

ACTS 11:19–30; 13:1–12

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH / TWO MISIONARIES TO CYPRUS

Story Notes

File no. 180

11:19-30

Through the conversion of Cornelius, God has expanded the vision of the Apostles and the Jerusalem Church—they confess that Gentiles may belong among his holy people. Now Luke tells us how this works out in fact. Christians are sent scurrying northwards out of Jerusalem because of persecution. They preach to Jews in Phoenecia, and Cyprus, and also in Antioch—possibly the third largest city of the time (after Rome and Alexandria). Many cultures mingle here, and it is here that natives of Cyprus and Cyrene (North Africa), free of Jewish restraints, preach freely to Gentiles. The Lord is present and many believe.

The actual events here may have happened concurrently with some of what we have just read, but Luke's purpose is to show how the Antioch church becomes a centre for further expansion.

On hearing the news of many Gentiles turning to the Lord, Barnabas is dispatched from Jerusalem to see what is happening. He sees 'the grace of God'—God's grace in granting repentance (v. 18), God's grace in making them one (Eph. 3:6-7) and God's grace evident in their faith and love (2 Thess. 1:11-12; 1 Tim. 1:14). He does not need to pray for them to receive the Spirit and simply encourages them (true to his name) to follow the Lord heartily. The Lord has done his own work in these Gentiles.

Barnabas is a good man, and good for this situation. More people come to the Lord through his ministry, presumably more Gentiles, and he stays to give leadership to the work. He sees the importance of Saul being part of this and searches him out. For about 10 years, the period from when the Christians in Jerusalem sent him to his home city of Tarsus (9:30), Saul, or Paul, has been preaching in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21-24), areas surrounding Antioch and Tarsus respectively. So Saul becomes part of this Antioch Church and for a whole year, these two men teach the good news of Christ widely.

It is from this Church in Antioch that we have picked up the name 'Christians', probably a name used by onlookers to describe these new people.

The grace of God is now seen in their generosity and gratefulness (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 9:13-14). This new Jew/Gentile congregation does not quench the Spirit or despise prophesying (1 Thess. 5:19-20), they heed the prophets from Jerusalem who predict a widespread famine (and which did come during the reign of Claudius the Emperor) and prepare an offering to meet the need of their fellow believers in Jerusalem. In this way, the Spirit gives opportunity and power to demonstrate the oneness of this new people of God from all nations. Paul reasons later that it is only right for those who have received spiritual blessings to respond with physical blessings (Rom. 15:27).

13:1-12

Certain prophets and teachers at Antioch are serving the Lord (*lietergeo*—as in liturgy), as priests did in the temple. Their fasting suggests they are expecting the Lord (Jesus) to do something in particular, and he does. The Spirit of Christ shows them that he wants Barnabas and Saul for other work, and so they are sent out, together with John Mark.

As with every stage of the mission in *Acts*, the Spirit is in charge. On the other hand, Barnabas is Cyprian by birth (4:36) so the decision to go there first may be quite natural, and sea connections are readily available. Preaching that Jesus is the Messiah in synagogues is where Saul began his

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH / TWO MISIONARIES TO CYPRUS con't

ministry (9:20) and this is the pattern they follow now in Cyprus—from Salamas in the East to Paphos in the West. Here, proconsul Sergius Paulus summons them, wanting to hear God's word.

Preaching of the gospel does not only engage human wills, it exposes spiritual powers, and here, evil powers emerge in the person of the local magician Elymas. His magic is shown to be devilish by his seeking to turn the proconsul from the good news of Christ. Saul, who now takes the Greek form of his name, Paul, is filled with the Spirit (to equip him for this task) and speaks like an Old Testament prophet so the truth of God will reach to the nations. He tells this magician that he is a son of the devil, that he is opposing righteousness, that he is maligning the Lord, and that he will be temporarily blind. The proconsul is amazed and in no doubt as to the truth of Jesus Christ.

We don't know what else happens here but two of the men board a vessel for the mainland of Pamphylia (modern Turkey) and John abandons the mission and returns to Jerusalem.

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ACTS 15:36 – 16:15

PAUL GOES ON ANOTHER JOURNEY

Story Notes

File no. 181

Vv. 36-41

Many Gentiles have turned to Christ and it is now clear that the whole Church has embraced them fully, as God has. The scene is set for Paul to revisit churches where he had preached— areas around the North East corner of the Mediterranean—to see how they are and to strengthen them.

Paul won't accept John Mark as a companion, having been let down by him before. Barnabas can see hope for Mark (possibly his cousin) and so the two leaders disagree sharply (*paroxusmos*). For the time, they travel their own ways. The church commits Paul and Silas to the grace of God for their work.

Later, Paul acknowledges John Mark as a valuable companion (Col. 4:10; II Tim. 4:11). He may have in mind that love does not allow itself to be provoked (*paroxuno*) (1 Cor. 13:5).

Vv. 1-5

Part of Paul's second missionary journey is to the churches established earlier in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe—the Galatian churches. Timothy has commended himself to two of these churches and Paul sees how helpful he will be for this work. Because Paul's regular starting point is Jewish synagogues he reasons that if Timothy is circumcised, his well known Greek status will not hinder proclamation among Jews.

Timothy's circumcision is pragmatic. Paul will tell us later that on an earlier trip to Jerusalem, Titus had not been required to be circumcised (Gal. 2:1-3).

The report of ministry here is brief and focuses on delivering the Jerusalem conference decrees. These instructions (along with other teaching no doubt) help to make them strong in faith. Like the believers in Antioch who rejoiced and were encouraged when they heard the decrees (15:31), they are glad that their place among God's people is recognised by the whole church and they are glad to oblige the mother church with regard to meat offered to idols so as to preserve that unity while people accustom themselves to the new idea of Gentiles worshipping with Israel. And the church continues to grow. So ends another section of *Acts*. God is preparing his servants for ministry in new fields.

Vv. 6-15

The work of Paul, Silas and now Timothy is restrained within Central Asia Minor (the Galatians area, as above) because the Holy Spirit forbids work to commence in Western Asia Minor. As with all other new directions in *Acts*, it is the Holy Spirit who leads the work. This is just noted but may have involved some pain for the apostles. One writer suggests it was the illness that Paul says was the reason the Galatians heard the gospel (Gal. 4:13-14) but how the Spirit spoke to the apostles is not mentioned.

Like Peter being directed to Cornelius' home, Paul receives a vision of a man in Macedonia (northern Greece) asking for help. The Spirit has prepared them for this move. They recognise God's call and immediately cross the Aegean Sea and are soon in one of Macedonia's chief cities, Philippi— a Roman colony (possibly for retired soldiers and with rights of self government).

There is no synagogue for worshippers here, perhaps because of insufficient Jewish men. Paul supposes that there may be a gathering outside the city wall, by some water (for Jewish ceremonial washings), and finds some women praying.

PAUL GOES ON ANOTHER JOURNEY con't

Lydia is a Gentile from Thyatira, back in Western Asia Minor, well known for its dyes, and is in business selling expensive purple goods here in Philippi. Later we find she has the means to host the visiting missionary team. She fears God and seeks to know him, but it is God himself who opens her heart to hear the gospel from Paul. She is baptised, along with all her household, possibly her servants (business associates, employees?). It is always God who brings people to himself (11:18; 13:48; 14:27; also Luke 24:45).

