

A Patristic Commentary

Acts of the Apostles

PART I

(CHAPTERS 1 To 12)

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PREFACE THE HIDDEN TREASURE

St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, presented a series of lectures on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, during the second or the third year of his ordainment. He started saying,

"I have taken this narrative for my subject, that I may draw to it such as do not know it, and not let such a treasure as this remain hidden out of sight. For indeed it may profit us no less than even the Gospels; so replete is it with Christian wisdom and sound doctrine, especially in what is said concerning the Holy Ghost. Then let us not hastily pass by it, but examine it closely. Thus, the predictions which in the Gospels Christ utters, here we may see these actually come to pass; and note in the very facts the bright evidence of Truth which shines in them, and the mighty change which is taking place in the disciples now that the Spirit has come upon them" ¹.

If the gospels draw our hearts in longing, to encounter the crucified Christ - the spiritual King (Matthew), the Minister to humanity (Mark), its Friend (Luke), and the Only-begotten Son, who alone can tell us about God the Father, and reveal the divine secrets (John). *The Book of the Acts of the Apostles* introduced to us His Holy Spirit, who led humanity in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. We see Him kindling the hearts and drawing them to the Savior. He works in the apostles, as well as in the nations, to shape the Church of Christ, that carries the icon of its heavenly Groom, and to prepare it for the eternal wedding.

Our good God is capable of working with His fiery Spirit, to let the Book of Acts of the Apostles remain open all the time, for the whole earth, to become for God and His Christ, and for everyone to enjoy spacious hearts that would never stop testifying to the gospel of salvation, with the spirit of giving love. Then, the Book would be consummated by the coming of the Lord Christ on the clouds, to bring His Church into His eternal glory.

May the Holy Spirit of God open up the treasure of this Book, to make every soul rich with the heavenly riches, and flood over all around it, for everyone to carry the exalted heavenly features.

¹ *Commentary on the Acts. Homily 1.*

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF Acts of the Apostles

This Book presents the story of the Church at the beginning of its setting forth, after the ascension of the Lord Christ, and the dwelling of His Holy Spirit, along thirty years. St. Luke the Evangelist, inspired by the Holy Spirit, presented it to reveal to us the Church in the apostolic era: The secret of its birth, its growth, its worship, its testimony to the Lord Christ, and its strength through the work of the Holy Spirit; And to reveal to us the realization of the Lord's promise to His disciples: **"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"** (Matt. 28.20); **"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"** (Acts 1.8).

The Book of Acts of the Apostles is the book of the Church of Christ in the era of the apostles that received His gospel, and practiced it practically in her daily life, as well as in worship and preaching.

It is the gospel of the Holy Spirit who granted the Church the grace of existence on the day of Pentecost, and received the Church of Christ to lead her, and to draw to her the souls to enjoy the Savior, granting her the persistent sanctity of life.

It is the book by which the Church opens itself to the world, to minister to it and to wash its feet.

It is the book of the church, poor and rich. She becomes poor with her Groom, and becomes rich with Him.

It is the book of inner strength that would never weaken or get old.

It is the book of the Holy Church who would never stand evil, yet she is compassionate to the sinners.

THE PRACTICAL GOSPEL

It starts by the words of the Evangelist St. Luke: **"The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach"** (Acts 1.1): As though the four gospels are the 'former account', pertaining to the works and teachings of the Lord; whereas, this book is a consummation of that account. What the Lord began, as He was present in flesh on our land, He continues to do by His Holy Spirit, and His secret presence in the middle of His Church. This book reveals an important evangelic fact: that the Lord Christ, ascending to heaven, is alive, present, working, and speaking in His Church, and will continue to be, until the day of His ultimate appearance, when His Church will be consummated, and will enjoy the fellowship of His glory. The Book of acts is a living gospel that testifies to the presence of Christ, working and speaking in His Church, through her, and to her account.

- ❖ "And then, besides, there are doctrines to be found here, which we could not have known so surely as we now do, if this Book had not existed, but the very crowning point of our salvation would be hidden, alike for practice of life and for doctrine"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom).

THE BOOK OF ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

This book presents the acts of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, promised by the Lord to His disciples. We see Him behind the history of the Church, being the true Leader, the Guide, and the Mentor, capable of drawing the souls, to experience the work of salvation of the Lord Christ. He shines with His light over the Church, to fill it, amid the afflictions, with a divine, hidden, and attractive splendor, to kindle the hearts with the divine fire of love. It is the divine river that flows from heaven, to set on earth the city of God, a fruitful divine paradise, in place of the barren, spiritually dry wilderness.

- ❖ The gospels are the history of what the Lord Christ has done and said; whereas, the book of acts is an account of what the other Comforter has done and said. Yet, this Spirit has equally done many things that came in the other gospels; And Christ is still working as well in the book of acts, in mankind, as He did in the gospels. There, the Spirit has worked in the temple; while now, He is working through the apostles. There, He worked, as He came into the womb of the Virgin, as a temple; and now, He is working in the souls of the apostles. There, He came in the form of a dove; while here, he comes in the form of fire².

(St. John Chrysostom).

THE BOOK OF THE REJOICING CHURCH OF THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST

This book reveals the nature of the Church of the crucified Christ, since its beginning, having been formed by the Holy Spirit, amid the affliction and bemoaning, to bear the fellowship of passion and crucifixion, together with her suffering Groom. Yet His presence in her midst transforms the bemoaning into a glorified joy, and the affliction into heavenly comfort, to let her live praising God amid the furnace of persecution.

- ❖ **It is fitting for the Christian to become ‘Alleluia’, from head to toe.**

- ❖ Let us rejoice and give thanks; not because we became Christians, but because

We became Christ. Do you realize that? Do you comprehend the magnitude of that great grace, granted to us by God? Let us then stand in awe and joy; we have become Christ!

- ❖ **“He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seeds for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Ps. 126.6).**

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 1

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 1

❖ This psalm, that addresses the spirit of those who persist on going forth on their spiritual walk to God, is very convenient to help us during the time of grief and depression. This world is undoubtedly the valley of tears, where man sows while weeping. It supports you to go forth in your faith.

Anyhow, explaining what this book means by the seeds that we sow now, they are **“the good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”** and has planned for us to practice by the power of His Spirit, amid the troubles of this disturbed life (Eph. 2.10).

Whoever is taught to practice the work of God in this world- the valley of tears and troubles - will rejoice like the diligent farmer who sows the seeds even during the death of winter. Can the cold wind and the severe weather hinder them from working? Certainly no!

That is how it is fit for us to look at the troubles of this world: Distractions will be put along our way by the evil one, in order to make us divert from the good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

The Psalmist says, **“He who continually goes forth weeping.”** Although each of us may actually find a reason for weeping; yet we should continue to go forth, practicing the good works of God that we should walk on.

How miserable we could be, if we are called to work diligently, only to weep without looking forward to some fruition of our work! How miserable we could be, if we find no one to wipe out our tears! But we know that the Holy Spirit works, to make us go forth on sowing amid our tears, as the Spirit promises us through the Psalmist that we shall come back amazed by joy. We shall bear the fruition of our labor, as an offering to Him¹.

(St. Augustine)

THE POSITION OF THIS BOOK IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Until the end of the first century and the beginning of the second one, this book was considered as a continuation of the gospel according to St. Luke, as the beginning of this book came in harmony with the end of that gospel. Yet, after the gospel of St. John was written; the Church brought the four gospels together; and this book came to form the connecting link that binds the four gospels and the epistles of the apostles. As the epistles reveal the writings of the apostles, this book came to reveal their acts by the Holy Spirit of God, or the works of Christ in them, by them, and to their account. We could never have enjoyed the comprehension of those epistles as we should have; unless they are read through the background of this book. This book helps as well, in a living way, to study the bond between the teachings of the Lord Christ, and those of the apostles².

In some scripts, this book used to follow the epistles of the apostle St. Paul, since it presents the events pertaining to the ministry of St. Paul mentioned in his epistles³.

¹ *Homilies Ps. 2*

² *Donald Guthrie. New Testament Introduction, 1975. P.136*

³ *CF. Adam Clarke. The Acts, Preface.*

The following is a comparison between this book and the holy gospels:

1- While the gospels present to us the Lord Christ, being the Saving Messiah; the book of acts reveals that the Messiah is present in His Church who anticipates His coming.

2- While the gospels present to us what the Lord Christ began to do for our sake; the book of acts proclaims that He is still, with His Holy Spirit, present in His Church.

3- While the holy gospels tell about the Savior, crucified and resurrected from the dead; the book of acts presents Him ascending to heaven -the glorified Lord, and the Leader of the Church.

4- While in the holy gospels we hear the teachings of the Lord Christ, that bring us to salvation by His blood; the book of acts lets us come in touch with His salvation work in His holy Church, to draw the nations to glory¹.

THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

The identity of the author is not mentioned in the book, but the tradition of the church confirms that its author is the Evangelist St. Luke. This view is supported by several testimonials within and outside the book.

