

# Going Places with Paul

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## A life prepared

Paul was born and brought up a Jew. In view of traditional Jewish indifference to the evangelization of the Gentiles, his missionary travel in the non-Jewish world is remarkable. That his expeditions involved much sea travel is likewise remarkable, because the Jews had never been a seafaring people. Their world was Palestine, and if they looked westwards across the Mediterranean, they preferred not to think about the Gentile world beyond the horizon.

By nature, Paul was not one to challenge accepted Jewish attitudes. He grew up in a traditional Jewish home,<sup>1</sup> and he spent many years studying the Jewish law under the prominent Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, the very heart of Jewish conservatism.<sup>2</sup>

But Paul's thinking had been broadened and his powers of reasoning developed by a Greek element in his secular education. A Roman influence also helped shape his life. He had inherited the valued privilege of Roman citizenship,<sup>3</sup> and the Roman notion of empire provided the background to his program of world evangelism.

This rich heritage, whether Jewish or otherwise, was no cause for personal pride. Paul acknowledged this, and even renounced it as a basis for claiming God's salvation. His standing as a Christian was not based on personal heritage or achievement, but on what God had graciously done for him through Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

With his conversion, however, it soon became evident that the God whom Paul previously misunderstood had, through all Paul's circumstances, been preparing his chosen messenger. For Paul was supremely fitted to penetrate the Gentile nations with the gospel to an extent never before imagined.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he still needed to make a response of obedience to the divine will.

1. Phil 3:5-6

2. Acts 22:3

3. Acts 22:27-28

4. Phil 3:7-9

5. Acts 9:15. For map see page 38.



*Jerusalem, where Paul studied Jewish law*

## From a convert to a leader

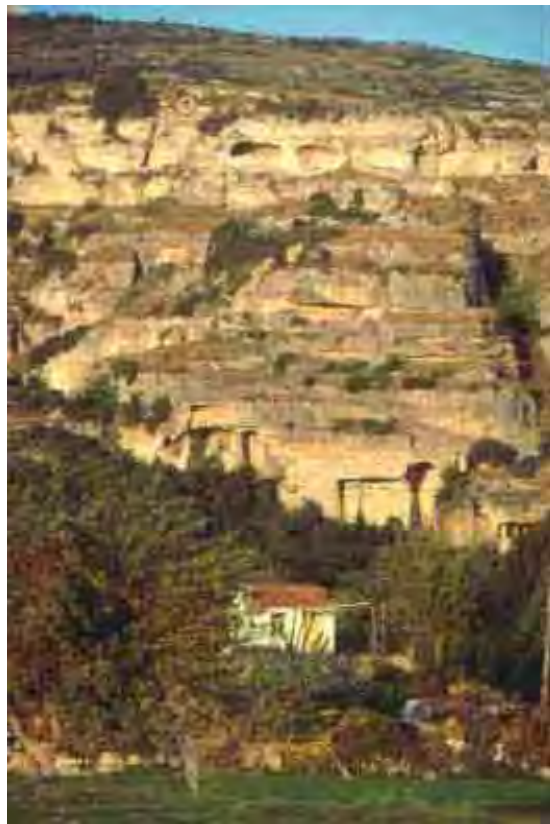
Natural ability, a godly upbringing, a good education and a thorough grounding in the law of Moses may all be valuable, but they are not in themselves enough to carry out God's service properly. Even a convert of the calibre of Paul was a novice in relation to the new life he now possessed in Christ. At the time of Paul's conversion, God made known the work for which he had chosen him,<sup>1</sup> but many years would pass before Paul would begin that work.

Though a convert of only a few days, Paul did not hesitate to proclaim his new-found faith in the face of bitter opposition.<sup>2</sup> To be a *leader* in God's service, however, was a different matter. Much preparation was necessary, but few details have come down to us of that period of Paul's life.

Our only knowledge of Paul's first three years as a Christian is that he spent some time in Arabia and Syria.<sup>3</sup> After this he went to Jerusalem, then returned to Syria and went on to Cilicia, the region where he had been brought up.<sup>4</sup> Nothing is recorded of the next eleven years of Paul's life, apart from a note concerning the last of those years, which he spent with Barnabas at Antioch in Syria.<sup>5</sup> That year provided the background to a significant development in Paul's career.