Now, as a lover of Christ, she wants to provide for his servants, but will these Jews come and stay with her? She would be familiar with Jewish reticence on this point (10:28). The qualification she asks to be judged by is if she is 'faithful to the Lord', that is, to Jesus. Old habits are fading away.

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ACTS 16:16–40

THE SLAVE GIRL AND THE JAILER

Story Notes

File no. 182

The meetings by the river continue until interrupted by the constant calling out of a slave girl with powers of divination, probably thought by them to be from Apollo but recognised by Paul as coming from an evil spirit. What the girl says is entirely true: they are slaves of the Most High God (as in Luke 4:34, 41) and bring a message of salvation, but Paul is grieved, pained and angered by the daily disruptions and the free reign that Satan has over this girl and her employers. He orders the spirit to leave her (as in Luke 8:29). By the authority of Jesus Christ, the spirit does go from her, and so do the profits of her owners (the same word is used for both).

No objection has been made to the out of town meetings, but now, a 'hip pocket nerve' has been touched and the slave girl's owners make claim to the local magistrates that Roman law is being broken. Roman law in fact did tolerate Jewish and other worship, so long as it didn't subvert Roman gods or encourage unruliness. It is more likely that some current sentiment against Jews is involved because mob hysteria is aroused and the magistrates extravagantly tear their robes at the supposed threat to Roman religion and order. With so much passion and noise, there is no opportunity for Paul and Silas to announce their Roman citizenship, they are beaten savagely, and, like serious criminals, confined in jail. The jailer is left in no doubt about the seriousness of their 'crime' and he puts them in his inner prison with their feet in stocks.

It is midnight, Paul and Silas are singing and the other inmates are listening intently. The prison shakes with an earthquake and everyone's shackles are loosed. The guard knows he will be executed for losing his prisoners and decides to commit suicide. Paul says, 'Don't be afraid, we are all here!' At every point, the unexpected has happened, but Paul and Silas are servants of the Most High God and he has been in charge all along.

The jailer now wants to be 'saved', not from what Rome can do to him, but from the dis-favour of the Most High God. This man who has had no thought for Israel's God or for Christ, now hears that he can know God through faith in Jesus as Lord—clearly, Lord over the earth, but also revealer of God and reconciler to him. His whole household can be saved. Now this brutal man who put their bleeding bodies in stocks, washes their wounds and feeds them. He and all his family confess their new allegiance to Christ as Lord in baptism.

In what seems to be a casual unconcern, the magistrates want to be rid of their annoyance of the previous night and let Paul and Silas go. But Paul has concern for his dignity, and for justice, and particularly, for the gospel. It must be clear that Rome has acted wrongly, not the servants of Christ. He tells them now that he is a Roman citizen and such treatment has been illegal. Now the magistrates must act with deference. So the Philippian Church is established and encouraged by this display of God's grace and sovereignty. This Church will play a significant part in Paul's future ministry.

ACTS 17:16–33

A CITY FULL OF IDOLS

Story Notes

File no. 183

Paul is hounded out of Thessalonica, again by Jews, and arrives, alone, in Athens. This is the acknowledged intellectual capital of Greece but Paul does not seem to have any particular goal here. Rather, he is provoked by idolatry, so reasons with Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue (the same message as in Thessalonica—1 Thess. 1:9-10), but then also with Greeks in the market place. His topic, according to them, is 'Jesus and the resurrection'. As in other places the victory of Jesus over death and his reign over this sinful world is his core business.

The Athenian idol worshipping audience may think 'Jesus' and 'resurrection' are two more gods. Paul is summoned to the Aeropogus, a prestigious court for what may be a preliminary hearing as to whether this speaker should be allowed to continue. If he says anything that challenges their existing gods, he may be examined further, and be in trouble.

Luke describes the Athenians as spending their time in nothing except telling or hearing new ideas (agreeing with their own historian Thucydides from some 400 years earlier), perhaps implying that they were not interested in believing but in debating.

'You are very religious' Paul begins. The word can mean superstitious but is ambiguous and would not offend his hearers. They don't want to miss any god so have provided an altar for one that is unknown. Paul has begun with core business for him: what or whom do people worship? On the two occasions when an audience is other than Jewish or God-fearers (here and in 14:15-17), his point of contact has to do with worship.

Paul knows the beliefs of Epicureans and Stoics but builds nothing on this. He can quote Greek poets but speaks from his Scriptures. Just as he quotes these to show Jews that Jesus is the Christ, he alludes to them now to show Gentiles that they should not worship idols (as in Isa. 44:9-20). What God has revealed to Israel remains revelation for the world. It is truth for all nations. Paul says, 'I can tell you what you are ignorant of!'

So he tells them who God is. He is the Creator. Paul could have many passages in mind (e.g. Gen. 1:1; Exod. 20:11; Ps. 74:17; Isa. 42:5; 45:7) but simply makes his affirmation. God is Lord in heaven (over the gods) and earth. He is not located in temples (1 Kings 8:27). He doesn't need us to serve him (Ps. 50:7-15), but rather, is giving (present participle) us life itself (1 Chron. 29:14) and everything to sustain it (Isa. 42:5). Some of his points may have the agreement of part of his audience and other points their disagreement, but that is not his concern.

Paul continues: God has made us from one (from one man, nature or Father), every 'nation (*ethnos*) of mankind (*anthropos*)' annulling the idea that some nations have a different origin or are more favoured than others. The Athenians believe they are made from their soil and are unique.

Our times and boundaries (either history and geography or our seasons and space) are all appointed to us (Deut. 32:8) with the specific intention that we should know him. There is no room for fatalism. He acts so that his creatures will seek him out (as Ps. 14:2; Prov. 8:17; Isa. 55:6; 65:1; Jer. 29:13). Plato used the idea of 'feeling after' for vague guesses at truth, but Paul presents a Father who is seeking his children, so our finding is for someone ready to be found! Paul knows God will provide palpable assurance of his presence (Rom. 1:20; 1 John 1:1). This God is not far from each of us (cf. the Stoics who believe he is identical with us or impersonal) but is present to us (Ps. 145:18; Jer. 23:23-24).

A CITY FULL OF IDOLS con't

Paul quotes Epimenides, 'In him we live and move and have our being', but he puts his own thought into this: humans are not a spark of the divine, as the philosopher thought, but are made in the image of God ('image' and 'likeness' are familial terms—Gen. 1:26; 5:3). He is not appealing to a natural theology so much as using the question of their cultural fathers to point them to what God is now revealing. He also quotes the Cilician Aratus (c. 315 BC) poem *Phaenomena*, 'For we also are his children'. Paul shows that the message of Jesus is the truth for which their poets quested.

Paul returns to the matter of worship: the representations of God or gods that litter the city cannot portray the true God (Ps. 115:4-8; Isa. 37:19; 40:18-19; 46:5-7). He calls these Greeks to share Israel's monotheism—'We should not think....' Paul has begun with Christ and the resurrection. He has questioned their worship of what cannot be God. He has told them what Israel knows and returns to the very specific visitation of God in Jesus Christ. Gentile history is summed up as 'ignorance' (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18), an ignorance that God is willing to overlook (as in 14:16) because the sending of his Son is a call to repentance—to change their minds about worship.

Paul presses them to make a change (we remember that they are apt to debate and not to decide) by reference to the coming again of Jesus as Judge (cf. Ps. 96:13; Dan. 7:13). The day is fixed and the Judge is identified as Jesus. No one can avoid death or miss its significance. We won't, and we don't deserve to live forever. We are assured that this man Jesus will be our judge by the fact that he has been raised from the dead. No one has any excuse for not accepting God's gift (Acts 14:16; Rom. 3:25) because God has declared that this man is his Son (Rom. 1:4).