TESTIMONIALS WITHIN THE BOOK

1- The author proclaims that he is the companion of the apostle Paul in his trips up to the last one to Rome (Acts 16.10-40, 20.5-6, 21.1-8, 27.1-28.16).

2- It is similar to the gospel according to St. Luke, as far as the person to whom it is addressed (Luke 1.1-4; Acts 1.1) is concerned.

Theophilus: he is most probably a prominent personality from Alexandria. The two Books are also similar in language and style.

3- The unity of thought between the two books, the following examples for which can be mentioned:

- ❖ They share the principal goals: Caring for the historical and the geographical aspects; as well as confirming the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Christ (Luke); and the apostles (the Book of Acts).
- ❖ Interest in the salvation of the whole world (Luke 2.32; Acts 10.34).
- ❖ Interest in the ministry to women (Luke 7.37-38; Acts 9.36).
- ❖ Interest in prayer (Luke 11.13; Acts 1.24).
- ❖ Whereas the word 'Grace' was mentioned 9 times in the gospel according to Luke, and 7 times in the Book of Acts; it was not mentioned in the two gospels according to Matthew or Mark.

¹Henrietta Mears. *What the Bible is All About*. 1997. P. 439-440.

- ❖ Interest in the forgiveness of sins (Luke 38.2; Acts 5.31).
- ❖ Both books are free of any tendency of prejudice toward foreign governments (Luke 20.20-26; Acts 16.36-39).
- ❖ The use of precise medical terms, beside an interest in caring for the sick and the miracles of healing, as St. Luke has been a physician.

TESTIMONIALS OUTSIDE THE BOOK

1- An Anti-Marcionite document dating back to the year 160 AD, constituting an introduction to the gospel according to St. Luke, states that St. Luke was the author of the Book of Acts.

2- **The Moratorian law of the holy books** (between the years 170 and 200 AD) puts *the Book of Acts of the Apostles* among the canonical books (As St. Paul was the only apostle according to Marcion).

3- **St. Irenaeus** states that St. Luke “Paul’s companion” is the author of both his Gospel and the Book of Acts¹.

4- According to **St. Clement of Alexandria** (about 190 A. D.), Luke, in the Book of Acts, testifies that Paul said to the men of Athens, **“I perceive that in all things you are very religious”** (Acts 17.22)².

5- Also according to St. Clement of Alexandria, it is known that Luke is the author of the Book of Acts³.

6- According to the scholar Tertullian (about the year 200 A.D.), in his speech about the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the apostles in the upper room, while they were praying, that this fact came in the **‘record of Luke’⁴**, namely, in the Book of Acts.

7- According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Luke, a citizen of Antioch and a physician by profession, took part with Paul and the rest of the apostles, yet in a lesser way; and left for us examples of the healing of souls he saved in two inspired books: his Gospel, and the Book of Acts⁵.

8- Several fathers, since the first century, quoted from this book. Fr. Paul Feghali dedicated a whole chapter to those quotations from the Book of Acts⁶, like those by St. Clement of Rome, the epistle of Barnabas⁷, Didache⁸, the shepherd by Hermas⁹, St. Ignatius’ Epistle to the Magnesians, St. Polycarp Bishop of Smyrnam, the martyrdom of Polycarp, the Epistle to Diognetus, the document of the

¹ *Adv. Haer. 3.1.14*

² *Stromata 5.12*

³ *PG 9: 732.*

⁴ *De Jejuniis 10 PL 2: 966.*

⁵ *Eusebius: H. E. 3: 4.*

⁶ راجع الخوري بولس الغفالي: أعمال الرسل، مداخل، تأملات، أبحاث، بيروت 1994م، الفصل الثالث "أقدم الشهادات الكنسية عن سفر الأعمال".

⁷ *Barnabas 19:8.*

⁸ *Didache, 4: 8.*

⁹ *The Shepherd, vision 4: 2: 4.*

Constitutions of the twelve Patriarchs, Justin martyr¹, the works of Paul (about the year 160 A.D.), a letter from South Ghal in the year 177 A.D., that came in Eusebius².

THE DIFFERENT NAMES OF THE BOOK

This book had several names of which we mention the following³:

- 1- The Book of Acts, as it came in 'Gestae Res', and in the copy of 'Codex Bezae'.
- 2- The Book of the holy Apostles; as it came in the Alexandrian copy 'Codex Alexandrinus', and other copies, as well as in the writings of several Greek and Latin fathers.
- 3- 'The fifth gospel' by some; and 'The gospel of The Holy Spirit' by Oecumenius.
- 4- 'The Book' and 'The proof of Resurrection' by St. John Chrysostom.

The DATE OF ITS WRITING

Some believe that this book was written in Alexandria; whereas, the majority of scholars believe that it was written in Rome, while the apostle Paul was in prison, after St. Luke arrived to it together with St. Paul (Acts 28:16)⁴.

Many scholars believe that the Book of Acts was written about the year 63 A.D., when horrible acts of persecution were waged against the Christians, a little while after which, St. Luke might have been martyred. As Rome was burnt, and the Christians faced slaying and burning, the appearance of the gospel according to St. Luke, and the Book of Acts (as one book), was delayed, and did not happen until the seventy-year war came to an end (burning the temple by Titus), when the situation became better, and the Church started to regain some freedom.

Some scholars justify the opinion that the book was written before the year 63 A.D. as follows⁵:

1- St. Luke appears more interested in Jerusalem than the Evangelists Matthew and Mark. He was called the 'travels narrator' (Luke 9:51, 16:15), having concentrated on the Lord Jesus' moves toward Jerusalem. His interest in the holy city is demonstrated in his narration of the events concerning the resurrection, concentrating on Jerusalem. If he has written the book after the events of the devastation of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D., he would have mentioned that particular episode.

2- St. Luke recorded the troubles that faced the early Church, so he would not have disregarded the persecution by Nero in the year 64 A.D., when a huge number of Christians were martyred, including the two saints: Peter and Paul. This book must have been written before the devastating riot by Nero, Having mentioned the episodes of the martyrdom of both James, son of Zebedee, and of Stephen, why should he disregard those of St. Peter and St. Paul?

¹ *Apology 1: 50; 1: 1: 10.*

² *Eusebius: H. E. 5: 1.*

³ *CF. Adam Clerke. Acts, Preface.*

⁴ *CF. Adam Clerke. Acts, Preface.*

⁵ *Guthrie. P.340 etc.*

3- The book presents the nature of Christian Theology in a primitive way, as to be expected in the time of the apostles. The Theological language reveals to a certain extent the time of its writing. For example, calling the Christians ‘disciples’; and referring to ‘Sunday’ as the first day of the week; beside the fact that the description of several incidents reveal that the author was an eye witness, having a close relationship with the apostles, and one who lived in the atmosphere of the Church in the era of the apostles.

4- The tendency of the State toward the Church: In this book it is to be noticed that the Roman rulers and leaders did not persecute the Church; And in the few incidents it happened, it was provoked by the Jews. In some situations, the rulers even took the side of certain apostles, as that of St. Paul for example, whose life they saved from the plots planned by the Jews to kill him. That tendency was prevailing before the persecution of the Church by Nero in the year 64 A.D.

5- The Book of Acts did not mention the epistles of St. Paul and of other apostles; therefore, it must have been written before all those epistles.

THE GOAL OF THE BOOK

1- The Evangelist gave us the goal of his gospel, which is an account of what Jesus has done and preached until the day of His ascension (Luke 1.1-4). Then, the Book of Acts carried the same goal, from the time of His ascension, all along the period of about thirty years, to cover the work of the Lord Christ through His Church following His ascension, as a record of the works of Christ, by His Holy Spirit in His Church who testifies to Him, being the One working in her and who sent her His Holy Spirit.

❖ “The Acts of the Apostles seem to relate a mere unvarnished narrative descriptive of the infancy of the newly born church; but when once we realize that their author is Luke the physician whose praise is in the gospel, we shall see that all his words are medicine for the sick soul”¹.

2- **The realization of the divine promise concerning the spreading of Christianity in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth** (Acts 1.8): opening the gate of faith before all nations. This is counted by the Lord as the miracle of miracles, done by the Lord Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, through His disciples and apostles. The main factor in spreading the faith is the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, who granted the disciples the gift of talking in tongues, to draw the Gentiles, and to shut down the mouths of the fanatic Jews, beside supporting the disciples with the capability of doing miracles and wonders in the name of Jesus Christ, and guiding them and drawing the souls to the word.

For a long time, it was not easy for the Jews to accept the call to the Gentiles to faith, especially, if they did enter into it without converting them first to Judaism. That is what we feel in some of the writings and debates of the fathers with the Jews; as for example, those by **the scholar Tertullian**², who

¹ St. Jerome. *Letter to Paulinus of Nola*. 53.9

² Tertullian. *An Answer to the Jews*.

quoted the prophecies of the Old Testament about receiving the Gentiles, like what came in the Psalm: **“You are my Son; Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your Inheritance”** (Ps. 2.7-8); and, **“Their line has gone out through all the earth; and their words to the end of the world”** (Ps. 19.4).

