. They preceded their choosing with prayer but the decision was their own. They took the initiative and accepted the outcome as the will of God.

It is encouraging that in these 'independent' actions they were so impregnated and permeated with the word and mind of God that their 'natural' actions were so spiritual. Yet, lest they continue in their own strength, they had been commanded to *"tarry in Jerusalem until you be endued with power from on high"*.

It was then that they became true spirit-filled and effective witnesses to God and his purpose, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

His chapter opens with the believers (120+ of them) gathered together in a room (presumably the room where they normally met)

waiting for the realisation of the promise of Divine power that Jesus had spoken to them about. The events of that day have become fundamental to subsequent Christian testimony; sadly, some of it contentious.

So, what happened?

They had been briefed by Jesus Himself in Chapter 1 to “*tarry in Jerusalem until you be endowed with power from on high*”. While there they heard a wind and saw tongues of fire descending on each of them so that they were filled with a supernatural spirit – the Holy Spirit. Later, they were accused of being drunk – a phenomenon that is often associated in the NT with the experience of the Holy Spirit. (e.g. “*Be not drunk with wine but be filled with the spirit*”) And with such ‘inebriation’ they found themselves expressing it in the form of utterances which turned out to be in languages spoken by the festival worshippers in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

That is what happened as recorded in Acts 2. While so many details are not explicit, there has been a dangerous tendency to read back into the NT record features subsequent practices (many of them divisive) that are not specified in the original.

To what extent the bystanders knew exactly what was happening is not known but clearly it drew a crowd to the porch to see and hear what was going on. These onlookers – devout Jews and pilgrims to the festival were bewildered at hearing the message in their own language spoken by such “uneducated and unlearned” people. It perplexed them and so they pondered “*What do these things mean?*”

Peter, emboldened from his own experience from being ‘*filled with the Spirit*’ explained to them that, far from being unexpected was in fact the fulfilment of Joel’s prophesy. It was a continuation of the

working out of God's promise and purpose. Developing his explanation further he took pains to stress that Jesus was part of that purpose. What made the transformational experience of being filled with the Spirit possible was the fact that Jesus had come to earth, taken on human nature but had been denied and crucified by them. Yet, God had raised Him from the dead as evidenced by many witnesses. Nevertheless the guilt of rejecting the very Son of God and crucifying Him was on their heads: they were guilty.

In response, the listening crowd - "*cut to the heart*" - asked what should they do; to which Peter replied *Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*". The saving transformative experience was available to them also, if they believed and committed themselves. Over 3000 did so.

This new, enlarged company, continued in their practice of devotion and living the life of witnesses. That took the form of making sure that they were informed by the '*Apostles doctrine*', and shared together in fellowship, breaking of bread and praying together. In this way the devoted themselves to maintain the life of the Spirit and to be effective witnesses. Recognising their unity and togetherness they adopted the practice – as Jesus had commanded them - to love one another which, in this instance, made sharing their possessions making sure that each was adequately provided for. Just as they were "altogether with one accord" at the beginning so they were together in the practical situation. That kind of living attracted other followers and large numbers were added to the church daily.

It presents a wonderful picture of what began as a handful of men who professed faith in Jesus as God's Messiah and later joined by others who had believed also (how and when we do not know) had an experience of God activating them in a new life – a spiritual,

Christian, life as witnesses to God's purpose. They were 'the church' by which God will "*manifest His wisdom*".

Subsequent chapters will demonstrate how they actually lived out that new life in the various contexts that they found themselves in. In looking at that development it is important to grasp the principles underpinning the various practices and not make the practises as evolved over the years the underlying principles.

Whatever happened in Acts 2 was not an innovation which rendered previous expressions as obsolete but the foundation of the outworking of God's purposes which embodies Divine injunction and human perception and practice.

We'll start next week with their "Monday morning" as recorded in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapters 3 and 4

Pentecost was an outstanding experience for the early believers. Waiting in Jerusalem, as the Lord had told them to, in one place and with one accord the early believers were "filled with the (promised) Holy Spirit. They were transformed and immediately let that new found life express itself through them.

It was the beginning of a new calling: they (and those of subsequent generations following them) were to be witnesses to the Lord Jesus for this interim period between then and His promised return.