All must deal with sin and death, and the only way forward is to hear the gracious message of the God who raises his Son to announce forgiveness. If we reject this, there remains a fearful prospect. Resurrection is not a logical or expected or acceptable sequel to any human inquiry. It is God's unexpected, undeserved and wonderful intervention into our otherwise sad performance, and it must be announced, not because it is acceptable but because it is true.

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ACTS 21:26 – 22:29

Acts 19:21; 21:17–26

PAUL IS ARRESTED AND TELLS HIS STORY

Story Notes

File no. 184

21:26-40

Paul has arrived in Jerusalem (v. 17) and the Church leaders have affirmed his ministry among Gentiles. However, they would like him to divert the criticism of Jewish Christians, numbering thousands, who understand that he is persuading Jewish Christians to cease being Jews. He can set this to rest by sharing in a Jewish custom of taking a vow at the temple. Paul is ready to oblige them.

This ceremony requires temple attendance to give notice of the days set aside for these purification rites, and again at the end of a week. Some Jews from Asia, who are probably in Jerusalem for Pentecost, notice Paul in the temple. They would have been upset by his success in turning many Jews to Christ in their homeland in West Asia Minor, and they detest anyone who upsets their religious culture. Now it reaches boiling point. If Paul begins to have success in Jerusalem as in Asia, their whole life will be turned upside down and they lash out with wild accusations. In fact, Paul has *not* preached against Israel or the Law or the temple, and he has certainly *not* brought Greeks into the temple (which Jewish law stated would defile the temple and be punishable by death).

However, the mood in Jerusalem is anxious and a mob is soon aroused to carry out a lynching. They drag Paul out, close the temple gates and begin beating him. The story of Stephen is being repeated with the protagonist now being the victim!

Rome has a fort within the city limits and soon sends a troop to attend the melee. To them it looks as though all Jerusalem is in confusion and the vice like grip of Rome on all civil unrest saves the situation. The local Roman tribune, Lysius cannot find a consistent accusation to account for the trouble, but binds him assuming he is making trouble. .

At the steps leading up to their fortress, just North of the Temple Mount, they must carry Paul to safety. Here, he surprises them by making a request in Greek. Any thought that he is the Egyptian leader of 'The Assassins' is quashed. Jews may rightly protest such a presence, but having an educated man from the leading intellectual city of Tarsus is unexpected and he gains the opportunity to address all Jerusalem from the safety of Rome's Jerusalem barracks.

Now Paul surprises everyone by speaking Hebrew. The mob has been misled as to who has caused the trouble. He is not a rabble-rouser.

22:1-29

The speeches in Jerusalem (and later, before Felix and then Agrippa) are a 'defence' (*apologia*—22:1; 24:10; 26:1-2, 24). Jesus warned his disciples not to prepare a defence for themselves (Luke 12:11; 21:14) because this would be their opportunity for testimony, or to give reasons (*apologia*) for their faith (as in 1 Pet. 3:15). The Holy Spirit, or the Lord himself, would give them what to say when the occasions arose.

Moods of crowds thrive on ignorance and Paul's ability to negotiate with his guards, and then to speak their vernacular may surprise them into listening. He calls them brothers and fathers and confesses the upbringing he has shared with them. Even the zeal they are showing in being upset, he has shared with them. Paul must realise from experience that this does not endear him to them but they need to know that his life and action is all because of Christ.

PAUL IS ARRESTED AND TELLS HIS STORY con't

He confesses his earlier conflict with Christ (vv. 1-5), effectively confessing his ignorance and sin. This parallels the constant reference in apostolic talks to 'you...' or 'they crucified him'. Paul, together with the yelling mobs in Pilate's hall, had willed Christ dead.

He describes his conversion to Christ on the Damascus Road (vv. 6-16), his discovery of the grace of God.

The light he saw revealed the divine nature of his Visitor. The question he heard ('Why are you...') declared Christ's love that thought of Paul's pain rather than his own. Paul's address to the 'Lord' acknowledged a new authority. Paul introduces Ananias into his story as a 'devout Jew', to deflect any idea that he has drifted from respect for Israel. Paul's sight was restored just as miraculously as his blindness had been inflicted. The Voice was identified as Israel's Righteous One (3:14; 7:52 with Isa. 32:1; 53:11; also 1 John 2:1), their Messiah. He was told that he would be a witness to others. He must wash away his sins in baptism (cf. 'save yourselves' in 2:40). Here is where his life long love for justification by faith was born. In an instant was clean, and the truth of this would never fade!

Paul must also explain his redirection to Gentiles by Christ in Jerusalem (22:17-21). He explains that he wanted his testimony to be effective and hoped to stay in Jerusalem, even arguing with Christ about this! But no, he must go to the Gentiles. Paul's insistence that Christ sent him to Gentiles when he wanted to stay in Jerusalem, far from sedating their unrest, reignites the riot. They want him dead.

Paul is saved from the Jews but Rome's rough justice gets Paul ready to be 'examined'—meaning to extract some confession from him by whipping him—something by which the tribune can explain to his superiors what has happened in Jerusalem. Paul protests that he is citizen of Rome, more natively so than the tribune himself, and he is to be treated accordingly. The tribune is now in trouble because of treating a Roman citizen without due process.

Through this faithful 'defence' of what Christ has done, Paul demonstrates that the gospel and its servants are not the cause of upheaval. It is others who must explain their behaviour.

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ACTS 22:30 – 23:35
HOW GOD PROTECTED PAUL
Story Notes
File no. 185

The Roman tribune has rescued Paul from a Jerusalem mob, and on the next day, summons the Jewish Council to meet with him. He asks Paul to explain himself. This may be an enquiry rather than a formal court session.

Paul addresses himself to the Council. He has always sought to please God (albeit mistakenly earlier). He does not mean he has never done wrong but that he has been a diligent keeper of the law (24:16; Phil. 3:6). This does not impress the High Priest who regards such a claim as blasphemous. They think he is destroying their religion and that he must be a blasphemer—hence the call to slap Paul on the cheek.

Paul does not ‘turn the other cheek’ (Luke 6:29; cf. 1 Pet. 2:23) but speaks more like Christ did to hypocrites (Luke 11:44): God will strike him; he is a hypocrite; he has acted unlawfully (because Jewish law provided for the fair treatment of the accused until proven guilty); he is in no position to be a judge of someone else breaking their law.

F. F. Bruce comments: “The warm, impetuous humanity of a man of like passions with ourselves is vividly portrayed in this trial scene, and there is no doubt who presents the more dignified bearing—Paul or the high priest. (*Acts*, p. 450).

In fact, other history tells us that High Priest Ananias is a rogue—power hungry, using his riches to secure advantage and ready to murder to further his ends. Paul’s word about God striking him down is fulfilled when, some 10 years later, he is murdered by his own people.

When Paul is reproved, he says he didn’t know who was speaking. In this informal setting, it is possible he didn’t see where the comment came from, but then, he speaks to him as someone who is sitting as his judge. It is also possible that he speaks ironically—as if to say, ‘Someone who spoke as you have could not be a high priest!’ Whatever the case, Paul fulfills the law regarding honour (Exod. 22:28) and apologises.