Moreover, the heavenly hosts have taken part in the work; the angelic ministry appears mightily, to the account of the spreading of the kingdom of God through the Church. The Lord proclaimed to the disciples that they would be brought before governors and kings, and would be tried before Synagogues, for His sake (Matt. 10.18); yet, that did not hinder the preaching in the whole world (Matt. 24.14).

3- It is a book of history and theology that brings to us the theological thinking through historical events, simply proclaiming that the Lord Christ is the Center of history, and that the history of salvation is an integral part of the general history.

Although this book recorded for us the works of certain apostles, like Peter, John, Paul, and others; Yet, it concentrated on the work of the Holy Spirit in them, as a Leader and Organizer of the life of the early Church, and His work to spread the preaching to the end of the world. That is why, once St. Paul arrived to Rome and testified to the Lord Christ in the capital of the Roman Empire that ruled the world, the book came to an end, with no reference to the martyrdom of St. Paul in the days of Nero. The goal of the book was that the preaching of salvation has gallantly reached even to the palace of the Roman Emperor.

This book reveals the continuity of God’s goal by history. Even if the events that took place by Jesus Christ the Savior of the world have entered history as historical events, that exalted divine work remains as **“being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God”** (Acts 2.23). So also are the events of preaching by the apostles, written in the Book of Acts, Although they are historical and temporal events, they testify to the continuation of the execution of God’s plan in the world, until the whole Church of Christ is realized, to be worthy of the eternal inheritance and the fellowship of glory.

Its events are realization of prophecies that came in the Old Testaments, realized by the Holy Spirit Himself along the ages, up to the day of the ultimate coming of the Lord.

4- The Gospel of the Spirit: As this book often refers to the Holy Spirit, it is apparent that its goal is not to tell about the troubles that the Church faced at the beginning of her setting forth, but to confirm that God by His Holy Spirit is the guide of every movement in her history. The growth of the Church was not realized through the personal efforts of the apostles, and the troubles they encountered; as, according to the human thought it was impossible for the world to accept the faith. But it is the fruit of the move of God Himself, the Lover of mankind, who works in the life of the apostles, as well as of the people. The Holy Spirit grants the Shepherds the strength to preach, and the talents to shepherd. He is the gift of God to His children in Baptism, granting them spiritual wisdom, and a word in the time of affliction (6.10). His talents are not acquired by money, namely, by Simonism (Acts 9). The power of

the Holy Spirit is apparent in confronting the opponent Jews and giving the apostles power to stand before the rulers and kings. He is the stronghold surrounding the Church, and the secret of her strength and glory. And as it came in the book of Zechariah, **“For I, says the Lord, will be a wall of fire all around her, and I will be the glory in her midst”** (2.5).

5- A defense for the apostleship of St. Paul, the apostle for the Gentiles: His personality has been subjected to harsh criticism. He was accused of being an opponent to Moses “the Law”, and his apostleship was even denied by some. It is a defense document that harmonizes between the thoughts of Peter and Paul: between the wish to gain the Gentiles, and the commitment to the law.

The two apostles were similar¹: both of them healed the handicaps (Acts 3, 14), the sick (Acts 5, 18), were counted as sorcerers (Acts 8, 13), raised someone from the dead (Acts 9, 20), got out of prison through miracles (Acts 12, 16), and went for three preaching trips. This similarity between both personalities has been magnificently and excitingly introduced, to confirm that St. Paul was an apostle on an equal level to St. Peter. Moreover, the book demonstrates certain situations of St. Peter, ministering to the Gentiles, and of St. Paul, keen on keeping the law (Acts 16, 18).

6- A theological and didactic document: It includes 18 essays or speeches, constituting 25 % of the book, introducing in most of them a living portrait of the teachings and Theological thought of the early Church. We can say that the Book of Acts of the Apostles has introduced the seeds of the Christian creed, especially that of the salvation work of God, and recognizing God the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and their work in the life of the Church, as well as in the life of every believer, as a living member in the Church. Yet, we can not say that what came in the book is the complete program of all the teachings of the Church. Despite the harmony between what came in the book and what came in the epistles of the apostles, the epistles introduced in some detail the dogmas, the Christian teachings, and the behavior fitting for the believer, in his personal life, in his home, in the Church, and in the society in which he/she lives.

7- A guide for the Church: This book presents the main lines for the Church of the Lord Christ, as a Guide for her along the generations, in order to grow with no diversion, in the midst of affliction.

8- The Evangelist St. Luke was not preoccupied by writing a record of the history of the early Church, or parading a history of the apostles and their glorious works; but his goal was a preaching one. The book is a preaching work that proclaims salvation for everyone, wherever his location is, and whatever his circumstances may be. The Lord Christ Himself presents by His Holy Spirit the salvation for all with no racial discrimination. He presents His gospel to the Jew, as well as to the Greek or Roman... to the man, as well as to the woman; ... to the rulers, governors, and leaders, as well as to the mob; ... to the rich, as well as to the poor.

¹ Donald Guthrie. P.339.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

- 1- A historical accuracy, together with some detailed living narrations.
- 2- A high literary Greek eloquence.
- 3- An objective book that introduces the exalted work of God, through actual events, not disregarding the human weakness, even among the leaderships of the Church (Acts 15.39).
- 4- The heart and soul of this book is **“You shall be witnesses to Me”**. The word “witness” or “testify” came more than 30 times. What the Church testifies is that, by His name alone, salvation will be realized to the world (Acts 4.21). This testimony should come from the heart, as **“Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks”** (Matt. 12.34). Thus, it was not possible to realize this testimony without the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Church, for the believer to carry Him in his heart, and to enjoy what He tells him about the Lord Christ, through His new risen life. The true witness is the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the heart, and who works in, and by it. The Spirit likewise, works in the hearts of the listeners, to draw them, not to the speaking believer, but to God the Savior, dwelling in him.
- 5- This book is the “Book of Power”: **“You shall receive power”** (Acts 1.8) that will challenge the forces of darkness, the corruption of the world, and the evil plans, to proclaim the light in the life of the believers.

PREACHING IN THE WORLD

In the gospel of John, the Lord Christ promises, **“He who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also, and greater works than these he will do”** (John 12.14). The secret of their greatness is that they are done in His name after His ascension, realizing the goal of His coming. The amazing spreading of preaching among the Gentiles did not occur during the ministry of the Lord on earth. The book of acts proclaimed the realization of this divine promise, not as a history recorded by the Evangelist St. Luke, through an inspiration by the Holy Spirit, but as a living setting forth, to open the gate of hope before the Church to work along the generations, leaning upon that promise, until the earth and its fullness become for the Lord and His Christ.

- ❖ "Now all this, how it came to pass exactly as it was said, may be seen in this Book, and more besides, which He told them while yet with them. Here again you will see the Apostles themselves, speeding their way as on wings over land and sea; and those same men, once so timorous and void of understanding, on the sudden become quite other than they were; men despising wealth, and raised above glory and passion and concupiscence, and in short all such affections: moreover, what unanimity there is among them now; nowhere any envying as there was before, nor any of the old hankering after the preeminence, but all virtue brought in them to its last finish, and shining through

all, with surpassing luster, that charity, concerning which the Lord had given so many charges saying, **“By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13.35) ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

PENTECOSTING ALL THE AGES

In every Liturgy of the Catechumens on every Sunday, or on any day of the week, the Church is committed to read a chapter of the Book of Acts of the Apostles “the Praxis”, not just to remind us of the setting forth of the Church on the day of the Pentecost, and of establishing the early congregations of the Church, of their thought and life in the Lord; but because it represents a practical portrait of the early Church, that reveals the concepts of the Church in the events of the Pentecost in order to practice the Pentecost along all the ages.

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE TRUST OF PREACHING²

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles reveals the joyful trust of preaching that was received by the apostles, and committed to them, together with the bishops, the priests, the deacons, and even to the people, who find inner pleasure and exalted joy to hand this trust over, amid the affliction of the enemy, and his persecution against the Name and Church of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Church feels that her foremost mission is to provoke the nations to enjoy the joy of the salvation of God, so that they, in turn would become witnesses to Him, until the preaching reach the end of the earth. This joyful commitment is realized by the Church, on the level of the holy congregations, as well as of every one of its members personally.

JESUS CHRIST IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

1- The Name of Jesus Christ

St. Basil the Great says that the name ‘Jesus Christ’ is the summary of the whole faith. It is a recognition of Him as the Son to God the Father, and that He is anointed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the name embraces the Father and the Holy Spirit, and proclaims the Deity of the Lord. It embraces in it the names of the three Persons of the Trinity.

❖ “As then the point on which Christ himself most insisted was, to have it known that He was come from the Father, so is it this writer's principal object to declare, that Christ was risen from the dead, and was received up into Heaven, and that He went to God, and came from God”³.