So, on the next day at the start of this new existence, what did they actually do? Nothing of what we would expect by way of major projects but simply to go to the prayer meeting in the Temple at the regular hour. That communion with God had been their sustenance so far and that is what they deemed important now. It is important

that we never abandon the basics and the source of life and power in discharging any significant role.

Ordinary though it may have been it opened the way for remarkable happenings. On their way they encountered a need in the form of a lame man seeking charity help from worshippers. Peter, however, bravely said to him that they did not have what he was wanting but what they did have – healing potential – they would happily give.

That is a clear picture of the gospel in that the church does not offer what the world wants – temporary relief – but full salvation. It is good to remember that what we primarily have to offer is the gospel. Other acts which emerge from that charity may come later but essentially it is the gospel that can make people whole.

By the time Peter, John and the healed man came out of the prayer meeting curious crowds had gathered, so Peter took the opportunity to explain to them what had happened.

It certainly was not their own power or piety but it had been performed through faith in the name of Jesus (who had been crucified and raised again by God). That He would have been rejected, crucified and raised was known to God and was part of the positive message of redemption that God had through the OT and the Prophets foretold would be fulfilled in Jesus. Though technically culpable the Lord's mercy is such that they could repent and become new creatures and be blessed by God's bountiful provision.

The religious leaders, however, took a dim view of what was taking place and ordered it to stop. After deliberating on it the next day they ordered the believers not to mention it. It challenged their authority.

Peter, however, resisted such prohibition and emphasised that this was God's way. The One they had rejected was indeed God's Saviour. Nor could there be any salvation through anyone else. Jesus was "the way, the truth and the life –and no one came to God" but by Him. He was the stone rejected by men but was the head of the corner.

While strongly motivated by their sense of their authority and position being undermined one thing stood out by way of embarrassing opposition. A man – and a 40 year old man - had been healed and now stood as clear evidence of a different power and authority. It was evidence that could not be refuted. Nevertheless the Sanhedrin prohibited them.

Peter had made it clear that his allegiance was to God and there was no question of their disobeying Him. So they returned together to pray, not for relief but for boldness and courage to continue to bear witness. That is certainly what followed in theist of the book of Acts.

What lessons can be learned from this incident and its consequence?

First of all, accepting the wonderful transforming experience of Pentecost, their priority was to attend to spiritual nourishment so that they were indeed full of God.

- Be filled with the Spirit
- Respond to each situation
- Same – and only – message
- Apply the truth – guilt and new life
- Importance of evidence
- Aware of who and what they were
- Attitude

Their main way of functioning at this early stage was to respond to pressure in different situations, almost as saturated sponges which exuded what they were full of in any situation or circumstance which exerted any kind of pressure.

Prioritising what they could offer and not being side-tracked by secondary needs was important. Just as was their consistent emphasis on Jesus as the One sent by God who had been crucified (by them) but vindicated in his resurrection. That was the message whatever the occasion.

Evidence of the redemptive work of God is essential is a testimony to what God can do. And the glory for that must be attributed to God and not claimed by any human agent.

And through it all continue fearlessly, in faith, to discharge their responsibility to be witnesses. That generated a sense of fellowship which became a serious challenge for some and threatened to fracture the integrity of this group –large as it was – of early believers.

We'll see next time.

Chapter 4: 32 to Chapter 5

Emboldened by their experiences on that “first day at the office” the episode concludes with them gathering together, the house being shaken and them being full of the Holy Ghost. The remainder of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 cover three main aspects: Fellowship, Witness and Pressure. We deal with each of these in turn.

Fellowship

As we enter Chapter 4: 32 they were euphoric. They were one in heart and mind, they showed grace toward each other and had great

power in proclaiming the resurrection of Christ as God's triumphal act. In making sure that adequate supplies were available they came up with the practice of selling property they 'owned' and giving

Fellowship

- With one heart and mind
- Everything in common - no needs
- Testifying to resurrection with great power
- Gracious - no needy ones
- Enterprise selling land and distributing proceeds
- Two examples
 - Barnabas
 - Ananias and Saphira
- Great Fear

the money to the Apostles for distribution. With their new experience and status they were no longer self-centred but citizens of heaven, showing love. But they were sufficiently grounded to have thought of such a practical arrangement. The history of Christian work provides abundant evidence of ordinary men resolving challenges in a way that expedites the work of God. It is part of being a good steward.

