

CHAPTER 2 : THE RAPID SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

About this time the Apostles departed on their several missions. Wherever they went they ordained elders and deacons. James, the half-brother of our Lord, remained as Apostle of Jerusalem, while his brothers, Simon and Jude, went into Mesopotamia. Andrew went to Arabia, while his brother Peter ministered to the dispersed Jews. John and Philip departed for Asia Minor, and Thomas and Bartholomew traveled to India. Matthew and Matthias went to Ethiopia, but not till the former had written his Gospel, which several of the Apostles carried with them, and which has been found in possession of the most ancient churches by them converted.

There was constant coming and going in those days throughout the world, so word could travel far and fast. Jews from all quarters went up to keep the Passover and other feasts at Jerusalem, which served as an excellent opportunity to hear the gospel preached by the church in Jerusalem. The Roman empire stretched from Britain as far as Persia and Ethiopia, and people from all parts of it were continually going to Rome and returning, so they could have heard the gospel from the church based in Rome. We must also consider how merchants traveled from country to country on account of their trade; how soldiers were sent into all quarters of the empire and were moved about from one country to another. And from these things we may get some understanding of the way in which the knowledge of the gospel would be spread, when combined with the widespread outreach of the Apostles themselves. Thus it came to pass, that by the conclusion of the Apostolic era something was known of the Christian faith throughout all the Roman empire, and even in countries beyond it; and if in many cases, only a very little was known, still even that was a gain, and served as a preparation for more.

Little is known of the labors of most of the Apostles, as from this time the Acts of the Apostles chiefly dwell on the history of the Apostle Paul. But it seems certain that everywhere they began by preaching to the dispersed Jews. When the Jews would reject the offer of salvation, they turned to the heathen, by whom in general it was far more readily received. The Romans, heeding this world's greatness more than any spiritual matter, were not inclined to interfere with any one's religion, and only fancied the church a sect of the Jews. They usually gave the Apostles their protection if the Jews raged against them; and their ships, their roads, and the universality of their dominion, made the spread of the gospel much more easy, so that they were made to prepare the way of the Lord, even while seeking only their own grandeur.

It was about this time that the Emperor Claudius came to Britain, and his generals won all the southern part of the island, rooting out the cruel worship of the Druids in their groves of oak, and circles of huge stones. He died in the year 55, and was succeeded by his step-son, Nero, a half-mad tyrant, who used to show off like a gladiator; racing in a chariot before all the Romans at the games, collecting them all to listen to his verses, and putting those to death who showed their weariness. He was so jealous and afraid of plots on his life, that he killed almost all his relations, even his mother, for fear they should conspire against him; and all the richer and nobler Romans lived in terror under him, though the

common people liked him for being open-handed, and amusing them with the cruel gladiator shows.

After Saul's marvelous call from Heaven, he spent three years in solitude in Arabia, before entering on his work. Then returning to Damascus, he began to set forth the gospel. The Jews were so angry at his change, that they stirred up the soldiers of the Arabian king, Aretas, and he only escaped them by being let down over the wall in a basket. Coming to Jerusalem, the gentle Levite, Barnabas, was the first to welcome him, and present him to the company of the Apostles; but he spent some years in retirement at his home at Tarsus, before Barnabas summoned him to come and aid in his preaching at Antioch. There the Word was heartily received, and the precious title of Christians was first bestowed upon the disciples. At Antioch too, on the occasion of a famine in Judea, the first collection of alms for brethren at a distance was made.

At Antioch, a heavenly revelation signified that Paul and Barnabas were to be set apart for a special mission; and after prayer and consecration they set out on their mission, accompanied by the nephew of Barnabas, John, surnamed Mark. Barnabas had once had great possessions in the isle of Cyprus, and thither they first repaired, preaching in all the chief places. Then they went into Asia Minor, where they showed such power from on high, that the rude people of Lycaonia fancied them gods in the likeness of men. The Lycaonians had well-nigh done sacrifice to them, though afterwards the spiteful Jews led the same men to draw Paul out of the city, stone him, and leave him for dead. In such perils, Mark's heart failed him, and he departed from them.

Returning to Antioch, they found the church in doubt whether the Christians of Greek birth were bound to obey the rites of the Jewish Law. To discuss and settle this issue with the church at large, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, after fourteen years' absence, taking with them a Greek, named Titus. In Jerusalem was held the First General Council of the church, a meeting of her Apostles and elders, in the full certainty that the Divine grace would inspire a right judgment, according to the promise that Christ would be with those who should meet in His Name. It was decided that the whole object of these rites had been fulfilled, therefore that they were among the old things that had passed away; and that no such rule need be imposed on the Gentiles, save that given to Noah ere the parting of the nations. It was agreed that Paul should go especially to the Gentiles, and Peter and John to the scattered Jews, while James remained at Jerusalem. Two Jewish Christians, Silas and Barsabas, went back with the two Apostles, to notify the resolution to the church at Antioch, and Peter shortly followed them. But there continued to be a great tendency among the Christians of Jewish blood to avoid their Gentile brethren, and Peter was drawn in to do the same, so that Paul, always more steadfast, was forced to rebuke him.