2- Jesus Christ is present in His Church

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 1.*

² *Biblical Studies (10) Priest Paulus El-Ghafali. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost of all Ages. Beirut, 1995.*

³ St. John Chrysostom. *Hom. Acts. Hom. 1.*

The Book of Acts began by the ascension of the Lord Christ to heaven, and the disciples standing in awe before that scene, having been unable to cross over together with Him, with their bodies, to where He ascended. Two glorified angels appeared to them to give them the good news that, as He ascended from the east to carry their hearts to His heavens, He will also come to carry them, together with all the believers of the Old and New Testaments to the bosom of God the Father, to share with the Groom His eternal glory. And the Book ended with the apostle Paul, the captive in Rome, testifying in the capital of the Roman Empire to Jesus Christ the Savior of the world. In between the first and the last chapter, the leader of the procession of the Church on earth is the Holy Spirit, who proclaims the presence of Christ in the Church that partakes of His passion, and experiences the down payment of His glory. It is as though the Lord, who ascended to heaven in flesh, is present in His Church that consummates His passion, until the whole world enjoys salvation through the preaching of the Church of her Groom, and her acceptance of the persecution with the pleasure of heart.

3- Jesus, the Lord, and the Christ

The goal of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit is the enjoyment of the work of the Holy Trinity. After His dwelling, St. Peter proclaims that God has proved by miracles and wonders; that Jesus who was executed by the Jews is the Christ about whom David prophesied that He is risen from the dead, and sitting at the right hand of His glory in heavens (Acts 2.22-35). He concluded his sermon saying, **“God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ”** (Acts 2.36).

Therefore, the Holy Spirit confirms that crucifying Christ on a tree was not out of divine wrath on him, but a proclamation of His Deity in that He abolishes death from us, and reigns on the hearts as a Lord and heavenly King. The preaching of the apostles in the temple and houses is the preaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 5.42), as though the goal of the persecuted apostles was bringing forth the spirit of joy for the coming of Christ, whom the fathers and prophets had so long desired to see and to encounter.

The title ‘Christ’ came, not as a political national title, but a heavenly one that concerns the salvation of the whole world (Acts 3.21). In Samaria, Philip was preaching Christ (Acts 8.5-8). In Thessalonica, the apostle Paul reasoned with the Jews that **“This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ”** (Acts 17.3). At Corinth, the apostle Paul testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 18.5); and so did he in Achaia (Acts 18.28), and in Caesarea (Acts 26.23).

4- Jesus, the Holy and the Just (Acts 3.14-15)

The name Jesus was connected to the Holy and the Just: **“Nor will you allow Your Holy One to see corruption”** (Acts 2: 27); **“They killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers”** (Acts 7.52).

The Jews intended to get rid of Him by delivering him to the Gentiles and murdering Him, the Holy and the Just One, whoever carries will carry His Holiness and Justification. As the apostle Paul says, **“He became for us justification and holiness”**, by which He presented to us a new concept of the holiness and justification, which the law with its literality could not realize.

5- Jesus the Servant and the Minister

“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied; ... you denied the Holy One and the Just ... and killed the Prince of life” (Acts 3.13-15).

“God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities” (Acts 3.26).

In the prayer of the Church after the release of St. Peter and **St. John** from prison, they asked **“... that signs and wonders may be done in the name of Your holy Servant Jesus”** (Acts 4.30).

The prophet Isaiah had previously presented many of the praises of the suffering Servant (Isa. 53). He is the true Servant, anointed by God the Father to proclaim the divine love, the giving and the practical, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (John 3.16).

6- Christ and the call for repentance

The whole book was a call to repentance (metania) (Acts 2.37-40); as in Christ alone, it was possible, by His Holy Spirit, to change the internal tendency, and to renew the nature; so as to let the believer give the face to God his Father; and to be able to give the back to evil, whatever its attractions may be.

7-The name Jesus Christ and the Baptism

In this book, repentance is accompanied by getting Baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, in whom we gain the new birth, and the fellowship in the body of Christ, to carry His image, and be capable, by the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, of renewing the covenant, that was enjoyed by Moses in Sinai. He, whom they have killed, is the God of Sinai, whom they, for so long, have treasured. He was raised, not for any need on His part, but for us to be buried in Baptism and be raised together with Him, and to experience the power of His resurrection in our daily life. This is a practical testimonial to His resurrection, **“And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him”** (Acts 5.32).

In short, preaching the crucified and the resurrected Christ is not a subject of philosophical controversy or debate, but is an experience of the resurrection, and the transformation to persons, living as members in His body, raised from the dead, the one body, in order to live by one spirit and one soul. Thus, our life would be transformed into a Passover life, into an incessant feast, and a permanent joy in Christ, our true Passover.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The Book of Acts is called **‘The Book of the Holy Spirit’**, having begun by the promise of Christ to His disciples, to send them the Holy Spirit, to grant them the power to testify to Him in

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. The whole book proclaimed the leadership of the Holy Spirit of the Church in every way to realize that divine promise.

If we look at the Holy Book as a whole, we see the Holy Spirit persistently working since the beginning of creation, up to the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ, to provide man with every capability, and to prepare him to enter into the eternal glories. We can reveal His divine work along the following four historical stages:

1- The work of the Holy Spirit before the creation of Adam and Eve.

2- The work of the Holy Spirit after the fall (the stage of preparation for the first coming of Christ).

3- The work of the Holy Spirit in the days of Christ.

4- The work of the Holy Spirit in the early days of the Church of the New Testament.

The Evangelist St. Luke kept on revealing the incessant work of the Holy Spirit through the last three stages.

a- The work of the Holy Spirit before the creation of Adam and Eve: The Book of Genesis starts by mentioning that the Holy Spirit was hovering over the face of waters; when the earth was void, without form, beauty, or benefit, to make out of that earth a magnificent and beautiful world, representing a royal palace, for Adam and Eve to live in like a king and a queen, where nature with all its capabilities and beauty works for their happiness. This same Spirit keeps on working all along all ages, to make out of every believer a beautiful world, and a holy bride, prepared for the unique and joyful heavenly wedding.

b- The work of the Holy Spirit after the fall of man:

The apostles, in their speeches mentioned in this book, concentrated on the role of the Holy Spirit to prepare the people of God for receiving the salvation work of the Lord Christ. In the first speech by St. Peter after the Ascension, he says, “... **This Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David**” (Acts 1.16). The Holy Spirit was leading the men of God to prophesy about the events of salvation, to let the whole world enjoy the new life. The period between the fall of man and the coming of the Lord Christ was a preparation period for mankind to receive the Lord, especially through prophecies. We should not marvel to hear the prophet Moses saying to his disciple Joshua, “**Oh, that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them**” (Num. 11.29), when Joshua became angry, as the two elders Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, and not in the tabernacle; whereas the prophet Moses desired that the Holy Spirit would work in the life of the leading elders, as well as in the people, with no place limitation.

c- The work of the Holy Spirit in the days of Christ:

The Holy Spirit, who kept working, especially in the prophets, to prepare the people to receive the Savior, also worked in the days of the Lord Christ. St. Luke mentioned how the Holy Spirit set St. John the Baptist to precede the Lord Christ: “**He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s**

womb... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1.15, 17). He also revealed the role of the Holy Spirit in the incarnation of the Savior, the Word: **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God”** (Luke 1.35).

d- The work of the Holy Spirit in the early days of the Church:

The book of acts profusely revealed the realization of the divine promise: **“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me”** (John 15.26).

Since the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit kept on leading the Church through the priests, as well as through the people, to give every member a living role in testifying to the Lord Christ. He set forth with the Church dedicating the testimony to the Lord Christ, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, then to the Gentiles, until it was even brought up to the Imperial palace in Rome, the capital of the world at that time.

❖ **The Holy Spirit working in Jerusalem:** The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the upper room (Acts 2), He, who granted the apostles, the teachers, and the prophets, and every one his role; it is the Spirit that works in the whole Church. This is what has been realized according to the prophecy of the prophet Joel: **“It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams, And on My menservants, and on My maidservants, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy..., and it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”** (Acts 2.17-21).

So, the Holy Spirit came over the Church to transform every heart into a prophet, to behold the coming glories through the experience of their down payment, working in men and women, in the young and the old, bringing salvation to every one calling on the name of the Lord, whether he is a Jew, or Barbarian. The Holy Spirit set prophets in Jerusalem, like Agabus, who prophesied about the great famine to come throughout the whole world (Acts 11.27-28).

❖ **The Holy Spirit working in Samaria:** The Holy Spirit was not confined to Jerusalem or in the temple of Solomon, as the Jews expected. As Samaria received the word of God, the Church sent St. Peter and St. John, who **“laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 8.17). Moreover, the Holy Spirit led St. Philip to proceed to accompany the chariot of the man from Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8.29). We even see Him catching Philip away and bringing him over to Azotus (Acts 8.39-40).

❖ **The Holy Spirit working in the whole earth:** It would have been impossible except for the Holy Spirit to force His way through the Gentile world, to move the hearts, to draw them to believe in the Crucified, to grant them the new birth in Baptism, and to renew incessantly their thoughts, to become

the icon of the heavenly Groom. It was impossible for any apostle to dare to baptize a Gentile, before converting him first to Judaism. That is why, the Holy Spirit started by dwelling upon Cornelius and his household, beside all those present from the Gentiles, before St. Peter finishes his speech to them (Acts 10.44). Only then, could St. Peter say, **“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”** (Acts 10.47). In every city, as St. Paul laid his hands on believers, the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19.6).