But the introduction of that practice served to expose potential weakness and a flaw in the early church. Sometimes, as Jesus warned, the cost may seem too much. Ananias' and Sapphira's deception failed to take account of the fact that they need not pretend but be honest as to how far they were willing to go. Offering is always free will. Their end was severe not for financial reasons but for deception and false claims. The incident, like some of the others in these early chapters, generated 'great fear'.

Witness

As they gathered in Solomon's porch great fear was very evident. The Apostles bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus (note: not so much the death as the resurrection) and ministered healing in

remarkable ways with great power that we find not easy to comprehend. It did mean that no one attached himself to them assuming merited acceptance yet the way to join by believing was open and very productive. Thousands more came that way.

Witness

- Many signs and wonders
- All together in Solomon's Porch
- Respect – no one dared join them
- New believers added
- Healing in different situations

Pressure

The areligious authorities who had been uneasy before were now desperately antagonistic. They arrested and imprisoned them overnight ready for a grilling the next day. Miraculously, however an angel released them and restored them to their temple location preaching base by the next morning.

Summoned before the Sanhedrin they were prohibited from further dissemination of the message but boldly responded by the declaration that it was God, rather than human agencies, that they were answerable to. Furiously reacting to such a rebuff the authorities wanted to kill them there and then but Gamaliel

Pressure

- Arrested and imprisoned
- Miraculously released and in temple
- Sanhedrin charge
- Peter's bold defence and accusation
- Vicious reaction and Gamaliel's counsel
- Beaten and discharged
- Rejoiced
- Persisted in preaching and teaching

(Paul's mentor's son?) intervened with sound advice that proved to be providential. He advised the Sanhedrin to be cautious lest they be resisting God himself – a very perceptive insight.

Meanwhile the believers expressed pleasure at being counted worthy of such adverse treatment (drinking the 'cup that I drink' predicted by the Lord Jesus) and continued with their activity of preaching and teaching.

This 'second day at the office' turned out to be very significant and found them now to be embarking on a course from which there would be no turning back, even if serious challenges encountered them on the way.

Lessons

It became clear that with Pentecost and the fellowship they were a new community. No longer their own, or motivated by self-interests, they were becoming citizens of heaven learning to use enterprise to fulfil their understood mission. Life as a Christian is a communal life manifesting a new being and outlook.

Stewardship was another lesson made real in these experiences. It was for them to look after property that belonged to Another, and to do so faithfully and with enterprise. That means *"understanding what the will of the Lord is"* and operating accordingly.

Lessons

- Spontaneous enjoyment of new life
- Distinctive community
- Discharge responsibility
- Individual enterprise
- Confident and bold
- Successful despite adversity

But the key factor is the life. They were full of the Holy Ghost. Christ was resident in them by His Spirit and they were totally (as far as

they would allow) motivated and enabled by it. That new, holy, life manifested itself in practical expression. Practice does not provide the experience but the life expresses itself in appropriate practice.

Yet, not without its challenges as we shall see next time.

Chapters 6 and 7

Much has happened between the end of Chapter 5 and the beginning of Chapter 6. The early believers continued to witness and practise their new found faith, rejoicing in their ministry and seeing God work. The number of believers kept increasing, so much so that clearly difficulties would inevitably arise with the potential of being setbacks or opportunities.

Chapter 6 opens with a **complaint**. Of the many, many Jews in Jerusalem there were those native to Jerusalem, Hebrew speaking, and adherents of Judaism and Hebrew culture. Alongside there

others from the Greek-speaking countries scattered during the Diaspora, with different cultural influences working on them. Although we are not told how or why it is almost inevitable that the

Complaint

- Face it squarely
- Consider the issues and follow principles
- Devise appropriate responses

one group would be accorded preference over the other.

Inadvertently, the Grecian widows were being neglected in the caring practice of the church. It was a fact.

Such difficulties need to be faced square on and immediately. There is no virtue in promoting a blame culture but there was a need to

assess the situation, find out what and why and devise appropriate strategies for resolution.