The church at Antioch had been founded by Jewish Christians of Mediterranean origins who had been expelled from Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> On coming to Antioch, they took the revolutionary step of preaching the gospel specifically to the non-Jews. Many believed, and a lot more believed when Paul and Barnabas came and helped them. This must have been a great experience for Paul. After all those years of preparation, his mission to the Gentiles had begun – and with resounding success.

1. Acts 9:15
2. Acts 9:20-22
3. Gal 1:17-18. Damascus was in Syria.
4. Acts 9:26-30; Gal 1:18-21
5. Acts 11:26; Gal 2:1
6. Acts 11:19-26



*Remains of Antioch's fortifications near Seleucia*

## The church with a vision

The generous spirit of the Jews who evangelized Antioch passed on to their Gentile converts. When they heard that Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering economic hardship as a result of a famine, the Antioch Christians promptly organized a collection of goods and money that Paul and Barnabas took to Jerusalem on their behalf.<sup>1</sup> The conservatives in the Jerusalem church were not happy about what was happening at Antioch, but that did not stop the Antioch Christians from demonstrating the sort of generous fellowship that should always characterize God's people.

Antioch's concern extended beyond the Christian circle to people and nations who had not yet heard the Christian message. Though it had existed only a short time, the Antioch church matured rapidly. It maintained a healthy balance between building up the Christians and reaching out to non-Christians.<sup>2</sup> The believers had an appetite for instruction in the Scriptures, without which outreach can be very superficial. Yet they had also a concern for the unevangelized, without which a church can become complacently self-satisfied.

One factor that contributed towards this healthy outlook in the Antioch church was the local ministry of prophets and teachers. These men, being sensitive to God's directing, took the initiative in the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for their divinely appointed task of taking the gospel to the Gentile regions beyond. From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to the nearby port of Seleucia, from where the vast Mediterranean stretched westward. They boarded a ship and set sail.<sup>3</sup>

The missionaries' first landfall was the island of Cyprus. There was a large Jewish population on Cyprus, and in fact Cypriot Jews were among those Christians from Jerusalem who first took the gospel to the non-Jews of Antioch.<sup>4</sup> Now the Antioch church was in turn sending the gospel to Cyprus.

1. Acts 11:27-30
2. Acts 11:26
3. Acts 13:1-4
4. Acts 11:20



*Harbour at Seleucia, from where Paul set sail*

## Messiah and Saviour

Paul's plan was to preach the gospel to the Jews first, because they were supposed to be God's evangelists to the nations. But if the Jews refused to believe, Paul did not hesitate to take the message to the Gentiles direct.<sup>1</sup> The contrast between Jewish rejection and Gentile acceptance of the gospel was well illustrated on Cyprus when a Jewish sorcerer fiercely opposed Paul, whereas the Roman proconsul believed.<sup>2</sup>

Having preached the gospel from one end of Cyprus to the other, the missionary party set sail again, this time heading for Asia Minor. They landed at Perga, and then pushed on north into the Pisidian region of Galatia, where they stopped at the city of Antioch<sup>3</sup> (known as Pisidian Antioch, to distinguish it from Syrian Antioch).

In keeping with his policy of 'to the Jew first', Paul began his proclamation of the gospel by addressing the worshippers in the synagogue. His audience consisted of Jews and a large number of Gentiles who, because of their attraction to the Jewish religion, attended synagogue services regularly.<sup>4</sup>

These Gentiles, known as 'God-fearers' or 'worshippers of God', already had a knowledge of the God of Israel, and Paul built on that knowledge in presenting to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. Significantly, those who had already received some teaching about the character and activity of God were the ones who responded more readily to the gospel when it was presented to them.<sup>5</sup>

The Christ whom Paul preached in Antioch is the same one who is preached today – the centre of history, the fulfilment of all God's purposes for Israel, the very reason for which the nation existed. Through him, and him alone, people can have the forgiveness of sin that Israel's law aimed at but could never achieve.<sup>6</sup>

1. Acts 13:46-47
2. Acts 13:6-12
3. Acts 13:13-14
4. Acts 13:43
5. Acts 13:48
6. Acts 13:38-39



*Roman stadium, Perga*

## A new bondage and a new freedom

Most of the towns Paul visited had a Jewish community that was large enough to justify the existence of a synagogue. Paul could usually be assured of an audience with whom he had some common ground in religious matters. However, as Jesus had experienced before him, Paul found that the synagogues often produced his most fanatical opponents.