It seems that Paul cannot see any future in reasoning with this assembly and decides to set the Council against itself by a debate about resurrection, a belief he holds in common with the Pharisee contingent on the Council. Pharisees believe God’s promises to them can only be fulfilled if there is a resurrection, and Paul, who knows Christ has defeated death, totally agrees. Predictably, the Council now argues wildly, the Pharisees siding with Paul saying a spirit or angel may have spoken to him (a possibility they acknowledge and Sadducees do not). The Roman tribune worries that he will not be able to discover the facts and the fighting threatens to become physical and he is concerned that he may not even be able to secure the safety of Paul.

Rome has secured Paul’s safety for the moment, but it is the Lord who tells him, that night, the outcome of his imprisonment. He must bear witness to Christ in Rome.

Jews vowing to fast until they have killed Paul shows how deeply they are wedded to their religion, and how profoundly they have rejected Christ as the fulfillment of their religion. The complicity of the leaders makes this rejection official. Wonderfully, Paul’s nephew hears about and exposes the plot, first to Paul, and then to the tribune. Rome is clearly inclined to trust Paul and his family more than they are to trust the Jews (even though Ananias has been complicit with Rome in his rise to power).

HOW GOD PROTECTED PAUL con't

Lucius, the tribune knows what to do and acts immediately. Felix the governor or procurator in Caesarea must deal with this, and Paul must be out of Jerusalem before daybreak. A rigorous overnight journey is planned, some 56 kilometres to Antipatris—with 200 infantry, 70 cavalry and 200 spearmen, and a mount for Paul. The remaining 43 kilometres to Caesarea will be escorted by the cavalry on the next day.

The contingent to protect Paul is humourously greater than the 40 who have vowed to kill Paul. Lucius recognises the ferocious anger of Jews against Paul and Christians generally. They fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 2, 'Why do the nations rage...against the Lord and his Anointed?' The 40 would be assassins are left foiled, and hungry!

Lucius' letter to Felix explains the near lynching that happened outside the Jerusalem temple, claims credit for rescuing him as a Roman citizen (in fact he had nearly scourged him before discovering he was a Roman), explains that the matter concerns Jewish, not Roman law and that a plot to kill his prisoner necessitated removing him from Jerusalem.

So Paul arrives in Caesarea, in Roman custody. Felix checks that Paul comes from a Roman colony, Tarsus, clearing the way for Rome to deal with what falls within their jurisdiction. Client kingdoms such as Syria had rights to deal with people from their areas. So Paul must wait in prison for his accusers to arrive from Jerusalem.

This Felix is no angel. Romans historian Tacitus says 'He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave'. But Paul is a prisoner of Christ, not primarily of Rome.

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ACTS 24:24 – 26:32

PAUL WITNESSES TO TWO GOVERNORS / KING AGRIPPA

Story Notes

File no. 186

24:24-27

Felix, has married a Jew and knows more of their religion than other Romans but he plays with Paul, pretending to be interested in his call to believe in Christ. Paul is not playing but tells him about righteousness, self-control and judgement—until Felix becomes alarmed. As it turns out, he is interested in money, not justice or faith in Christ (v. 26). And he is interested in currying favour with the Jews, so leaves Paul in jail. Two years pass, until Felix is replaced.

The two years spent at Caesarea were a change of pace for Paul. If he were not sure of the providence of God, he may have found them frustrating: he was accused by the Jews of things he had not done, and was held by an irresponsible Roman governor who hoped for bribes and favour rather than righteousness. Some think that Luke, who is writing this story and is with Paul for these two years, may have researched his Gospel account during this time, while he was close to the action of the life of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). Paul has some freedom to meet with others and, no doubt, uses this opportunity to good effect.

25:1-12

Paul has been kept waiting in Caesarea for two years when the new governor Festus arrives to take up his duties. He takes an early journey to Jerusalem where Jews approach him regarding Paul. They still hope to assassinate him but are foiled by Festus saying the matter will be settled in Caesarea. The Jews waste no time getting there, but the charges they bring against him are no more convincing than before (v. 7). Paul is innocent of any charges brought with regard to either Jewish (particularly regarding their temple) or Roman law.

Festus is little better than Felix, wanting to keep Jews happy. He asks if Paul is prepared to face trial in Jerusalem. Again, Paul sees no future in this charade and appeals to Caesar. With all the failings of Roman justice, he reckons that it is better to go to its highest court than to trust himself to Jews who had rejected their Messiah. The Lord has already explained to him that the Jews in Jerusalem will not accept his testimony, and that he must bear witness to him in Rome.

25:13-27

The newly installed Festus is visited by a neighbouring Roman colleague—King Herod Agrippa II. He makes the trip from Caesarea Philippi (towards Damascus) to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast just a few days after Paul has appealed to Caesar.

This man is a fourth generation Herod. His great grandfather, Herod the Great, had tried to murder the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:16). His father had murdered the apostle James (12:1-2), and then came to a sorry end under God's judgement (12:21-23).

Festus takes the opportunity to discuss the issue of Paul with his colleague—what charge to write when sending him on to Rome. He thinks the matter is incomprehensible—involving Jewish law and the raising of a dead man (vv. 19-20). Agrippa knows more about the Jews. He should remember his father's end in this city and be careful not to mess with Israel's God! Herod Agrippa II says he would like to hear Paul speak.

Agrippa II, like his father, loves glamour (v. 23) so, with full ceremony, he and his wife Bernice enter the hall and Paul is summoned. Festus explains the business in hand. Agrippa is regarded well by Jews because his grandmother was of famous Jewish descent and he has remained conversant with Jewish matters. Festus has made a problem for himself by not releasing Paul straight away and now needs a respectable basis for referral to Rome.

PAUL WITNESSES TO TWO GOVERNORS / KING AGRIPPA con't

26:1-8

Paul again makes his defence, or gives his testimony. As Jesus says, 'Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45).

He is fortunate to be tried by this man because he has studied Jewish affairs. In fact, he is sought out by Rome for advice in these matters. Paul's good fortune is not that he will be treated better than previously but that Agrippa may be starting from a higher point than some others with regard to the truth.

Paul has been a faithful Jew, first, as a strict Pharisee as is well known. But he remains a faithful Jew because he has embraced the hope for which all Jews (or most of them) want to be worthy and this is the issue of his trial. The real question is not why Paul hopes but why Israel doesn't—that is, hope for resurrection. Why should this be thought incredible? Anyone knowing the Scriptures, and God's power should have come to this hope (as in Matthew 22:29).

26:9-20

This address follows the same pattern as the one given to the Jerusalem crowd. He confesses his earlier conflict with Christ (vv. 9-11; cf. 22:3-5); his conversion to Christ (vv. 12-15; cf. 22:6-13); and his redirection by Christ to Gentiles (vv. 16-17; cf. 22:14-21). He gives a fuller version of what Christ said to him as he neared Damascus including it being hard for him to kick against Christ's goading of him. Paul has proved the truth of the proverb, '...the way of the treacherous is hard' (Prov. 13:15) but has now discovered the amazing gentleness of Christ.

This fuller version of how Christ addressed him says he must open the eyes of people (as the Lord opened his eyes) so they will turn from Satan to God and live in obedience to him (v. 18; as in Col. 1:12-14). Paul continues to be obedient, not as he was before, to the dead tradition of Judaism, but to the heavenly vision anticipated by the Scriptures and revealed in Christ.