In this instance they analysed what was happening and considered the implications. That there was a genuine need was not in doubt. A situation needed to be resolved. But what were the potential dangers? Was there a risk of a related need overshadowing the main thrust of their existence and calling?

The answer was to re-emphasise the need to maintain spiritual activity with the apostles devoting themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. At the same time, special measures were instituted by the appointing of seven (godly) men to address the practical needs. While the proposal was put forward by the leaders it was endorsed by the whole crowd.

A great significance of this event is that the actions taken were based on initiatives that came from them. There was no divine revelation or external guidance: it was sensible and sound stewardship.

The rest of chapter 6 (and 7) is taken up with **Stephen** – a model servant. His credentials were spiritual ones: godliness personified.

He was an effective witness through or alongside his practical responsibilities? We don't know but he was very effective. Soon his actions generated opposition.

When defending what was happening Stephen traced the ways of God as outlined in the Old Testament story pointing

Stephen - a 'model deacon'

- Exercising his ministry effectively
- Subject to opposition
- Ready to response
 - Tracing God's and people's actions in the OT
 - Implicating the opposing leaders
 - Motivation
- Martyrdom

out that the religious then rejected the true ways of God (and sometimes substituted them) just as they did the Messiah, whom they had killed. That charge aroused great anger and violence.

Throughout Stephen radiated godliness. Earlier, his face had shone like an angel's. Now he 'saw' heaven, God's glory and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. His motivation was spiritual, powerful and disseminated a sense of victory and peace.

His eventual martyrdom was also productive for Saul of Tarsus, minding the assailants' coats, must have been deeply moved and subsequently became a Christian – and a faithful witness himself.

These events illustrate the truth contained in the hymn: *I lay in dust life's glory dead; and from the ground there blossoms, red, life that shall endless be.* Or Tertullian's famous dictum: *The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*

Next week we shall explore Stephen's discourse from chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Although we are not told much of what Stephen actually did as a 'deacon' (did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people) it seems that they were all accompanied by theological explanations of his motives. His opponents argued with what he was saying. Losing these arguments they resorted to false charges first that he was challenging Moses and the Law then narrowing that down to the Temple being challenged.

When asked whether these charges were true he avoided a straight answer (for there wasn't one) he focused on God's purposes as declared in the Old Testament.

That explanation ranged from Abraham and the call to bring into being a special People, to Joseph's key role in maintain the nation through the Egyptian exile and to Moses and his experiences. Those experiences covered several phases from being a special child to his self-motivated efforts to 'save his people (whom he had decided to align to rather than enjoy the pleasures of Egypt for a season) That was followed by a barren period of 40 years in the wilderness only to be 'called and commissioned' at the Burning Bush and eventually secure their release from bondage and lead them through the wilderness to the Promised land. En route he ascended Sinai to ascertain God's requirements in the Ten Commandments and the Tabernacle pattern.

However, while with God up the mountain the people turned against hill, set up the Golden Calf and virtually deserted the ways of God. That was their history throughout the wilderness years – abandoning God and worshipping idols; essentially rejecting God. That history would be repeated as they rejected exclusive devotion to God and "hewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns" as Jeremiah had foretold. Isaiah could cry "Who has believed our report. That rejection even extended to the Lord Jesus Whom they were accused of putting to death.

Meanwhile the faithful remnant were to abide by the Tabernacle and the tangible symbols of God's presence even to the extent of building Him a permanent house – something that never was in the mind of God.

So, it came down to a conflict between the tangible and the spiritual.

That is the pattern of life. Life results in some kind of form but, with time, the form becomes more important than the life, even becoming its opponent. For example church going is the product of

Christian life but the danger is of the external expression becoming the main criterion when people think that replicating the external will produce life. Similarly with any form resulting from generational life: it can become the focus and the devastating alternative.

God made it clear to David that He was not interested in a permanent house (the Tabernacle was transitional and transportable). He dwells in His people, but only insofar as they generate and express life.

Yet, in destroying Stephen's form; it was the occasion where life was generated in a way that they could never have envisaged when one of the 'vandals' (a young man named Saul) was subsequently converted and throughout the remainder of his earthly "was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" having run the race. Life, true spiritual life will always survive.