Synagogues were not an Old Testament institution. They came into being during the intertestamental period, the centuries immediately before the era of Christ. They were the product of practices that arose during the time of the Jews' captivity in Babylon. With the temple in Jerusalem destroyed and the Jews exiled in a foreign land, people no longer carried out sacrifices and other rituals related to the temple. The emphasis was now on the moral teachings of the law rather than the temple ceremonies. From these beginnings there developed a clearly defined class of people known as teachers of the law (or scribes, or rabbis), and a recognized centre for Jewish communal affairs known as the synagogue.

Certainly, much was commendable in the attitude of those who, immediately after the Babylonian exile, taught the law of Moses and explained its implications.<sup>1</sup> Also, much was commendable in the initiative of the Jews scattered in countries far from their homeland who built centres for worship and teaching. But those who came later did not follow the fine example of the originators, and a new bondage closed in on the Jewish people. The scribes asserted themselves and the people suffered.<sup>2</sup> Religious power, wrongly used, can be cruel.

The synagogue services were one channel through which the Jewish legalists maintained their power. Paul's two memorable services at Antioch were the means by which many Jews and many Gentiles found new freedom.<sup>3</sup>

1. Neh 8:1-2,8; 9:1-3

2. Matt 23:2-4

3. Acts 13:39-49



*Interior of a synagogue*

## More than just strategy

The Jewish leaders in Antioch, envious and angry at the success of Paul's preaching, incited the influential people of the city to use their power to oppose Paul and Barnabas. When forced to leave, the missionaries went to Iconium, where again they preached in the synagogue and again a large number of people believed.<sup>1</sup>

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Iconium 'a long time',<sup>2</sup> strengthening the believers and ensuring that the church was established on a firm footing. In time, however, the opposition of unbelieving Jews and their incitement of the Gentile leaders forced the missionaries to flee once more, whereupon they moved on to the towns of Lystra and Derbe.<sup>3</sup>

Although his movements were to some extent determined by the reception or rejection he received in the places he visited, Paul still worked to a basic plan. The Romans had built great roads to link the important towns of the Empire, and Paul usually kept to these roads. His plan was to establish churches in the main population centres, then move on to other unevangelized parts, leaving the newly founded churches to spread the gospel into the regions round about.<sup>4</sup>

Having a strategy is one thing; getting it to work is another. The nature of Christianity is such that no scheme, plan or method is in itself a guarantee of success. The more important elements are less tangible, non-measurable, far deeper and more basic.

There would be no particular virtue in Paul's establishing churches in selected towns unless the spiritual life of those churches was of a quality that made growth and expansion possible. And the quality of a church's overall spiritual life is inseparable from that of its members.

1. Acts 13:50; 14:1

2. Acts 14:3

3. Acts 14:5-6

4. Acts 13:49; cf. 19:10; 1 Thess 1:8



*Street in today's Konya - biblical Antioch in Pisidia*

## One true and living God

Although Greek was the language of the Roman Empire, regional languages were also spoken, mainly in the home and the market place. Paul and Barnabas may have been fluent in Greek, but they had little understanding of the many local languages they met. In Lystra they found themselves in an embarrassing situation when they failed to understand what the locals were saying, but Paul, with characteristic alertness, quickly turned the situation to their own advantage.

Somewhere around the streets of Lystra, Paul had healed a cripple. This created much excitement among the onlookers, and soon word spread around the town that Paul and Barnabas were incarnations of two of the Greek gods. Even the priest at the temple of Zeus felt convinced, and prepared animals as sacrifices to these two visiting deities. Paul and Barnabas, not understanding the local language, discovered what was happening only at the last minute, and quickly intervened to stop the sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

Seizing the initiative, Paul explained to the excited mob that there was only one God, the one Paul preached, and he alone was worthy of worship. In the synagogues Paul had based his preaching on the revelation God gave to Israel in the Old Testament, for that was familiar ground for his hearers, but pagan idolaters such as these had no such knowledge of the Old Testament. Paul therefore based his preaching on the revelation God had given to people in general through nature.<sup>2</sup>

The gospel does not change, and God's demands of faith and repentance do not change. But the presentation of the gospel may vary from one audience to another.<sup>3</sup> The story of Paul's preaching in Lystra ends abruptly with no record of its results, but we know from other references that he established a church there.<sup>4</sup>

1. Acts 14:8-14,18

2. Acts 14:15-17

3. 1 Cor 9:16,21,23

4. Acts 14:21-22; 16:2



*Across the Roman province of Galatia*

## Courage and faith

Jesus had told his disciples that just as he suffered persecution, so would those who followed him. In the world they could expect persecution, but, he added, 'I have overcome the world'.<sup>1</sup> In that assurance Christians throughout the ages have triumphed through violence and opposition. Courage in the face of hostility has been a distinctive mark of Christ's people.