The Holy Spirit is the One who sets the ministers to work in that vineyard. **“Now, separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”** (Acts 13.2). As to saying, ‘for Me’, it reveals how the Holy Spirit was keen on referring that work to Himself. He chooses the ministers, and keeps working in, and by them, until He realizes His divine work through the Church He sanctifies. The book of acts keeps on confirming this fact, as we shall see in our study of this book.

The Holy Spirit used to reveal to St. Paul even what tribulations he would face during his ministry: **“... except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me”** (Acts 20.23). In his speech to the priests of Ephesus, St. Paul says, **“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the Church of God, which He purchased with His own blood”** (Acts 20.28).

Finally, as the captive Paul reached Rome, he entered it with a rejoicing spirit, because the Holy Spirit has realized what He inspired the prophet Isaiah to say: **“The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to saying: ‘Go to this people and say: ... Therefore, let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it’** (Acts 28.25-28).

THE PROOF OF RESURRECTION IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Preaching is a call to believe in the Lord Christ, the crucified, and the raised from the dead, for the believer to experience the down payment of resurrection in his daily life. And as believing in resurrection from the dead was almost impossible at that time, God granted the apostles and disciples unusual signs and miracles, in the name of the Lord Christ, as it is mentioned in this book, to confirm that fact.

❖ The apostolic miracles are the proof of resurrection; and this book is its school¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE CHURCH LIFE

Wherever the believer set forth, for one reason or another, what preoccupied him was the formation of a holy congregation, a holy body of Christ, with its own features and capabilities to establish the kingdom of God. Even though with a small number, or with modest material capabilities, the Holy Spirit enriched the Church, and led her by His divine powers.

¹ *Hom. Cur in Pentec. Acta Legentur, T. 3, P.89.*

The most important features of the early Church are:

1- A Church of joy: It was a joyous church, in all the sides of her life, in worshipping and preaching, as well as in the midst of tribulations in her daily life, when the believers comprehended that the prophecies and the salvation work have been realized, anticipating the ultimate coming of the Messiah and the resurrection from the dead.

2- The new spiritual Israel: It was far from the material bigoted thought, as the kingdom of Christ has been realized through the work of His Holy Spirit.

3- A Church open to the Gentiles: In order to open the hearts of the Jews to the Gentiles, God used every way to uproot the spirit of bigotry from them, like sending an angel to Philip, to preach the Ethiopian (Acts 8); the appearance of the Lord Christ Himself to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9); and the commitment of Peter to go to the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10).

4- A Church of friendship working in God: In this Book, we see the friendship between the apostles Peter and John (Acts 3, 4, 8), between the apostles Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11, 13, 15), between the apostles Barnabas and Mark (Acts 16), between the apostles Paul and Silas, between Paul and Luke the Evangelist, between Paul and Timothy, and also between him and Aquila and Priscilla, etc.

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND WORSHIP¹

In few words, the Evangelist Luke expressed the Church life, saying, **“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrines and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”** (Acts 2.42). The Church life has been an apostolic faith thought, with a practical fellowship of love, and incessant collective and private prayers. The whole book confirmed that the holy congregation is a perpetual Church of prayers. When St. Paul the apostle spoke before King Agrippa, he presented the early fathers as **“serving God night and day”** (Acts 26.7). So, the Church of the New Testament came to continue the same path: **“incessant prayers”**. Even though this book is a proclamation of the testimony to the Lord Christ, until it reaches the end of the earth; this would not be realized except by the spirit of prayer, according to the call of the Lord Christ: **“Ask the God of the harvest to send workers for His harvest”**.

The early Church, as portrayed to us by the Evangelist Luke, was a perpetual congregation of prayer; in prayer, she found her fellowship with her God, her practicing of the angelic life of praise, her support in preaching, and her help in times of affliction. She prayed wherever she assembled; and every one of her members prayed wherever he went, and under any circumstances; as Prayer is not limited by place or time.

1- She continued to pray with one accord in the temple (Acts 2.46). Whenever an apostle or a believer of a Jewish origin came to Jerusalem, he used to go to the temple to pray (Acts 21.26, 22.17). The Christians used to have their prayers in their homes, as there was no church building yet (Acts

¹ *Biblical Studies (10) Priest Paulus El-Ghafali. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost of all Ages. Beirut, 1995.*

2.46); there they celebrated the sacrament of the Eucharist, and the liturgical prayers, etc. They used to pray in their secret place, as Saul did (Acts 9.11), or on the housetop, as St. Peter did (Acts 10.9).

The believer never stopped praising and praying, even in the inner prison, as Paul and Silas did (Acts 16.25). And when bidding an apostle farewell, the whole church used to assemble even on the beach, where everyone knelt and prayed (Acts 21.5, 20.26).

2- The Church used to assemble on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7-10). In Teruas, the disciples assembled from the eve of the Sabbath, when the week starts; and the apostle Paul kept on talking until midnight. Then the assembly ended by celebrating the sacrament of the Eucharist, or breaking of bread.

3- The believers were committed to keep the prayers of the hours; a devoted Jew used to pray three times a day; as did the prophets David and Daniel; and as did St. Peter when he ascended to the rooftop, at the sixth hour to pray (Acts 10.9).

4- Prayer is the secret by which holy ministers were chosen for the Lord: For instance, choosing the twelfth disciple, Matthias (Acts 1.15-26); dedicating Paul and Barnabas to preach among the Gentiles (Acts 13.2); and for ordaining priests, the whole church used to pray (Acts 14.23).

5- Prayer is the support of the ministers for their work: St. Peter prayed to raise 'Tabitha' from the dead (Acts 9.40). So did St. Paul when he healed 'Publius' (Acts 28.8).

6- Prayer is even for the sake of opponents and persecutors: as St. Stephen knelt and prayed for the sake of those who were about to stone him (Acts 7.6).

7- As to the goal of praying, it is for every human soul to enjoy the sweetness of the new life; So no wonder to hear St. Paul saying before the assembly: **"I would pray to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains"** (Acts 26.19).

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE SPIRIT OF LOVE AND UNITY

The book of acts reveals both the diversity and unity among the members of the Church, and even among the apostles. Although each of them had his own independent personality, talents, and capabilities, he felt his need for the others, to think together, and to work with the spirit of love and unity.

1- The Jerusalem (Christian) Council (Acts 15) might have been the best example of this, where no one was preoccupied by who would lead the Council or who would be its head; but every one tried to push the other to the first place. Those who worked together with the apostles in the Council had also shared this spirit of love and unity.

2- The Church of Jerusalem's support for the ministers in other regions: They sent St. Peter and St. John to support St. Philip in Samaria (Acts 8.14). It is as though the whole Church worked together for the salvation of every soul without anybody seeking the position of leadership, on the level of individuals or even the local churches.

3- Barnabas sought Saul to serve together with him for a whole year in Antioch (Acts 11.25) in order that it would become the center of the ministry to the Gentiles in several nations. St. Barnabas did not monopolize the ministry there but found pleasure in benefiting from the talents of St. Paul, without thinking about to whom the ministry of the Gentiles would be referred.

4- The Holy Spirit has separated Barnabas and Saul for preaching (Acts 13.2): The Spirit of God Himself has taken over the choosing of ministers and the distribution of work, where the Church was assembled together with the spirit of love and unity.

5- Although St. Peter was given the responsibility to minister to the circumcised, in order not to feel a stranger to the Church of the Gentiles, he was chosen to preach to the first fruit of the Gentiles, namely, the Centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). Likewise, St. Paul, the minister chosen for the Gentiles, started his ministry among the Jews. Thus, the gap between the Jews and the Gentiles, who received the faith in the Lord Christ, would become narrower; and all would enjoy the spirit of love and unity.

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE FREEDOM FROM THE MOVEMENT OF JUDAISM

The coming of the Magi to Judea to seek the Savior of the world reveals the commitment of the Gentiles to seek Him in the books of the Old Testament. Yet, they should not be enslaved to the letter of the law. With mutual respect for the holy ones in both groups, it is imperative to set oneself free from the political factors.

THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE FULLNESS OF TIME¹

Since Adam and Eve got the promise of the coming of the Savior, to get them back to a paradisiacal, victorious, and glorified life, they kept on looking forward to the realization of that divine promise; as though it would be realized without waiting for the fullness of time. Their children inherited this flaring wish; Every time a new prophet appeared, the people would wonder if he was the anticipated Messiah, or should they wait for another. Once it was the fullness of time, and Christ came, they expected Him to reign temporally on earth, and were not able to wait for the fullness of time of His ultimate coming. That is why, when He promised the coming of His Holy Spirit, His disciples asked Him, **“Will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel”** (Acts 1.6)?

St. Luke, through a proclamation of the Holy Spirit, transferred his listeners to the events of salvation, from crucifixion, to death, to resurrection, then to ascension to heaven, and ended the book by saying, **“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hand and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God, Amen”** (Luke 24.50-53). Thus, St. Luke annexed the heavenly

¹ *Biblical Studies (10) Priest Paulus El-Ghafali. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost of all Ages. Beirut, 1995.*

dimension to our salvation history. He presented a movement of correction to the Jewish thought that, for every work, there is a fullness of time.