It also marked the end of the initial phase of exercising responsibility on their own to becoming witnesses of Providence at work in a series of "Divine appointments"

Chapter 8

The previous period of spontaneous witness culminating in the martyrdom of Stephen was, on one hand, a disaster, almost occasioning the extermination of the church and its witness. Saul, not only looked after the stone throwers' clothes but approved of what they were doing and actually became intensively involved himself. It was devastating persecution.

But, it also was a scattering. Far from bringing witness to an end it occasioned its expansion with the redirecting of individuals – key individuals – in the expansion of the church and its witness.

It can also be seen as God intervening to use circumstances to make these early disciples “get on with it” in obeying the great commission and expanding from Jerusalem.

What is interesting is that, while up to now it has involved the whole church and the thousands-strong company of the disciples these next chapters trace the events that involve individuals, beginning with Philip. In fact Philip appears to be one of the ‘deacons’ appointed in Chapter 6 to ‘attend tables’. He was probably a non-Jew who had become a proselyte. But, like his fellow deacons, he was godly and that quality made him obedient and diligent in going to a questionably hostile Samaria with his message. His story covers three phases: Samaria, the Gaza road and Azotus.

We don’t know why Samaria (other than it had been specified in the initial commission). There he preached freely and, largely because of his ‘signs and wonders’ seen in miracles of healing and exorcism the people were very attentive. Being attentive was not new to them for they had responded favourably to the magic arts of Simon whose motive was power and self-aggrandisement. Philip’s preaching, however overshadowed Simon’s suspect presentation and many turned in positive response – Simon among them – and were baptised.

Exercising their oversight responsibility Peter and John were sent by the Jerusalem church to verify this new experience only to find that they had not ‘received the Holy Spirit’. It had possibly been an emotional, superficial response. Peter and John’s action in ‘laying hands on them’ ensured that the process was complete. What that actually means in practice has led to a range of controversies over the years.

They would not have been the first to encounter such 'incomplete' experiences, having only grasped some of the truth or not being fully committed. Such folk need reassuring and remedial help. And clearly were given that, in common with other individuals in these chapters whose desire was sincere enough but needed 'the whole truth', the 'full gospel' to really belong to The Way.

Significantly, while the blessing was at its height, Philip is redirected from the buzzing crowd to an isolated rendezvous on the Gaza road. There he encountered an Ethiopian official returning from Jerusalem in his chariot reading from the Book of Isaiah. What he was doing in Jerusalem we don't know; nor do we know why. It is probably safe to surmise that he was a genuine seeker - a Jew from the Diaspora or even a proselyte – who had gone up to participate in the Festival but apparently his needs had not been properly satisfied.

That is where God steps in and providentially guides Philip to the place and to the person, even in this desolate place. Obedient Philip is able to explain the significance of the story and share the gospel with him resulting in the man's baptism following, we assume, repentance and faith. His conversion was significant for it would have sown the seed in the heart of Africa and there is historical evidence of Ethiopia becoming a cradle of Christian witness long before the heyday of the North African giants of the 4th Century.

And, from there? Whisked away by an angel (whatever that means exactly, we shall never know) Philip makes his way along the coast northward preaching consistently en route to Caesarea where another diligent seeker is providentially led to his reward and accession to the saving truth.

But, not before another miracle of divine providence in the conversion of the arch enemy – Saul of Tarsus – on the road to Damascus. More on that story next week.

Chapter 9

Reference to the dramatic, sudden conversion of Saul of Tarsus, reinforced by the eventual change of name to Paul, is proverbial in Christian history. The fact of the demonstrable change is axiomatic in much thinking about evangelism and initial Christian experience. But, it is worth looking at the narrative more carefully for it presents so many valuable insights and teaches several lessons and highlights principles.

The story itself is comparatively straightforward. The zealous trained Pharisee is on his way to Damascus to continue his persecution and destruction of this new 'sect'. On the way he is blinded, has a personal encounter with Jesus which leaves him blind, is met by one of the established Christians and is healed whereupon he embarks on an active pursuit of The Way and shares in fellowship with the believers, emphasising that Jesus is indeed

Much happened between the lines of this Acts 9 narrative that we pick up from Paul's subsequent writings.