In Antioch and Iconium, Paul and Barnabas had been threatened with violence and driven out by hostile enemies. In Lystra, Paul had been so fiercely stoned that it appeared he would lose his life.<sup>2</sup> But when the two men reached Derbe, from where they could have conveniently returned home overland, they decided to retrace their steps through the cities from which they had been driven out. They knew the importance of strengthening the believers and appointing elders in the newly founded churches. They are still remembered, two millennia later, as 'men who risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>3</sup>

Courageous though they were, the two men were not domineering. Enterprising Christian workers can easily think that something they began can be carried on successfully by no one else. Paul and Barnabas believed otherwise. They had founded the churches, but the spiritual life of the churches came from God. The two men had taught the believers to have faith in Christ, but they themselves also needed faith. The churches belonged to Christ, not to them. They therefore committed the believers to him in whom they believed.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the coast, the missionaries preached in Perga and Attalia, towns they had missed on the outward journey. They then sailed for Syrian Antioch to report to the church that had sent them what God had done among the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup>

1. John 15:20; 16:33
2. Acts 14:19-20
3. Acts 14:21-26
4. Acts 14:23
5. Acts 14:24-28



*Attalia, modern Antalya*

## Guarding the gospel

Paul had been back in Antioch some time when a group of men arrived from Jerusalem with teaching that Paul immediately saw struck at the roots of the gospel. These teachers were Jews who, conditioned by centuries of Jewish beliefs, could not accept the message Paul preached. They insisted that people must submit to the law of Moses to be saved.<sup>1</sup>

With absolute confidence in the truth of his message, Paul boldly refuted the Jews. He also publicly rebuked those at Antioch who had been carried away by the new teaching.<sup>2</sup>

No sooner had he restored some stability in Antioch, than Paul heard that these Judaisers had spread their teaching throughout the churches of Galatia he had recently founded. Paul was furious, and immediately sent off a letter to the Galatian churches.

This was not a time for sweet words. In Paul's view the Judaisers perverted the gospel and were accursed.<sup>3</sup> Those who believed them had deserted Christ and were fools.<sup>4</sup> Neither then nor now must a person submit to the Jewish law, either to become a Christian or to live as a Christian. 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'<sup>5</sup>

Since the Judaistic teaching had spread to the most distant churches, Paul and others from Antioch decided to go and discuss the matter with the church from which the teaching came. Paul went to Jerusalem not to check whether the message he preached was right or wrong (he knew it was right), but to convince the Jerusalem church that salvation is by faith alone. The Jerusalem meeting not only supported Paul's stand, but even sent representatives to reassure the troubled churches.<sup>6</sup>

1. Acts 15:1,5
2. Gal 2:11-16
3. Gal 1:7-8
4. Gal 1:6; 3:1
5. Gal 5:1
6. Acts 15:1-35



*Jewish tradition, Bar Mitzvah ceremony*

## Divine directions

Decision-making is, for most people, usually beset with difficulties and uncertainties. For Christians there is also the consideration of God's will. Inflexible rules of guidance can be as misleading as hunches, feelings and irrational impulses. Paul's movements at the outset of his second missionary journey show an exemplary balance between sensible planning and a willingness to alter well-laid plans if God so directs. Christians who have been 'transformed by the renewal of their minds' will know 'what is the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect'.<sup>1</sup>

Paul thought it wise to revisit the churches of Galatia that had recently been troubled by the Judaisers, but on this occasion he decided to go overland rather than by sea. His travelling companion was a well-respected leader from the Jerusalem church named Silas, whose ministry in support of Paul would reassure those who had become confused.<sup>2</sup> The two were joined in Galatia by Timothy, a young man who had possibly been converted during Paul's previous missionary tour.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that Paul was heading across the province of Asia for Ephesus on the west coast. There were important towns along the way, but God directed Paul not to preach in them. Paul therefore headed north for the province of Bithynia, but he was not allowed to preach there either. So he turned west again and eventually came to the port of Troas.<sup>4</sup>

This change of plans meant that the provinces of Asia and Bithynia must remain unevangelized for the time being, as God had work for Paul to do in Greece first. He also had other people he could use in Asia and Bithynia.<sup>5</sup> As a result Greece, Asia and Bithynia all heard the gospel. Planning is necessary in God's work, but obedience is what sees God's plans accomplished.