Thousands of years had passed, while Adam and his children anticipated the coming of the Messiah King. Then He came in the fullness of time, not to reign on earth, but to ascend to heaven and to lift them up together with Him. He presented heavenly touches for the human life. The Non-temporal came and submitted to time in order to carry us to what is beyond time. This correction was partial; as even the disciples and the apostles thought that, once the seen presence of Christ on earth comes to an end, He would promptly come to carry His believers by His Holy Spirit, to the unseen world.

St. Luke was committed to write down the Book of Acts, to confirm the two following facts:

1- The coming of the Lord Christ and His ascension to heaven did not abolish His presence in us. And we, in our turn, submit to time, until He brings humanity, together with us, as far as the end of the earth, to rise together with us up to the eternal (eschatological) life. The Church, as the body of Christ, proclaims His unseen presence, until He carries all the nations to His glory.

2- With our anticipation of His ultimate eschatological coming, we actually submit to time, while our hearts are lifted up above time. His coming has the fullness of time until the Church realizes her mission, amid the external persecution, and the internal tribulations. The Church, confronting and challenging the world by the Holy Spirit, embraces every day those who are saved, those whose heavenly stature is apparent even now, while crossing over the history, whether long or short, until they get to encounter the Lord Christ in His ultimate coming, face to face.

The book of acts is a call to experience the eschatological life in the present life of the people of God, or in the history of His Church, realizing that Christ will ultimately definitely come, yet, in the fullness of time. That is why, St. Luke wrote in the first chapter of the book, the words of the Lord Christ before His ascension: **“It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority”** (Acts 1.7).

THE SIGNS, MIRACLES, AND VISIONS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

The book of Acts is characterized by demonstrating a living portrait of the Church at the time of the apostles, giving us a lot of instances of the signs, miracles, and visions, that were enjoyed by the Church, not to parade her possibilities, but in order to minister to the souls, and to draw the hearts to enjoy the work of God in her.

The most important of those works are:

1- The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of the Pentecost (Acts 2), as a realization of the divine promise (John 2.28-32), with the goal of enjoying the strength of testifying to the Lord Christ.

2- Speaking with tongues (Acts 2), aiming at bringing the Gentiles back to the divine bosom; every man heard the gospel of salvation in his own language.

3- Death of Ananias and Sapphira because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5.1-11), to root the spirit of fear together with the exalted divine love, so that the hand of the believer would not be stretched to corrupt the sanctities of God, or take His love for granted.

4- The gates of prison open up before the apostles (Acts 5.19-20): The world with all its energies can not suppress the word of God.

5- The vision of St. Stephen of the open heavens while he was being stoned (Acts 7.55) proclaims the support of the Lord Christ Himself to His honest witnesses.

6- The appearance of the Lord Christ to Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus (Acts 9.1-2) to let him testify to Him before the Gentiles and to have pleasure in the fellowship of suffering together with his Savior, in order to enjoy the power of His resurrection.

7- The restoration of vision to Saul (Acts 9.15-22) to realize and to treasure his enjoyment of insight.

8- The vision of Cornelius (Acts 10.1-8) to let him become a witness of God's love for all nations with no discrimination.

9- The vision of the apostle Peter (Acts 10.9-48) to set him free of the literalism of the law, that stands like a solid wall before the ministry to the Gentiles.

10- Agabus' prophecy about a future famine (Acts 11.28) to let the believers partake by practical love in supporting their needy brothers.

11- The apostle setting forth to minister directly after being stoned (Acts 14.19-20): there is no power that can hinder the testimony to the Resurrected from the dead.

12- The vision of the apostle Paul about a man pleading with him to come over to Macedonia to help them (Acts 16.9) to let the gospel cross over to the European continent.

13- The earthquake, the opening of the gates, and the loosening of the chains in the jail at Philippi (Acts 16.5-31) to proclaim the response of heaven to the praising tongues, and the conversion of the jailer and his household to faith.

14- The falling of the seven sons of Sceva in shame and disgrace, when they intended to drive out the evil spirits in the name of Jesus whom Paul preached (Acts 19.13-16) to proclaim that the name of Jesus should not be abused, as it only works through those who honestly believe in Him.

15- The prophecy of Agabus (Acts 21.10-14) about what would befall the apostle Paul in Jerusalem, by which God reveals how the apostle Paul submitted his life, and his readiness to die for the sake of Christ. It also reveals the extent of the mutual love between the ministers and the rest of the congregation in Jesus Christ.

16- Paul was not harmed by the sting of the viper (Acts 28.3-5) to let the inhabitants of the island believe in the Lord Christ who protects His servants.

17- God's support for His ministers by signs is only meant to testify to the salvation work of the Lord Christ.

Through the apostle Peter, a lame was healed (Acts 3); and by his shadow, many sick were cured (Acts 5.15-16). He also healed the paralyzed Aeneas (Acts 9.33-34), and raised Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9.36-40).

St. Stephen made signs and miracles (Acts 8.6-7, 13). So did St. Paul and St. Barnabas (Acts 14.3).

Moreover, St. Paul struck Elymus the sorcerer with blindness, for his opposition to the word of God (Acts 13.11). He healed the cripple from his mother's womb in Lystra (Acts 14.10), and drove out an evil spirit from a handmaid possessed with a spirit of divination in Philippi (Acts 16.18). In Ephesus, **"God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul"** (Acts 19.11-12). In Troas, he raised the young man Eutichus from the dead (Acts 20.10-12). And in the island of Malta, he laid his hands on the father of Publius, a leading citizen of the island, and healed him of his sickness (Acts 28.8-9).

SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

- 1- Preparation to set the Church (Acts 1 to 2)**
- 2- Testifying in Jerusalem (Acts 3 to 7)**
- 3- Testifying in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8 to 9)**
- 4- Preaching to the end of the earth (Acts 10 to 28).**

1- The preaching trips of St. Paul

- 1- The first preaching trip of St. Paul (1400 miles) (Acts 13 to 15)
- 2- The second preaching trip of St. Paul (2800 miles) (Acts 16 to 18)
- 3- The third preaching trip of St. Paul (2800 miles) (Acts 18.24-21.16)

2- Arresting St. Paul

- 4- In Jerusalem (Acts 21.17-23.35)
- 5- In Caesarea (Acts 24-26)
- 6- In Rome (Acts 27-28).

THE SERMONS AND SPEECHES THAT CAME IN THIS BOOK

By the apostle St. Peter (Acts 1.2, 3.4), by the two apostles Peter and James (Acts 15), By Gamaliel (Acts 5), By the Deacon Stephen (Acts 7), by the apostle Paul (Acts 13, 14, 17, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28), by the city clerk of Ephesus (Acts 19), and By Tertullus (Acts 24).

The broad lines of those speeches are:

- 1- The Lord Christ as the center of prophecies, who will set the fallen tent (kingdom) of David.
- 2- The crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, as the secret of salvation of the world.
- 3- A call to repentance and a return to Christ whom they crucified.

THE MAIN SERMONS IN THE BOOK

1	Peter on the day of the pentecost	2.14-40	His interpretation of the concept of the pentecost
2	Peter in the temple	3.12-26	A call to the jews, who crucified jesus, to repent
3	Peter in the sanhedrin ¹	4.5-12	A testimony to jesus, healer of the lame
4	Stephen in the sanhedrin	7.2- 53	Accusing the jews of rejecting the messiah
5	Peter to the gentiles	10.28-47	The call is both to the jews and to the gentiles
6	Peter in the church of jerusalem	11.4-18	His experience in joppa and his ministry to the gentiles
7	Paul in the concil of antioch	13.16-41	Jesus is the messiah according to the prophecies
8	Peter in the council of jerusalem	15.7-11	Salvation is for all by grace
9	Peter in the council of jerusalem	15.13-21	No need for the gentiles to get circumcised
10	Paul to the elders of ephesus	20.17-35	Keeping the faith despite the false preachers and the affliction
11	Paul to the multitudes in jerusalem	22.1-21	His conversion to faith and the call to him to work among the gentiles
12	Paul in the sanhedrin	23.1-6	His defense, proclaiming that he is a pharisee, and a roman citizen
13	Paul to king agrippa	26.2-23	His conversion and his zeal for the gospel
14	Paul to the elite jews in rome	28.17-20	A parade of his jewish heritage

¹ I used the word 'Sanhedrin' instead of 'sanhedrim' because it is thus identical with its Greek equivalent.

An Inspiration from the Book of Acts

You Have Turned the Earth for us into Heaven.