Paul and Barnabas intended to set out on a second journey, and Barnabas wished again to take his now repentant nephew, but Paul would not trust him a second time. After a dispute on the subject, Barnabas left Paul, and took Mark to Cyprus, where it is believed that Barnabas, that true "Son of Consolation", was at length martyred. Paul, taking Silas as his companion, went over the former ground in Asia Minor, and at Iconium ordained a

disciple, named Timothy, whose father was a Greek, but whose Jewish mother and grandmother had faithfully bred him up in the knowledge of the scriptures. A Greek physician, named Luke, likewise at this time joined him. With these faithful companions, he obeyed a call sent him in a dream, and crossed over into Macedon, where he gained many souls at Philippi and Thessalonica. But the Jews there stirred up such persecution, that he was forced to go southward into Greece.

Athens was no longer a powerful city, but it served as a sort of college for all the youths of the Roman Empire who wished to be highly educated; and it was full of philosophers, who spent their time in the porticos and groves, arguing on questions of their own—such as whether, this life being all of which they were sure, it was best to live well or to live in pleasure. The Stoics were the philosophers who upheld the love of virtue and honor; the Epicureans said that it was of no use to vex themselves in this life, but that they might as well enjoy themselves while they had time. Paul was well learned in all these questions, and set forth to the Athenian students, in glorious words, that the truth was come for which they had so long yearned, and declared to them the Unknown God Whom they already worshipped in ignorance. Some few believed, but the others were too fond of their own empty reasonings, and Athens long continued the stronghold of heathenism.

He had better success at Corinth, where he spent eighteen months, working at his trade as a tent-maker, and whence he wrote his two Epistles to his Thessalonian converts, about the time that Luke was writing his Gospel. The Jews hunted them away at last; after a short stay at Jerusalem, they went back to Asia Minor, and passed three years at Ephesus, whence were written the Epistle to the Galatians, against the Jewish practices, and the First to the Corinthians, on some disorders in their church.

Ephesus was the chief city in Asia Minor, and contained an image of the Greek goddess of the moon, Diana, placed in a temple so beautiful, that it was esteemed one of the seven wonders of the world, and thither came a great concourse of worshippers. There was a silversmith who made great gain by selling small models of her temple; and he, growing afraid that his trade would be ruined if idols were deserted, stirred up the mechanics to such a frenzy of rage, that for two hours they shouted, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" and they would have torn Paul to pieces, had they not been with much difficulty appeased. He was obliged to leave the city, and go to Macedonia, whence he again wrote to the Corinthians, to console them in their repentance, and he also wrote to the church at Rome, which he had never yet seen.

After visiting the Greek churches, a Divine summons called him back to keep the feast of Pentecost at Jerusalem, though well knowing that bonds and imprisonment awaited him there. On his way he had a most touching meeting at Miletus, with the elders of Ephesus, who sorrowed grievously that they should see his face no more. His beloved Timothy was left with them as a bishop.

At Jerusalem, a terrible tumult arose against him for having, as the Jews fancied, brought Greeks into the Temple, and he was only rescued by the Roman garrison, who treated him well on finding that he was a citizen. Then the Jews laid a plot to murder him, and to

prevent this he was sent to the seat of government at Caesarea, where he was brought before the procurator, Felix, and his wife, Drusilla, a daughter of Herod Agrippa. His words made Felix tremble, but the time-server put them aside, and neither released him nor sent him to Rome for judgment, but on going out of office left him in prison. Festus, the new procurator, could not understand his case, and asked the young Agrippa and his sister Bernice, to help him to find out under what accusation to send him to Rome. Again Paul's speech struck his hearers with awe, and Agrippa declared himself almost persuaded to be a Christian, but he loved too well the favor of the Jews and Romans, and his tetrarchy of Trachonitis, to become one of the despised sect.

The noble captive would have been set free, but that he had sent his appeal to Rome, and therefore could only be tried there. On his way came his shipwreck at Malta, but the life of his shipmates was granted to him.

The Emperor Nero was so much more disposed to amusement than business, that Paul's cause was not heard, but he lived in his own hired house, under charge of a soldier seeing the Christians freely, and writing three beautiful epistles, full of hope and encouragement, to his children at Ephesus, Colosse, and Philippi, also a friendly intercession for a runaway slave to Philemon, and letters of pastoral counsel to Timothy at Ephesus, and to Titus, who was a bishop of Crete. Apparently at this time the British king Caradog and his family learned of the gospel during their time in Rome, and brought it to Britain. It is thought that the Epistle to the Hebrews, which shows how the Old Covenant points throughout to the New, must be also of this date; but we have no longer the inspired pen of Luke to tell of Paul's history.

We find from the Epistles that the Apostle Paul afterwards got his liberty, and returned into the East. There is reason to believe that he also visited Spain, as he had spoken of doing in his Epistle to the Romans. He was at last imprisoned again at Rome. Peter had likewise come to Rome. He had met with Mark, and taken him as his companion, and, as it is believed, assisted in composing his Gospel. Peter likewise wrote two epistles to the Jews dispersed abroad. But dark times were coming on the church. James, who left an epistle, was, in his old age, slain by the Jews, who cast him from the top of the Temple, and then beat out his brains. The Emperor Nero had also broken out in sudden rage, as we will consider in the next chapter. And it would seem Peter and Paul were put to death in Rome in 68 AD.

Timothy went back to his post at Ephesus, and Mark founded a church at Alexandria, where, many years later, he was martyred by being dragged to death through the streets.

Thus the Apostles had gone forth "into all the world," as their Master had directed them, to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). As we read in Revelation 6:2, "And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer." The word of God was a sharp two-edged sword defeating the enemies of Christ, even though the bearers of that sword were a poor, oppressed lot.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

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Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.