1. Rom 12:2

2. Acts 15:27,32,40

3. Acts 16:1-3

4. Acts 16:6-8

5. Cf. 1 Peter 1:1; Rev 1:11



*Taurus Mountains*

## A true friend

It was probably at Troas that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, joined Paul and his companions. A comparison of the opening verses of Luke's Gospel with the opening verses of Acts will confirm that the latter book was written as a sequel to the former. The presence of the author among the missionary party is confirmed from his inclusion of himself in the story – 'we got ready to go into Macedonia . . . we made a direct voyage . . . we stayed in the city some days.'<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the rest of the missionary party, Luke was a Gentile. He lived, it seems, in Europe, probably Philippi, in what today is northern Greece. Having travelled with Paul from Troas to Neapolis and then to Philippi, he remained in Philippi when Paul, Silas and Timothy moved on.<sup>2</sup> He rejoined Paul some years later when Paul passed through Philippi on his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey,<sup>3</sup> and seems to have been with Paul for the next five years, to the end of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome.<sup>4</sup>

For a person who was close to Paul through those momentous years, Luke keeps a remarkably low profile. There is no hint of self-assertion in anything recorded by him or about him. The Bible writings show that he was discerning, dependable and thorough in things he did.

Most people would be content to leave such a good reputation behind, but there was another quality to Luke's life, one even more commendable and within the reach of all – love. He had that deep concern for people without which other accomplishments could have been worthless in God's sight.<sup>5</sup> When, years later, the aged Paul sat in jail facing execution, Luke, 'the beloved physician', was the one person who chose to stay with him.<sup>6</sup>

1. Acts 16:10,11-12,16
2. 'They', not 'we' in Acts 17:1
3. 'Us' and 'we' recommence in Acts 20:5-6
4. Acts 28:30; Col 4:14
5. 1 Cor 13:3
6. 2 Tim 4:11



*Archaeological work at ancient Troy, close to biblical Troas*

## Great things from small beginnings

Throughout its Empire the Roman government had changed the status of a number of towns to make them models of Roman life in what was largely a non-Roman world. The towns were called colonies, and their citizens (among whom was a large body of Roman officials, soldiers and business people) were given the right of self-government. They enjoyed, in effect, all the privileges of Roman citizenship.

Among these privileged towns was Philippi, a short distance inland from Neapolis, the port where Paul first landed in Europe.<sup>1</sup> He moved promptly to Philippi, where his evangelistic activity marked the beginning of a new era. The course of the world's history would be changed as Paul broke out of Asia and thrust into Europe. But there was no grand opening ceremony. His first recorded meeting was with a few God-fearers who met for prayer at the river bank, but out of that meeting one woman became a Christian.

This was an unspectacular start, but by no means a disappointing start. Paul knew, as Elijah did before him, that spectacular events are no measure of the work of God in people's hearts. A better measure is the transformed life that results when a person responds to the unseen power of the 'still small voice' of God as it brings conviction within the human heart.<sup>2</sup>

Paul's meeting at the river brought greater results than were at first obvious. Through that first convert a whole household was saved, and by the time Paul left Philippi (presumably some weeks later) a church was established there.<sup>3</sup>

The apostle seems to have had a special affection for the Philippian church, and the Philippians a special affection for him. To Paul, the Philippians were his 'joy and crown';<sup>4</sup> to the Philippians, Paul was their example of what a Christian should be.<sup>5</sup>

1. Acts 16:11-12

2. 1 Kings 19:11-12

3. Acts 16:13-15,40

4. Phil 4:1

5. Phil 4:9



*Kavala, biblical Neapolis, where Paul first set foot in Europe*

## The price of freedom

The streets and market places of Philippi were bustling with all sorts of people – merchants, labourers, fortune-tellers, beggars, hawkers, craft workers and citizens in general. News of the visiting preachers soon spread, particularly when, day after day, a demon-possessed slave-girl followed them shouting that they were servants of the Most High God. This was not the kind of promotion Paul approved of, and in the end he exorcised the girl.<sup>1</sup>

Then the trouble started. With the girl's return to normality, her owners had suddenly lost their source of income. They physically attacked Paul and Silas, and soon the townspeople joined them in a general free-for-all against the missionaries.