- ❖ Grant me to join the ranks of Your apostles and disciples,
To enjoy, together with them, meeting You, O Risen from the dead,
To listen to Your sweet voice speaking to them about the kingdom,
That my depths would kindle, longing for heaven.
Then, I see You inside me, setting Your joyful kingdom.
- ❖ May I get in touch with the work of Your Holy Spirit in the whole world,
To convert our earth into heaven;
And humanity into angels.
- ❖ When You ascended to heaven You carried our hearts up with You.
You sent to us Your fiery Spirit, to set of us ministers flaring with fire,
To give us a tongue and word, that draws hearts to know You.
Yes, keep Your fiery Spirit hovering over the face of the whole earth,
To set of humanity a holy bride, a living icon for You, O Groom of all.
- ❖ Let Your Spirit carry me to Jerusalem, to testify to You there.
The city that killed You produced believers who testify to You.
The city that drove You out of the camp, to be crucified on the Golgotha;
For it, You open Your Father's bosom, for its inhabitants to enjoy the divine love.
- ❖ Let Your Holy Spirit carry me to Samaria, together with Philip,
To rejoice in his work among the strangers, turning them into the household of God,
And to see the apostle of circumcision, preaching to the first Gentile in Caesarea,
To see how Your Spirit dwelt on Cornelius and his household.
Indeed, Your work is limitless.
- ❖ The Jews, Your own race, hated You, and persecuted Your Church.
Saul of Tarsus thought that he was capable of wiping out
Your name utterly from the face of the earth.
You appeared to him shining O the sun of righteousness.
Your amazing splendor caused him temporal blindness,
For his insight to be opened to see the splendor of eternal glory.

He became a chosen vessel to do nothing but to testify to You everywhere.

- ❖ You turned him into almost an angel.
He was surrounded by tribulations on all sides,
So His soul rejoiced as though what befell him befell the body of somebody else.
He became like a bird, setting forth from one country to another,
Having no place to lay his head,
To let You, his Savior, lay Your head in every heart.
- ❖ His life was transformed into a series of amazing preaching trips.
It was not possible for many of the apostles to realize what he has done.
He preached on land and sea, among philosophers, kings, and rulers.
Wherever he went, You got a new congregation, by Your words on his tongue.
- ❖ No one could describe Your apostle Paul:
Did he become an angel, who possesses nothing, although he possesses everything?
Was he so holy, that the rags on his body became holy,
To heal the sick, and drive away the evil spirits?
While he, himself remained suffering his own sickness.
Your amazing Spirit sanctified his whole being,
His heart, his mind, his soul, his body,
His words, his sermons, his pen, and his writings,
His time and his talents.
He became like a spirit as though with no body.
- ❖ Would You send, in every generation, preachers,
- ❖ To work through them in many?
Would You set, out of Saul, the persecutor, the blasphemer, and the aggressive,
An apostle, a preacher, and a witness for You?

**“And the Lord added to the church, daily,
those who were being saved”**

(Acts 2.47).

**“You shall receive power when the Holy
Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be
witnesses to Me, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and
Samaria, and to the end of the earth”**

(Acts 1.8).

THE FIRST SECTION

**PREPARATIONS FOR SETTING THE
CHURCH**

(Chapters 1 and 2)

CHAPTER 1

PREPARATION FOR THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH

Now, after the price has been completely paid, the Lord Christ was risen from the dead, confirming the acceptance of God the Father of the sacrifice of the Cross, and that humanity then had the right to enjoy entrance into the heavenly places through the righteousness of Christ risen from the dead. This chapter clarifies the practical preparation of the birth of the Church of Christ on the day of the Pentecost, as a Church led by the Holy Spirit Himself.

1- Drawing the disciples toward the Kingdom	1 - 3
2- The promise of a divine leader	4-- 8
3- The ascension of the Head to heaven	9 - 14
4- The consummation of the number of disciples	15- 26

1- DRAWING THE DISCIPLES TOWARD THE KINGDOM OF GOD:

After presenting the book to Theophilus, St. Luke the Evangelist clarified the work of the Lord Christ with His disciples during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension: drawing their hearts to the Kingdom of God, and flaring them to reach it. His resurrection altered their view of Him, as He was no longer living among them day and night, practicing the daily human life, but he encountered them in apparitions, as His natural place after resurrection is heaven. With every apparition, their longed more and more to the new resurrected life in order to taste the advance payment of the heavenly matters, until the day comes to encounter Him on the clouds, to receive the fellowship of eternal glory.

“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach”(Acts 1.1).

The introduction to the gospel (Luke 1.1-4) serves the two books as though they are one book in two volumes. Whereas the introduction to the book of Acts (Acts 1.1-2), binds the two books together.

In his first account, he presented a parade of the sayings and works of the Lord Christ. It was not possible for any book to register the details of all the sayings, miracles, and salvation works (John 21.25), but it registered the essence of all of them.

❖ ““He does not say "all," but "of all," as much as to say, "in a summary way, and in the gross"; and "of all that is mainly and pressingly important"¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Hom. on Acts. Hom. 1.*

St. John Chrysostom comments on the words of St. Luke: “*Of all that Jesus began both to do and teach*” (Acts 1.1), that, By letting the work precedes the words, he showed himself as an example of the true teacher.

- ❖ “But consider how Christ accredited his words by His deeds. Thus He says, “**Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart**” (Matt. 11.29). He taught men to be poor, and exhibited this by His actions: “**as the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head**” (Matt. 8.20). Again, He charged men to love their enemies; and He taught the same lesson on the Cross, when He prayed for those who were crucifying Him. He said, “**If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also**” (Matt. 5.40). Now He not only gave His garments, but even His blood. In this way He bade others teach.
- ❖ Wherefore Paul also said, “**Join in following my example**” (Phil. 3.17). For nothing is more frigid than a teacher who shows his philosophy only in words: this is to act the part not of a teacher, but of a hypocrite. Therefore the Apostles first taught by their conduct, and then by their words; nay rather they had no need of words, when their deeds spoke so loud. Nor is it wrong to speak of Christ's Passion as action, for in suffering all He performed that great and wonderful act, by which He destroyed death, and effected all else that He did for us¹”

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ “For teaching is put to the blush when a man's conscience rebukes him; and it is in vain that his tongue preaches poverty or teaches alms-giving if he is rolling in the riches of Croesus and if, in spite of his threadbare cloak, he has silken robes at home to save from the moth²”.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ And so keeping up that diligence in reading, which I see that you have, endeavor with all eagerness to gain in the first place a thorough grasp of practical, i.e., ethical knowledge. For without this that theoretical purity of which we have spoken cannot be obtained, which those only, -who are perfected not by the words of others who teach them, but by the excellence of their own actions, can after much expenditure of effort and toil attain as a reward for it. For as they gain their knowledge not from meditation on the law but from the fruit of their labor, they sing with the Psalmist: “**Through Your precepts, I get understanding**” (Ps. 119.104), and having overcome all their passions, they say with confidence: “**To You, O Lord, I will sing praises. I will behave wisely in a perfect way**” (Ps. 101.1-2). For he who is striving in an undefiled way in the course of a pure heart, as he sings the Psalm, understands the words which are chanted³”.

¹ *Hom. on Acts. Hom. 1.*

² *Letter 127 to Principia, 4.*

³ *John Cassian. Conferences. 14.9.*

(Abbot Nesteros)

“Until the day in which He was taken up, after He, through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Acts 1.2).

In His valedictory speech, He clearly promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit, the comforter, who will provide them with the whole truth, open up their minds to the knowledge of the Holy Books, and draw the world to know Him, rebuke on sin, on righteousness and on judgment. He also breathed on the faces of His disciples, and granted them the breath of the Spirit, so that if they forgave the sins of any, they would be forgiven them, and if they retained the sins of any, they would be retained. But after His resurrection, He **“commanded them by the Holy Spirit”**. He probably concentrated most of His talks on the Holy Spirit, so their hearts flared with love toward the heavenly matters. They probably wondered, openly or secretly: How could we ever be able to walk in fellowship with the One resurrected from the dead? The Lord Christ’s response to this was: “By the Holy Spirit!”

The Evangelist St. Luke has not mentioned the talks of the Lord concerning the Holy Spirit, but he let the events that came in the book reveal the things promised by the Lord to them, and what they enjoyed through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in them and in the newly born Church.

❖ **“After He, through the Holy Spirit, had given commandments to the apostles”**: i.e. they were spiritual words that He spoke to them, nothing human; either this is the meaning, or, that it was by the Spirit that He gave them commandments. Do you observe in what low terms he still speaks of Christ, as in fact Christ had spoken of Himself? **“If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God”** (Matt. 12.28), for indeed the Holy Ghost wrought in that Temple. Well, what did He command? **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** (Matt. 28.19-20).

A high encomium this for the Apostles, to have such a charge entrusted to them, I mean, the salvation of the world, words full of the Spirit! ... It appears then that He also taught the Disciples after His resurrection, but of this space of time no one has related to us the whole in detail. ... However, we have learnt these things through the Apostles, for what they heard¹.

(St. John Chrysostom).

“To whom He has presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1.3).

The Evangelist St. Luke Presented to us the ministry of the Lord to His disciples by appearing to them several times during the forty days, confirming that He is living by many proofs, and speaking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. His ministry in this period was totally different from His ministry during the past three years. He no more healed the sick or raised from the dead,

¹ Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

delivered sermons to the multitudes, or talked with them. He proclaimed by every means the nature of His Person, that He is the Conqueror of the evil world, of death, and of the devil. Whoever acquires Him, will acquire the victory and conquest, and will enjoy the new resurrected life that is a crossing-over to the down payment of heaven, and an enjoyment of the inner heavenly glory.