As Manuel reminded us it was a significant personal encounter in which Jesus was revealed to him. What can be read into the event is that Saul was very sincere according to his limited knowledge and understanding. Commendable though such commitment is, it is not sufficient nor acceptable. Such earnest seeking, however is rewarded and the events which followed brought him illumination as well as sight and a new life, new family and new purpose which he immediately espoused and practised.

For that to happen, however, several ‘human agents’ were involved in what was initially a potentially dangerous task: encountering and welcoming this ‘enemy’. That entailed obedience and discernment in which Ananias and Barnabas played no small part so that in a short while this adversarial Saul is called ‘Brother’ and absorbed into the fellowship both as a member and a teacher.

Such a transformation was not without its risks and twice there was an attempt to capture and kill him only to be thwarted by his new found fellow believers.

The chapter finished with two separate incidents featuring Peter with the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha / Dorcas. Whatever else can be said about these incidents and their inclusion as part of this chapter it emphasises that many have a significant role in the outworking of God’s purposes. While Saul – as Paul – was to become a mighty “chosen vessel” designated by God to fulfil so much in and for the early church, there was also room for others who played their parts faithfully and significantly in the distinctive divine way – “when the time was right”.

Interestingly enough, that special mode of operating, coordinated by God, marked them out as being, indeed, a “distinctive people” referred to in this chapter as The Way. And that testimony of living in devotion and obedience to God proved attractive to others, even non-Jews, as we shall see in the next two chapters.

Chapters 10 to 11: 18

This chapter and a half marks a significant turning point in the growth of the early church and the scope of gospel endeavour. Against a historical background where the Diaspora had seen Jews settled in various cities and countries intent on practising their

religion. They set up synagogues whose existence had established potential bases which were to play a strategic role in subsequent missionary journeys. It can also be assumed that they practised their devotion in such a way that others – non-Jews – were attracted and became proselytes.

One of these was Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea who is described as being devout, generous and prayerful. He was a genuine seeker with much to his credit. That seeking – like that of any other genuine seeker after God – was to be rewarded; not by being accepted as sincere but by being led to the saving truth. So, seeing a vision he was told by the angel to send to Joppa for Peter (a man whose address was known to God). This he did.

At around the same time in another place Peter, resting in his evangelistic travels used the time available before lunch to pray. In a dream and feeling hungry he saw a sheet of unclean animals he put out before him with the command that he should eat them. Repulsed, he protested for to do so would violate all the principles and godly precepts he was committed to. To his surprise he was rebuked by God and assured that he should not be so prejudiced.

Thus corrected he responded positively to Cornelius' request and proceeded to convey the message – the missing link – which would ensure his true conversion.

The message was the same as preached at all these Acts events. God had sent Jesus whose life had been exemplary. The religious authorities and the populace had rejected and crucified Him. But God raised Him from the dead completing an action that would bring forgiveness – and new birth – to anyone who believed.

When Cornelius accepted this the Holy Spirit fell on him as it had done on the first Christians at Pentecost.

The significance of that is that it also marked the end of an exclusive gospel to Jews only. The door was now open to the “*whosoever*” to believe. They were now free to go into all the world.

That in itself sounded strange to the Apostles and other post-Pentecost Christians. It seemed to contradict all that they held dear based on their understanding of Scripture. Peter, however, explained in detail what had happened as a result of which they accepted and endorsed the new situation. What happened next is covered in the rest of Chapter 11 and 12 before the more commissioned and ‘organised’ missionary journeys.

But, before moving on to those next time it is worth reflecting on some of the lessons that can be gleaned from this incident.

Clearly anyone genuinely seeking to “know God” in a vital way will find Him. Here Cornelius is rewarded. The Gospels tell several stories of people who took various – sometimes unorthodox - steps to encounter Jesus. Surely, “*they that seek him will surely find him*”. He knows and He will respond.

Sincerity cannot be enough. There is a central core that makes that finding possible. Here Peter preaches the “full gospel” and sees authentic results. There must never be a diluted gospel nor inadequate results.

God works in an amazing way through separate individuals and situations in a divinely coordinated way that the world knows nothing about. “I being in the way, God led me” can be so true in so many different situations. It is only on looking back that the connections can be traced.