Gentiles as well as Jews need forgiveness, and a place to belong amongst all the people God sanctifies—sanctifies, not by their sacrifices but by this gospel, and sanctifies so they can participate in the hope of Israel (20:32; Titus 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:3, 13). This is the message Paul has been preaching.

26:21-23

Paul now identifies that his claim to be sent by Christ to the Gentiles (and his supposedly being in the temple with Gentiles) is the real reason he has been accosted by Jews (v. 21; with 22:21-22), something he avoided doing before (24:18-19). It is this vision of a church including Gentiles (cf. Eph. 3) that has landed him in trouble with the Jews but which he cannot sacrifice in the interests of his safety. They need their eyes opened! And the glory of God needs to be seen in the unity of Gentiles with Jews in the joy of the gospel.

Again, Paul says his message is nothing other than what the Scriptures announced—that Christ would suffer and be raised from the dead, and, being the first to arise from the dead, would bring light to both Jews and Gentiles. He has brought life and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10)!

26:24-32

Festus rudely interjects saying Paul is mad, but Paul avers that he has spoken sober truth. He prefers to address Agrippa who has studied Israel's prophecies, and the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. (This highlights the importance of our Gospels, written, as Luke's is, that we may know the certainty of these things.) Agrippa should know there is no reasonable case against Jesus fulfilling Israel's scriptures. The resurrection is well attested and the links of this with Jewish anticipations of God's coming again to their rescue are indisputable.

PAUL WITNESSES TO TWO GOVERNORS / KING AGRIPPA con't

But Agrippa is not so eager to be flushed out as a believer in Christ and can only mock Paul about trying to convert him. Paul, in genuine love could wish Agrippa to be as he is, in Christ, but without the chains. Again, Rome can find no fault in this apostle, and, as Jesus said, such opportunities are the way the truth is proclaimed in the highest courts of the land. And now, he will go to Rome.

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ACTS 27:1–44

ON THE WAY TO ROME / SHIPWRECKED

Story Notes

File no. 187

Paul has journeyed by boat on several occasions and been shipwrecked more than once (2 Cor. 11:25) but never elaborates on this. Here, and also in chapter 20, the author, Luke, is travelling with Paul and we get more detail. The very full account here may express Luke's interest in travel, but also, the literary trend of his day to recount sea adventures in detail. Whatever the reason for the story, it demonstrates that the Lord is greater than the ravages of the sea (cf. Mark 4:39) and is able to shepherd his servants through all their circumstances and glorify himself as they proclaim his gospel. Amongst the superstitions of the day, it probably demonstrated to some that Paul was not a man who deserved to die (cf. 28:4).

Vv. 1-12

Centurion Julius is entrusted to get prisoner Paul to Rome by ship. Luke ('we' in v. 1) and Aristarchus (v. 2) may well be paid up passengers travelling as companions of Paul (19:29; 20:4; Philemon 24) or be fellow prisoners (Col. 4:10).

One day out from Caesarea they arrive in Sidon where the centurion allows Paul to receive (or to visit) believers who want to assist him (cf. 11:19). In the next two weeks, they sail up to, and north of Cyprus (to avoid open sea westerlies and pick up helpful off shore winds and a western flowing current).

Arriving at Myra (further west along the Asia Minor coast), the centurion must find another ship bound for Rome. From here, words like 'difficult', 'dangerous' and 'damage' appear but they arrive at their last port Cnidus, before heading for open sea. Winds are not favourable but they get to the eastern end of Crete—Salmone, and creep towards Fair Havens on the mid south coast of Crete. There is a small town close by but the captain does not regard it as suitable for wintering. Seasoned traveller Paul can see trouble coming. It is past Passover (the only occasion when fasting was prescribed for Jews) so winter is close and no shipping usually risks travel in these months. His warnings of damage, loss and fatalities are heard (showing that the centurion has respect for Paul) but not heeded. The captain and pilot (and others who discuss this) think they will be better heading for Phoenix at the western end of the island where the western aspect of the port will mean better wintering than their present remote place.

Vv. 13-44

A light south wind would enable them to tack westwards along the coast of Crete but an off shore hurricane (Gr. *typhonikos*), well known as 'the north-easter', blows them nearly 40 kilometres off the coast and they find shelter at a small island, Clauda, and even here they can barely control the ship. They manage to get ropes under the hull to help hold the ship together but fear they will be driven 600 kilometres south to Syrtus on the African coast where shallow seas regularly claim unwary sailors.

They manage to keep heading west into open seas, a sheet anchor out to slow their speed. Day two—they jettison cargo to lighten the ship. Day three—they must jettison the ship's tackle, sailors throwing their own tools of trade into the ocean. Many days pass with no abatement of the storm and with no sun or stars for navigation. Hope is abandoned.

Then, everything changes, not because of the weather but because Paul speaks! An angel has spoken to him! 'You should have listened to me', he says, 'but have courage because an angel has assured me that I will stand before Caesar and all of us will be saved!' He must have been praying

ON THE WAY TO ROME / SHIPWRECKED con't

for the lives of those who travelled with him because the angel says 'God has granted you...' (v. 24).

Day fourteen—at night, they are being driven around the Adriatic Sea and the sailors' measurements indicate shallower water. Land is approaching. Anchors are set out to prevent their being thrown onto rocks before daylight. Some sailors want to take matters into their own hands and Paul prevents this. They will all need to stay together, so the small boat is cut down—perhaps to prevent further action in this regard.

Not much eating has happened for two weeks, either because it is impossible to prepare or because they are too afraid to bother. Paul says it is time to eat and gain some strength. Again, he says they will not suffer any loss of life—all 276 will be safe. (The angel's promise is better than Paul's warning of lost lives—v. 10.) He thanks God in front of them all and begins to eat. So, they are encouraged and join in the meal. Now the wheat is thrown out to lighten the ship.

Daylight comes—they cannot recognise the place they have come to but hoist a sail to get the ship in shore as far as possible. But the bows get wedged on a reef and the stern begins to break up. There will be no orderly disembarking now and the soldiers want the prisoners killed so they won't escape. Now, the centurion takes his lead again (Paul being the only one to know what to do before) and protects Paul with a plan to let everyone make their own way as best they can, by swimming or on planks. By cutting the prisoner's shackles, the centurion tacitly acknowledges that he has encountered a reign more orderly than his own Roman heritage. They all land safely—on Malta, safely at their desired haven (Ps. 107:30).

The story shows God's concern not just to gain followers of his Son but also to demonstrate what it is like to live as a community of people who trust themselves to his care and live together in mutual respect.

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ACTS 28:1–29

PAUL IN MALTA AND ROME

Story Notes

File no. 188

Vv. 1-10

The people of Malta are generous and Luke recounts how considerate they are towards the bedraggled survivors. Paul, ever the servant, helps them with the fire but is bitten by a deadly snake. It is clearly a bite because the viper is hanging from his hand. The superstitious locals see this as retribution catching up with a murderer, and they wait for him to die. When they see he is unaffected, their superstition says he must be a god. Without a word of preaching that we know of, the true God has shown these locals that Paul is to be trusted, and that God intervenes in this world to rescue his people.

This is underlined when a leading citizen, Publius, entertains ‘us’ for three days—at least Luke and Paul, with Aristarchus and perhaps others as well. When Paul heals his father, the islanders know God favours them as well. ‘The rest of the people... who had diseases’ also come to be healed. The wording suggests that disease on the island was eradicated. What a three month ‘wintering’ this must have been! The works of Jesus Christ, ‘going about doing good’, are continuing through his servant (10:38). No wonder they respond with respect and generosity.