As if that was not enough, the two battered and bruised missionaries were then stripped and flogged by the local Roman authorities, and thrown into prison without so much as a questioning.<sup>2</sup> Such was the outcome of the visitors' kindness to a pathetic girl – and all because two or three heartless men had lost the source of their ill-gotten gains.

'When they saw that their hope of gain was gone . . .'<sup>3</sup> A heavy cost may be paid when someone becomes a Christian. A cost may also be paid when a person lives the Christian life as Jesus intended it to be lived. Many who profess to be followers of Jesus cast doubts on their own profession when they hesitate to do what they know they should do, because they fear that their hope of gain may be lost.

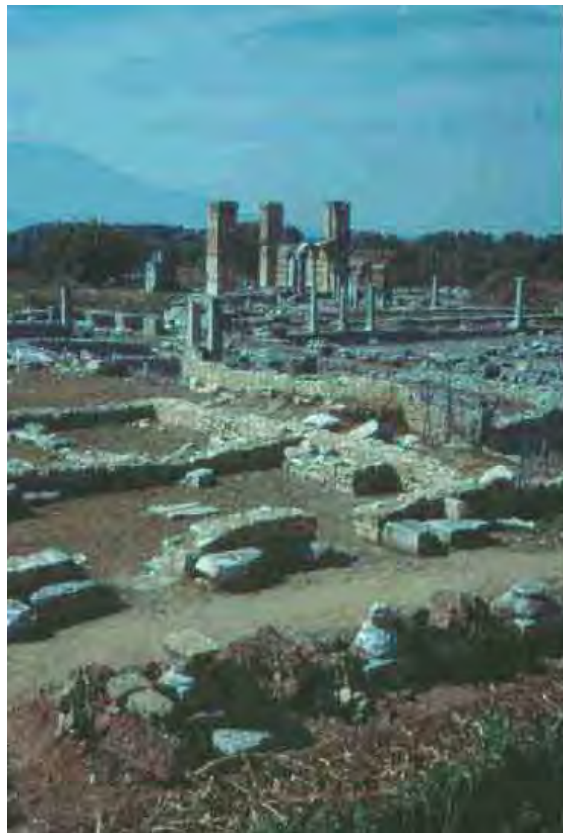
The account of Paul and Silas's night in prison is one of the Bible's best known stories. God's dramatic intervention showed that the two men were vindicated in his eyes; the next morning some shame-faced officials were forced to show publicly that the two men were vindicated also in the eyes of Roman law.<sup>4</sup>

1. Acts 16:16-18

2. Acts 16:19-24

3. Acts 16:19

4. Acts 16:25-40



*Byzantine ruins at Philippi*

## The King has come

Thessalonica, in contrast to Philippi, had a large Jewish community and consequently a synagogue. For three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul preached in the synagogue, with the result that some Jews and many Greeks (God-fearers) believed. In keeping with his usual practice when addressing such audiences, Paul showed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that his death and resurrection are essential to salvation.<sup>1</sup> The gospel, as always, is Christ-centred.

To proclaim Christ as Messiah and Saviour is to proclaim him as King. It is a fitting activity for anyone who prays the prayer, 'Thy kingdom come', for God's sovereign rule becomes a reality in people's lives as they submit to Christ in total allegiance. To preach such an uncompromising message may not always be popular, and when Paul did so he soon ran into trouble.

Jewish opposition to Paul's preaching in Thessalonica, however, was not based on the finer points of theology. It was based on some-thing far more assured of success, jealousy. Add to this a few hired trouble-makers and a deliberate distortion of what Paul had said, and soon the Jews created a riot.