Yet, that operation can be blocked by the agent not being in the proper condition – or frame of mind – to be used. Paradoxically that can be caused by distorted understanding. God uses various situations to bring us into line and to keep us in tune with what He is doing.

Such perception differences are quite valid and can give rise to genuine criticism based on insufficient understanding of God's ways. Any criticism should be squarely faced and considered whether it has any grounds. Discussion and conferencing helps towards that understanding. Sadly, it can – and has – led to division and strife.

Alongside the big issues there are several 'little things' that teach us much. Personal devotion has a positive effect. Peter uses his spare moments for what he considers important – prayer. Good people can sometimes be wrong without realising it. Trace what God is saying or doing in any situation. Benefit from multi-sourced advice, as proverbs would exhort us.

Finally, it marks the opening of the door to the whole world. But there is much in Scripture that would make us grateful and cautious to remember that we are only in by the grace of God and only 'made nigh' by the blood of Christ.

Chapter 11: 19 to 12

Much has been happening since the Apostles and early believers were "endued with power from on high" on the Day of Pentecost and became witnesses unto the Lord Jesus. Peter took the lead in the Jerusalem days and the others joined in, unitedly continuing in the doctrine, prayer fellowship and breaking of bread. As circumstances arose they responded to challenges, accepted opposition and continued boldly. When that opposition took the form of martyrdom

there was a scattering. In that scattering some strategic individuals and situations were established as key launch pads, with converts like the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus and the opening of Peter's eyes to the access being afforded to Gentiles.

At the same time others were responding to the great commission and taking the gospel mainly to the Jews but also to Greeks. The focal point for this was Antioch where many turned to the new faith and demonstrated real conversion.

To be sure that it was healthy the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas – a real encourager – to see what was happening. When he came he “saw the grace of God”. We are not told exactly what he saw but we can assume that it was evidence of real change, discontinuing old practices, adopting new and purposeful ones, demonstrating and practising love one to another and being diligent in meeting together, praying and “bearing fruit” that glorified their Lord and Saviour.

For us today it is essential that we consider what “the grace of God” looks like in our behaviour, what we practise ourselves and what we encourage others to exercise. Oversight – whatever its arrangement – should always be clear as to what it is looking for and to take steps both to acknowledge and to encourage it.

That is what Barnabas did. With a view to enhancing their testimony he encouraged them to be faithful and live purposeful lives. He also deliberately fetched Saul from Tarsus (where he had been consolidating his own understanding of the ‘mystery’ – as he called it). Together they stayed for a year teaching these believers and nurturing them.

That, too, has a lesson for us in that Christian life is not simply an initial conversion and confessional baptism but a life-long growing

after being born again. Later, Paul was to express concern at many believers not showing signs of growth (“you are still babes ... desiring milk rather than strong meat”) and spoke of his yearning that “Christ may be formed in you” and that they experience the fulness of Christ, becoming mature and fruitful.

It is also interesting to note that, presumably based on the behaviour manifested in word, deed and attitude, that these believers were first called Christians. Subsequent generations have settled for subsidiary titles and maybe lost the main focus in doing so?

Clouds, however, were on the horizon. Agabus, one of the Jerusalem prophets, foretold famine while in chapter 12 Herod persecuted the believers killing James, the brother of John with the sword, and intending to do the same to Peter once the Festival was over.

But, these two episodes reveal the providence of God.

The famine gave rise to an extension of what was already in evidence in the early chapters, viz. sharing resources with the needy in the form of famine relief. That, not only caused Barnabas and Saul to return to Jerusalem but also reinforced the principle of seeking positive outcomes from challenges.

Peter’s imprisonment and his miraculous escape facilitated by an angel was to reinforce the existing Christian practice of praying for each other and would demonstrate that God was over all: nothing will triumph against Him and His purposes.

No wonder that the chapter finishes with two significant statements.

The one says that (in spite of all the opposition and difficulties) the word of God continued and grew. The work had started with the resurrection: that principle was still in operation here and would continue to operate. The other statement records that, presumably

recognising what was happening where, Saul and Barnabas returned from Jerusalem to Antioch – and took John Mark along with them.

For, there was more work to do and more places to hear the gospel.

That will be the main emphasis of the next phase of our studies in Acts – the Missionary Journeys and Paul's final mission.

24.11.2022