What seems strange is there being no mention of preaching or converts, and no challenge to Paul being called a god. There may not have been anyone with a common language (‘natives’ = *babaros*, was used of someone who spoke an unknown language). However, it is clear that the blessings of the gospel were portrayed to these people in a way they could understand and that they were responsive to what they saw. All this is suggestive of the future going out of the gospel to Gentiles.

Vv. 11-14

Shipping stirs again and the centurion secures passage on an Alexandrian boat bound for Rome for his troops and prisoners. Their journey includes three days in Syracuse on the Western coast of Sicily, then Rhegium on the tip of Italy and then a good wind takes them up the coast to Putioli to disembark.

Immediately, the missionary party finds some believers and they are invited to stay for seven days. Where the centurion fits in this we are not told. From here, the travel to Rome is on foot. They arrive in 62 AD.

Vv. 15-31 Rome

Paul does not just ‘come to Rome’. News has travelled that he has arrived. His letter to the Romans five years earlier tells us he was looking forward to coming (Rom. 1:8-13; 15:32) and it is apparent that Christian ‘brothers’ in Rome are also eager to have him. They hear of his coming and travel up to 70 kilometres along the Appian Way to greet him. They make him thankful and give him courage. Paul, now well respected by his centurion, is permitted to live in his own arrangements, guarded by a soldier.

A Christian community has been in the capital for some 10 years (Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from Rome to Corinth as early as 51 AD and this may be because of Jewish/Christian trouble there—as Acts 18:1-2; so F. F. Bruce, p. 367f). Paul has written to Rome early in 57 AD calling believers ‘faithful’ and they are well known in the East by all the churches (Rom. 1:8).

Against all odds, with persecution from Jews and ineptness from Rome, faith in Jesus Christ has been ‘put on the map’. Luke wants us to know ‘the certainty of these things’ (Luke 1:4) lest the lethargy or hatred of our age discourage us.

We don’t hear any more about the time Paul may have spent with the church in Rome but we may be sure that he did meet with them. However, Luke’s purpose is to show us the spread of the

PAUL IN MALTA AND ROME con't

gospel, so he says that after only three days, Paul asks for the local Jewish leaders to come to him. He addresses them as 'brothers'—the usual way of Jews identifying themselves as children of Abraham. He has freedom to move (apart from the soldier permanently attached to him—v. 20) and perhaps could have gone to any one of several synagogues in Rome but chooses to ask their leaders to come to him, as they do.

There is nothing new in what Paul says to the Jews here. First, he has not broken Israel's law but reported the fulfillment of their hope. Second, given that the gospel is truth for all nations, he wants it to be known that he has done nothing wrong against Rome by breaking their law or starting a rebellion. Third, his 'chain' is because of the hope of Israel, and, because the Jews have objected to Christ being the fulfillment of this hope. Christ is front and centre of all that he wants to say. He is in Rome because Rome's leaders in Caesarea were too interested in humouring Jewish opinion and he had appealed to Caesar. He records no complaint against his own people.

The Jewish leaders are diplomatic and evasive in their replies, not wanting to upset their Jewish leaders or the Romans among whom they live. They have no official letters telling them how to treat Paul, just reports of Jewish opposition to this 'sect' from many regions. They want to hear about this themselves and arrange a time to do so.

So, for a whole day, Paul reasons from the Scriptures that Jesus is their King (as in 8:12), that God's reign has been established in him and that he alone is Israel's hope.

Some Jews in Rome believe, but many do not (as John 1:11; 12:40). Even someone rising from the dead would not change this (Luke 16:31). They trust that they are righteous in their own eyes (Luke 18:9) and obey unrighteousness (Rom. 2:8). Paul sees the truth of Isaiah's testimony, that Israel refuses to hear the good news of their salvation (Isa. 6:9-10).

He understands that the gospel will now go to Gentiles because they will believe it. Jesus predicted Jewish unbelief using the same Scripture (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40). Human rejection has not invalidated the message. God always has some who will hear.

Persecution of Christians in Rome begins in 64 AD, that is, at the time when Luke concludes his report. It may well be that Paul is acquitted and then travels again. Paul seems to be in Asia again (2 Tim. 4) but this is unclear.

Jesus said the gospel would be preached in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth (1:8). The fulfillment of this has been recorded in six sections each ending with a comment about the word of God or the church 'multiplying greatly' (6:7), 'multiplying' (9:31), increasing and multiplying (12:24); increasing in number daily (16:5), increasing and prevailing mightily (19:20), and now, Paul preaching for two years 'with all boldness and unhindered' in Rome (28:31).

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PHILEMON 1–25

Acts 28:30–31

PAUL THE LETTER WRITER (PHILEMON)

Story Notes

File no. 189

Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, and sends this letter to Philemon who leads a church in his home (vv. 1-2). Others are included in the greeting but the content of the letter is personal.

The church is in Colossae because the letter to that church is sent at the same time—the list of people sending greetings is largely the same, and he mentions that Onesimus, the subject of this letter, belongs to them (Col. 4:9).

Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave. He has encountered Paul in Rome and is being sent back as a believer but with a highly significant 'covering letter'. Paul will not be very effective if he tries to stop slavery at this point but his letter is asking for a completely changed relationship between slave master and slave.

Paul does not simply want Onesimus to be spared a beating when he returns. He wants master and slave to be reconciled. Reconciliation has been a theme in his letter to this church: Christ reconciled 'all things' to himself (Col. 1:18-20), and this must lead to new relationships between those who are reconciled (Col. 3:11-17) including masters and slaves. How Paul works this out in the case history of Onesimus is invaluable for us too; we also must flesh out Christ's reconciliation in our situations.

Paul sends greetings and highlights his relationship with Philemon (vv. 3-7). This is characterized by the grace of God in Christ, thankfulness for his faith and love, and a prayer that their fellowship of faith (with Christ and with one another) may be effective. Preaching God's word can be effective (1 Cor. 16:9; Heb. 4:12) but, if Philemon will live for Christ's sake in what Paul is asking him to do, so will this fellowship of faith be effective. Many will see and understand what Paul has meant in his letter—and what Christ has done in his death. Philemon has refreshed the heart of Paul and others before (v. 7) and he hopes he will continue to do so (v. 20). So far, Paul has outlined the substantial oneness he and Philemon have.

Now Paul makes his request (vv. 8-22). Because of Paul's position as an apostle, and the one through whom the gospel came to Philemon (Acts 19:10), he could expect Philemon to do as he says, but, as an older man, he prefers a simple response of love, and exhorts him (*parakaleo* — speaking from along side).

Paul has shown that he is close to Philemon, but he is also to Onesimus (vv. 10-13). He is his child (as someone he led to Christ); he has become useful (fulfilling the meaning of his name) to Paul who now loves him dearly. He would even love to have him back because he is so valuable but would not want him if he were not first reconciled to his master, and then freely given back. Paul seems to argue like this, not so much because he wants Onesimus back but because he wants Philemon to receive Onesimus in this way.

Paul's real desire is for Christ's reconciliation to be demonstrated in what happens when Onesimus returns with this letter (vv. 14-20). Paul says, "The separation caused by Onesimus' absconding has been a blessing; receive him as a brother—more rightly yours than mine; I am sending him, so receive him as though he were me; charge any of his debts to me." Though Philemon already owes Paul everything because Paul brought the gospel to his people he asks Philemon to refresh his heart.