The accusations brought against Paul and Silas were twofold. First, they caused trouble wherever they went – 'they have turned the world upside down' – and second, they were guilty of treason – 'they are acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.'<sup>2</sup> The charges were partly true, because Christianity *has* a revolutionary effect (not necessarily in a political sense), and Jesus *is* another king (though his kingdom is not of this world).<sup>3</sup>

Christ's opponents in Thessalonica thought they had won a victory over Christianity when Paul and his party were forced to leave.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent history of the church in Thessalonica was to tell a different story.

1. Acts 17:1-4
2. Acts 17:5-7
3. John 18:36
4. Acts 17:9-10



*Modern Thessalonica*

## Facing up to reality

Paul's sudden departure from Thessalonica must have been a blow to the young church. The person with whom the missionaries had been staying, Jason, was even required to pay some sort of bond, apparently as part of a guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city immediately.

Jason's bond may also have restricted Paul's re-entry to the city. Certainly, Paul's attempts to revisit the young church were not successful, a frustration he considered to be the work of Satan.<sup>1</sup>

The Thessalonian church, however, so far from collapsing after Paul's departure, grew stronger. Strong personality that he was, Paul did not make the mistake of building a work around himself. The converts' faith was not to be tied to the style or personality of the person who began the work. It was to rest entirely in the power of God.<sup>2</sup>

Also, Paul did not give potential converts or new converts the impression that, if they believed the gospel, they were assured of a trouble-free life that everyone else would envy. On the contrary, he assured them that, if they lived the righteous life required of those who are 'in Christ', they would suffer persecution.<sup>3</sup> The Christians of Thessalonica soon discovered for themselves the truth of Paul's words.<sup>4</sup>

Yet persecution was no hindrance to growth. Not only did the church in Thessalonica increase, but the Christians went out and spread the gospel throughout the surrounding countryside. Paul was so pleased with the Thessalonians' development that he might have wished to boast about it to other churches. But he had no need to; people elsewhere had already heard about it. The church from which Paul had been forced to make such a hasty departure had become an example to all the others.<sup>5</sup>

1. 1 Thess 2:18

2. 1 Cor 2:5; 1 Thess 2:13

3. 1 Thess 3:3-4; 2 Tim 3:12

4. 1 Thess 2:14

5. 1 Thess 1:7-8



*Greek church*

## Light and darkness

From Thessalonica, Paul's party went on to Berea. Each stopping place took Paul one stage closer to the goal of the present trip, the large cities of Athens and Corinth in the south of Greece.

Unlike the Jews of Thessalonica, the Jews of Berea did not dismiss Paul's preaching the moment they heard it, but searched the Old Testament to check his claims concerning Jesus. Many of them were convinced and believed.<sup>1</sup> Prejudice is always a barrier to understanding the truth, but once the light of the Scriptures is allowed to shine in, Christ is made known. God shines into the heart 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'<sup>2</sup>

When Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up opposition, Paul's life was in such danger that the Berean believers insisted he depart. Paul, rather than Silas or Timothy, was the target for the Jews' attacks, so when Paul left, the other two stayed behind to help the new church. Paul meanwhile was sailing for Athens, a group of Bereans going with him to ensure his safety.<sup>3</sup>

Alone in Athens, Paul contemplated the extent of the task before him. He had known from his student days that Athens was a centre of learning where philosophy, religion and politics were discussed freely, but he was not prepared for what he saw when he arrived there. It seemed that all the features of human philosophy and pagan religion that his soul loathed were there in Athens.<sup>4</sup>

Paul's first reaction may have been an urge to denounce this hateful idolatry as loudly and publicly as possible. But he restrained himself, and began his preaching, as always, among the Jews and God-fearers of the synagogue. Then he began to dispute with people in the market place, and soon the whole city was aware of his presence.<sup>5</sup>

1. Acts 17:10-12

2. 2 Cor 4:6

3. Acts 17:13-15

4. Acts 17:16

5. Acts 17:17



*'Searching the Scriptures', Berea*

## A preacher among the philosophers

The Areopagus was an ancient council responsible for the proper conduct of public lecturing and debating in Athens. Being aware of Paul's preaching about Jesus and the resurrection, the Areopagites asked him to explain his beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Of the schools of philosophy represented in the Areopagus, the main ones were the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans believed that because nothing in the world is lasting or stable, people should live in calm and contentment, avoiding anything that produces pain, fear and anxiety. This was how the gods lived, and therefore they took no interest in human affairs. The Stoics, by contrast, practised strong self-discipline. Believing that everything is controlled by a universal Mind or Reason, they taught that all circumstances were pre-determined and should be accepted without fear or complaint.