PAUL THE LETTER WRITER (PHILEMON) con't

Like Christ before him, Paul has fully identified with the offended party and the offender, taken the cost of the fault to himself and brought the parties together. Paul is confident in Philemon, or perhaps confident in the Lord for Philemon, that all will happen as he has requested. The fact that this letter has been preserved suggests that it was successful.

Paul hopes to be with them soon and asks if they will prepare for his coming.

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REVELATION 1:1 – 2:29

JOHN MEETS THE LIVING CHRIST

Story Notes

File no. 190

Revelation 1

This book is given to us because the Father gave it to the Son so he could prepare his servants for the future they would face. The Church was occasionally persecuted by Rome before this prophecy was given but far more with the opening of the second century and this prophecy spoke to their situation. With them, we need to understand that the reign of Christ the Lamb remains complete and purposive throughout all the Church's history. A blessing is promised to all who read and heed its words for this is how we will be kept fresh and purposeful in the things of the kingdom.

John asks for grace and peace for us from the eternal God and his Spirit, and from Jesus Christ. His request is potent because of what he says about Jesus Christ: he has told us what is true, he had defeated death, he rules the world, he loves us, has freed us from our sins and given us a dynamic part to play in God's reign over all things. He is returning, and all creation will then know that he is the one they should have listened to. God himself speaks: 'I am the one, the one from whom John's blessing will flow.'

We get some idea of what it means to participate in the kingdom of God by John telling us he is exiled on Patmos Island because he has been a witness to Christ. However, the reign of God and his Christ is not limited by the sufferings of his servants. John is caught up by the Spirit, shown the exalted Christ and given a word for the seven churches. He saw Christ among the churches in all his glory: truly human (son of man), having all authority (long robe), dignity (white hair), wisdom and insight (eyes like a flame), power (bronze feet), authority (voice) and holiness (shining face). The stars in his hand will be messengers to the churches and the sword from his mouth will finally punish the nations (19:15), but the churches should listen to his message now (2:12).

John experienced his human frailty in all of this. He had no spirit to even lift his head before such majesty. But that Majesty set him on his feet, explaining that, with God the Father (1:8), this awesome Son of Man is the first and last, meaning everything in between as well, but lives now as one who has been dead and raised up again, the ruler over, and liberator from death. So, John is freed to write, and, in writing what he sees, he shall be writing what is truly so.

Revelation 2

Christ has a word for each Church. An aspect of his glory appropriate to the need of each Church is mentioned to support the particular message given. Each Church is to hear the Spirit—speaking through the messenger who is in Christ's hand—perhaps an angel who will bring this word, or a pastor or prophet who will bring this word in the Churches. The Lord seeks people who have ears to hear and who, therefore, will go on to conquer.

It is hard to fault the Church at **Ephesus**. Their doctrine, diligence, discipline and perseverance are impeccable. But everything is threatened, because the one thing necessary is waning—love. Some years before, the Ephesians had been told: 'Grace be on all who love Christ with undying love' (Eph. 6:24). It would be impossible to be a Christian and not love—he who loves is born of God (1 John 4:7). We are to live a life of love (Eph. 5:2).

Smyrna is the rich-poor church. Engulfed as they are with persecution and dread of what might come, they need a word from him who shares with the Father being the beginning and the end—i.e. of everything, including death. Part of their suffering may have been covenant people—Jews. The Christians will encounter the raging of the devil, be imprisoned and perhaps killed, but should look forward to the crown of life. The promise to sustain them is preservation from the second death (as in Luke 12:5).

JOHN MEETS THE LIVING CHRIST con't

Persecution has already come to **Pergamum**. Satan has his throne there, perhaps referring to pagan cults centred in the city. The church has remained strong. These enemies of Christ will suffer later from the two edged sword which comes from the mouth of Christ (so 19:15). But the same sword will smite those guilty of Balaam's sin—seducing God's people into false worship and immorality. That is, this will happen if the church does not repent, so they should judge this sin themselves and not come under judgement.

Thyatira Church receives commendation from Christ, but has not dealt with 'Jezebel'. She had established false worship in Israel (see 1 Kings and following). Now, an evil prophetess or falsely prophetic movement has been established at Thyatira and not been addressed by the Church. An awesome judgment will come to establish in the minds of all the churches that Christ is Lord and Judge of his church—with piercing eyes and feet of glimmering bronze. But the Lord knows those who have been true and who have no fascination for these sordid matters and relieves them of further responsibility. They will conquer and reign with Christ.

Christ speaks to his churches in the context of whatever experience they are having, to open the hearts of his people to him in love. He is everything his people need, even in the face of death, and is jealous of and judges false worship. To him be glory and power forever (1:6)!

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REVELATION 4:1 – 6:1 & Chapters 21 & 22

Psalm 145:10; John 1:29

THE BOOK AND THE LAMB / A NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH, NEW CITY

Story Notes

File no. 191

Chapter 4

John was in the Spirit when he was shown Christ among the churches. He is in the Spirit again to see into heaven, or, to be there. In the first vision, Christ tended his Church so that her light burned clearly and God's grace was declared in the world. In this second vision (chapters 4-7), God administers all creation from his throne, through the Lamb, with a view to the same grace reaching all the earth. God deals in an orderly way with rebellion and secures his kingship over all things, first in the church, and now in the world. There is no unattended corner of the universe in which to hide. The action that follows from this, the book of history being opened, results in countless people from all nations, and from many tribulations, coming to this same worship of the Lamb (7:9-17). All of *Revelation* is the story of this throne and its rivals.

'Worship ... is the very heart and life of the creation, and so the battle wages back and forth with men and angels and other creatures for the purity of worship or capitulation to the Prince of evil, who passionately covets such esteem and adoration' (Geoffrey Bingham, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, p. 263).

John's first impression is of majesty (jasper and carnelian are translucent white and brilliant red, perhaps representing God's beauty and judgment). The rainbow surrounding the throne reminds us that God put the rainbow in the earth so that he would see it and remember his covenant with the creation: though the creation had rebelled, he would not destroy what he had made (Gen. 9).

'This rainbow is second in importance only to the throne. It tells us that there is to be no triumph for God's sovereignty at the expense of His mercy and it warns us not to interpret the visions of disaster that follow as though God had forgotten His promise to Noah' (G. B. Caird).

The elders around God's throne may represent God's people, of old and new covenants, though they themselves seem to be celestial. God is not ruling in isolation. The great creatures are closest to God but it is the elders who are on the thrones, and from there, they lead in worship and gather the prayers of the saints. They do not flee from the great thunders and lightning that will have such terrifying impact on the earth (8:5; 11:19; 16:18).

The seven Spirits who spoke to the several churches are before God, like torches, and are the eyes of the Lamb (3:1). They will soon be sent out into the whole world (5:6). All that God does he does by sending his Spirit, so it is vital for John, and ourselves, to be in the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit.

Great creatures, representing the many splendoured creation of God, give continuous honour to him for his holiness and eternity. God's holiness is his own being and nature, and the threefold cry makes the adoration of the creatures absolute. God's 'was' and 'is' and 'is to come' are all before them. They know that everything in the creation, from beginning to end, and including themselves, is from this Almighty God and they give him glory and honour and thanks.

By this adoration, the elders are continually energized to share in the worship. Now we know why they are on thrones: so they can rule with a view to the glory of this holy God by whom all things have been made and by whom they will be brought to their future.