Paul's address to the Athenians was a development of his short address to the Lystrans some time earlier.<sup>2</sup> In short, his message was that God was the Creator and Controller of the universe, and he could be known through his creation. In former ages he had been patient with the ignorance of sinful people, but now that Jesus had died and risen, things had changed. God demanded repentance, and people could no longer remain indifferent. To those who responded, God promised forgiveness; to those who refused, judgment.<sup>3</sup> And God's guarantees are still in force.

The Epicureans would have agreed with Paul that God needs nothing from mere humans, and the Stoics would have agreed that there is a supreme Being who gives life to all things and determines all things.<sup>4</sup> But both groups, except for one man, Dionysius, rejected his teaching about the resurrection.<sup>5</sup> While others in the council remained spiritually dead, Dionysius entered into new life through the risen Christ.

1. Acts 17:18-21

2. Acts 14:15-17. Later he developed the theme further in Romans 1:18-25.

3. Acts 17:22-31

4. Acts 17:24-26,28

5. Acts 17:32-34



*The Acropolis, Athens*

## The weak who shamed the strong

Athens, with its interest in learning and philosophical debate, may have had an appearance of sophistication, but not so Corinth. Brash and gaudy, Corinth was a harsh world of commercial activity, where all the vices of city life were open to view. Corrupt merchants mingled with brazen prostitutes in a city where most people took advantage of whatever opportunity came their way, regardless of whether it was right or wrong.

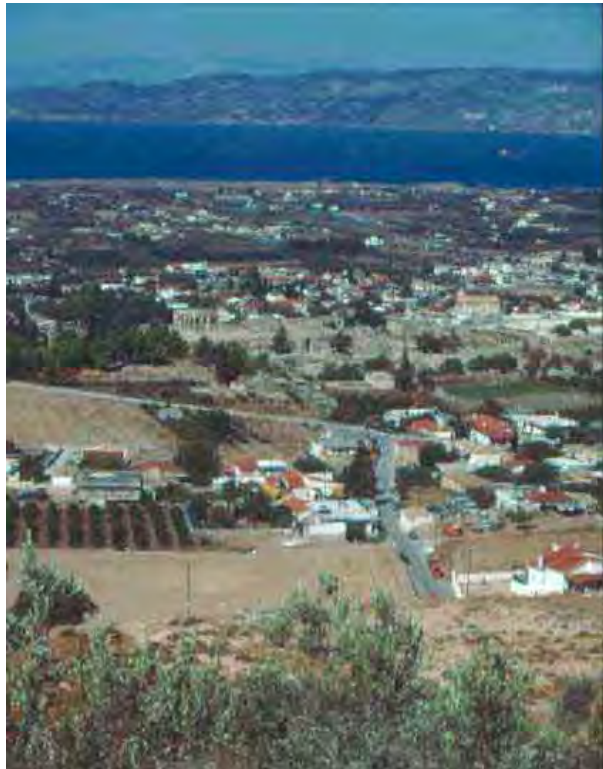
When Paul began preaching in Corinth, he clashed, as usual, with the Jews. But God encouraged him to persevere, reassuring him with the words, 'I have many people in this city'.<sup>1</sup>

The 'many people' God had chosen in Corinth proved to be representative of the community as a whole. There were not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble among them.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the church at Corinth soon numbered among its members converted thieves, prostitutes, drunkards, homosexuals and hooligans.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had often met with a better reception among those considered disreputable than among those who were socially respectable. In Corinth Paul had a similar experience. He neither ignored those who were despised nor flattered those whose social status gave them influence. He had little in common with today's status-conscious critic who looks at the crude and the disreputable and murmurs, 'But we can't have people like that walking into our church.'

The Corinthian church, with its odd assortment of people, was the church to which Paul gave his memorable teaching on unity within the Christian fellowship. 'Just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.'<sup>4</sup> It was also the church from which he wrote to another, 'Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.'<sup>5</sup>

1. Acts 18:6-11
2. 1 Cor 1:26
3. 1 Cor 6:9-11
4. 1 Cor 12:12
5. Rom 15:7



*Remains of biblical Corinth (centre of picture)*



