Jesus said that he would be seated at the right hand of the mighty God (Luke 22:69) and the vision continues to show how this is so.

Chapter 5

John has been invited 'up here' by no less than the conqueror of death (4:1 with 1:9, 18). He has seen Christ's lordship among the churches. What of his lordship in the world? While God is

THE BOOK AND THE LAMB / A NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH, NEW CITY con't

on his throne being worshipped by the great creatures and the elders, John sees a sealed scroll containing what will happen next. One who is worthy must be found (cf. Isa. 59:16) and John, like all the waiting church, is distressed at the thought that no-one may be worthy to execute the remaining plan of God.

An elder directs him to the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9-10) or Root of David (Isa. 11:1), and he appears as a just slaughtered Lamb. But now he can see that this Lamb has seven horns (for strength) and seven eyes (God's seven fold Spirit sent out into the earth).

The Lamb's taking of the scroll brings about new worship from the creatures and elders (v. 8), elders whom we now learn have harps ready for worship (15:2-3), and our prayers in their bowls like incense (Ps. 141:2) ready to offer. They also have a new song—which always results from God's action (Ps. 40:3; 33:3). Their new song has to do with the just slaughtered Lamb taking the plan of God for the earth into his hands. He is worthy to do this because, at the price of his life, he rescued humanity from death so they could live before God, gathered peoples from all nations and established them as a royal priesthood in the earth. Now we know that nothing can stand in the way of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9) no matter what happens in the world.

Angels join in the worship of the Lamb. He has honour equal to that given to 'our Lord and God' (4:11; cf. John 20:28), 'glory, honour and power' plus wealth, wisdom, might and blessing. Then, every creature joins in the acknowledgment of both God and the Lamb in one offering of worship. They acknowledge the kingship of God and the kingship of the Lamb (so Phil. 2:9-11) and their authority over all that will happen. God has not been dethroned by sin or death but given all authority to the Lamb to take his inheritance.

The creatures see all creation giving honour and give their assent and the elders prostrate themselves before Father and Son, and, of course, the Spirit who is there as torches before the Father, or, in the eyes of the Son. One can only imagine what John thinks of all this. We heard his weeping, but there is more to come and the action moves on.

21:1—22:5

John is given a glimpse of the final order of things (vv. 1-8), the end of the sufferings of earlier chapters. Then, an angel who had shared in pouring out wrath on the earth, bringing the wrath to an end (15:1), fills out this vision (21:9—22:5). We will survey the section as a whole.

The finale of 'what must soon take place (1:1) is a new heaven and earth, but the key to this new creation is God's glorified people (vv. 11, 23, 26), described in terms of God's City and Christ's Bride (v. 2), and the glory of the nations coming into this City (v. 26).

This Book has begun, and now ends with the expectation of Christ coming (1:7; 22:7, 12, 22). All that comes between assists us as we wait in hope for the glory to come. Much mystery remains, but the glory of the Lord will finally be revealed in his people, and it is this day that must remain clear in our minds. We are not spectators of this scene; rather, we are the spectacle (Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*).

The new (*kainos* not *neos*) or renewed heaven and earth (v. 1) is *new* in that we cannot trust the present one to provide our eternal home (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12), and it is *new* in that there is no crying, death or pain (v. 4). There is no sin either because all who have ignored God—his gospel and his law—are relegated to 'the second death' (v. 8) so that nothing unclean will enter the City of God (v. 27). There is no sea or night here (vv. 1, 23-24).

But it is *renewed* in that it has continuity with the original creation. Our dead bodies are 'sown' in dishonour but raised in glory; our mortal bodies put on immortality; death is swallowed up in life (1 Cor. 15:43, 53-54). The works performed on earth 'follow' us (Rev. 14:13).

THE BOOK AND THE LAMB / A NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH, NEW CITY con't

The repeated 'I saw...' (vv. 1-2) makes us focus on the essential element of the new heavens and earth—the holy city or Bride of the Lamb. The rest of the chapter is spent describing this. All creation will share in the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21) who comprise this City/Bride. Our renewal will signal the renewal of the entire creation.

The Church, 'the Bride, the wife of the Lamb', the 'holy city Jerusalem', comes down from heaven, 'from God, having the glory of God' (vv. 2, 10-11). God has been preparing her for this wedding occasion. What has, in fact, been so, is now revealed in splendour: the church has always 'come down', has been comprised of persons newly created and, as people led by the Spirit, being readied for this day. In fact, the word used for radiance is only used elsewhere for the radiance displayed by the witnessing church on earth (Phil. 2:15).

Further detail of the city continues to demonstrate how closely the present is connected with what will be revealed then. Twelve gates (vv. 12-13, 21), each one a pearl, open in all directions and are named for the tribes of Israel because the people who first heard the word of the Lord have opened their gates to all nations (cf. Luke. 13:28). But an angel prevents anything unclean from entering, only those with their names in the Lamb's book of life.

Otherwise, the jasper wall is impregnable, 65 metres thick (vv. 17-18), and is established on the twelve Apostles (v. 4; cf. Eph. 2:19-22). The people of God are secure in this City of God's people or Christ's Bride. The City itself is a massive cube of gold, 2000 kilometres in every direction (vv. 16-18, 21)! The tabernacle's holy of holies was also a cube, the place where the glory of the Lord dwelt.

The City's temple is God and the Lamb (v. 22). There is nowhere to 'go' to get to God! The City's light and lamp are the glory of God and the Lamb (vv. 22-23). As ever, God is our life and the life is the light of men (John. 1:4). Everything here receives its life from God and the Lamb.

The glory of the nations comes into this city (v. 24). Finally, the only glory of creation will be that which reflects the light of God and the Lamb. But what diversity there will be, as each nation reflects that glory in its unique way!

In remembrance of Eden (vv. 1-2), but now, with no curse (v. 3), the street connecting all the City together is beside the river of the water of life, again, flowing from God and the Lamb, and by the River is the tree of life (perhaps a forest of trees either side of the stream), constantly bearing fruit, whose leaves heal the wounds of all nations.

Finally, the saints, those acknowledged in the Lamb's book of life, truly reign (v. 5), as the Bride of Christ, taken from his side, alongside him, obedient to him, and having his glory. This is the vision given to us so we may wait expectantly, and diligently, knowing that the future is sure.

22:6-21

The great angel who has shown us the Bride (21:9) assures us that all that we have seen or heard in this prophecy 'must soon take place' (v. 6 with 1:1). Jesus himself speaks to affirm that this is true and blesses those who heed the prophecy. John is awed by the immediacy of all this but must still learn to distinguish between angels and God.

The angel, still concerned with the veracity and immediacy of this book urges that it be sealed (for confirmation, or because those who will not understand it will remain ignorant of it). Each person chooses either filthiness or holiness.

Again, Christ himself speaks in confirmation. All this will not be long in coming. Christ himself, together with God his Father, is both the beginning and end. He has taken everything into consideration (cf. 1:17-18) and so can declare the beginning from the end.

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John adds his appeal: Blessed are those who wash their robes and participate in all this; their remains an 'outside', reminding us to turn from all evil.

Jesus tells us again: All this is true; I am the promised Messiah and the 'star' who heralds the coming day.

Then, John speaks for us all, together with the Spirit: 'Come Lord!' And our cry to the world is, 'Come to drink the water of life!'

Nothing must be added or taken from this book. It is all for us and for our good.

Christ is still present and adds his last word, echoed by the Bride/Church.

So, may grace be with us all!

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