The Greek expression of the two words “**many ... proofs**” means “committing signs”, “indisputable signs”, or “infallible proofs”. If resurrection is the backbone of faith and salvation, without which the cross loses its role, the Lord Christ introduced many proofs to confirm it. These indisputable proofs or signs are:

1- **His appearances to various persons, and at different times** (1Cor. 15), during a period of forty days, were proclamations that could not carry any sort of deceit, but have attracted all those He has met. The Lord connected His appearances to His suffering and crucifixion, having revealed the glory of the cross by confirming His resurrection. Therefore, the disciples were proud to say, “**after His suffering**”, as they could not enjoy the glory of those divine appearances, and the realization of the truth of the nature of the Person of the Lord Christ and His mission, if He did not pass through this passion. It is the way of His glory, namely, the way of the realization of His mission as our Savior. By and with Him, We pass through the suffering to cross over to the glories. “**If indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together**” (Rom. 8.17). “**Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ who was in them (the prophets) was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow**” (1 Pet. 1.11). So, pain became the path to the true glory, as the apostle says, “**But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy**” (1 Pet. 4.13)¹. Here, we realize the secret behind the pride of the Church in the expression “Your life-giving passion”, and repeating it daily in the prayers of the hours, and in the liturgies, as a secret of our salvation and our eternal glory.

2- **His resurrection was unexpected** (Luke 24.19-24; John 20.25). This confirms that His apparitions were not products of fantasies or imaginations that were beforehand in their minds.

❖ “He spent forty days with them after His resurrection, going in and out, and eating and drinking: not indeed that He had any experience of hunger and thirst, but even by such evidences confirmed the reality of His flesh, which no longer needed, but still possessed the power, to eat and to drink. ...**but He was no longer with them in the fellowship of human infirmity**”²,

(St. Augustine)

3- **He appeared to them as a friend and companion**, but on a new and exalted level. He ate and drank with them, but not as normal daily life activities, as He used to do before His resurrection.

4- **His encounter with His disciples in Galilee as He instructed them**. They saw the One with whom they very closely lived for about three years.

¹ To know about showing Himself to the disciples, see: Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty. *On the Gospel of John*. 2002.

² In Joan. Tr. 64.1.

5- **Submitting His body to touch:** to let everyone of them cry out in his depths, together with the apostle Thomas, saying, **“My Lord and my God.”**

6- His apparitions to them were always accompanied with **His talk about the kingdom of God**, which they began to comprehend with a new concept, after enjoying the One risen from the dead, and His debates with them.

The Kingdom of God: What the Lord Christ presented to His disciples through that period was a living deposit for their preaching, the revelation of His cross and the enjoyment of the power of His resurrection. He presented Himself to them as the Crucified and the Risen from the dead. Thus, the kingdom of God became seen, heard, and touched, through the Christ raised from the dead; and the disciples sang, **“... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled concerning the Word of life”** (1 John 1.1). The practical testimonial to His resurrection from the dead is the practical aspect of the experience of the kingdom of God in us; In other words, the kingdom of God, in its essence, is a union with Christ, the crucified, the risen from the dead, and the ascending to heaven.

Before the Lord’s resurrection, the disciples were unable to comprehend His secrets. That is why He says to them, **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now”** (John 16.12). But once the resurrection had become a perceptible actuality, He no longer said to them, **“Do you not yet understand? ... How is it you do not understand”** (Matt. 15.9, 11)? But, **“He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures”** (Luke 24.45).

❖ "He was not always with them now, as He was before the Resurrection. For the writer does not say "forty days," but, "**during forty days.**" He came, and again disappeared; by this leading them on to higher conceptions, and no longer permitting them to stand affected towards Him in the same way as before, but taking effectual measures to secure both these objects, that the fact of His Resurrection should be believed, and that He Himself should be ever after apprehended to be greater than man. At the same time, these were two opposite things; for in order to the belief in His Resurrection, much was to be done of a human character, and for the other object, just the reverse. Nevertheless, both results have been affected, each when the fitting time arrived¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. Augustine believes that our life on earth is represented by the figure 40: We are committed to keep the ten commandments, in order to reach the perfection of blessings, And to practice them in all the 4 corners of the universe (East, West, North, and South), namely, wherever we are (10x4 = 40).

❖ ”Now this number (forty) signifies the life wherein we labor in this world²”.

(St. Augustine)

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.*

² *Sermons. Sermon 1.32.*

Some may ask why the Lord did not appear openly to everyone, as He did when He was crucified, instead of appearing only to the disciples, the apostles, and to certain groups of people.

1- It was imperative, in order to proclaim His love for humanity, to be crucified publicly, being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Whereas the resurrection is a gift, only given to those longing for it and to those honestly seeking to recognize the Person of Christ, the resurrected from the dead.

2- **St. John Chrysostom** believes that if the Lord appeared publicly to all, all would probably assume that it is merely an apparition of His person, and not a true resurrection from the dead. The disciples themselves, although they heard several times about His resurrection before He was crucified, were greatly confused by His appearance to them, touching Him, and sharing a meal with Him, as it was not easy to accept that anybody could be raised from the dead. That is why, the Lord intended by every possible means to confirm to them His resurrection, in order that they would be witnesses to it in their future preaching to the whole world¹.

Even after His resurrection and His continuous appearances to them, as they were still confused, feeling the heavy responsibility, and the apparent impossibility to realize the mission allotted to them, He talked to them about the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, but, not like His talks prior to His resurrection, but practically, by revealing His Person to them, to comprehend that the kingdom of God is in recognizing Him, enjoying His love, and the fellowship with Him; The kingdom is a practical living encounter with Him. He revealed to them as well, that He is sending them the Holy Spirit, who will dwell in them and give them the strength to testify to Him, that the kingdom of God would be realized in the hearts of many in the whole world.

❖ “since the disciples both had been distressed and troubled at the things which already had taken place, and were about to go forth to encounter great difficulties, He recovered them by His discourses concerning the future²”.

❖ He does not speak at great length with them after the Resurrection³”.

(**St. John Chrysostom**)

2- A PROMISE OF A DIVINE LEADER

“And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, ‘which’, He said, ‘you have heard from Me’”(Acts 1.4).

Some believe that in place of the Greek word for ‘assembled with them’ that came in several documents, it was translated as ‘eating salt with them’ in the Herculean Syrian version, or ‘eating bread

¹ Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

² Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

³ Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.

with them', in the Beshita Syrian version. According to St. John Chrysostom, it came as 'While He was with them at the dinner table'. That is why the disciples were proud that they ate and drank with Him after His resurrection, as a confirmation of the fact of resurrection (Luke 24.42; Acts 10.40-41).

Like Abraham, who received the divine promise from God, during a meal, with two angels around Him (Gen. 18.1-8), the children of Abraham, likewise, received the promise of the Holy Spirit, who sets from the stones children to Abraham from all nations, during a meal with the Lord.

"The promise of the Father" has been promised through the prophets in the Old Testament (Isa. 32.15, 44.3, Joel 2.28-32). The Lord Christ has also promised that the Father would send it, or that the Lord Christ would send it from the Father, five times in the gospel of John 14-16.

Why did not the Holy Spirit come upon the disciples while the Lord Christ was on earth, or directly after His ascension?

St. John Chrysostom believes that the disciples were committed to stay in Jerusalem, until the Holy Spirit dwelt on them, for the following reasons:

1- They were like an army of God, who could not enter the spiritual battle, without carrying weapons, to get ready for the fight; or, they were like the stallion that could not go to war, without being mounted by a horseman or a charioteer.

2- It was imperative for several of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to receive faith, so that the disciples would not preach the Crucified and the resurrected from the dead, to strangers, But, if some of those who crucified the Lord believed, their faith would be a strong testimonial to the resurrection of the Lord, in the same city where He was crucified and buried, and the disciples would mute the mouths of the opponents. By the faith of some of those who crucified Him, the apostles would confirm more strongly the fact of His crucifixion, and also of His resurrection.

3- "The Apostles should say, How shall it be possible for us to live among wicked and bloody men, they so many in number, we so few and contemptible, observe how He drives away their fear and distress, by these words, **"But to wait for the promise of the Father, 'which', He said, 'you have heard from Me"** (Acts 1.4). You will say, When had they heard this? When He said, **"It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you"** (John 16.7). And again, **"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever"** (John 14.16).¹

(St. John Chrysostom)

4- **St. John Chrysostom** says that the disciples were in need of a period of preparation to receive the Holy Spirit. If Daniel fell down on his face when he saw an angel (Dan. 8.17), how would be the condition of the disciples when they receive such a great gift?

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Homily I.*

5- In the presence of the Lord Christ, the disciples did not feel the need for another Helper, and their hearts did not yearn to receive the Holy Spirit, but after His departure in the flesh, they felt the need for another Helper, and waited with great longing for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

6- “It was fit that they should first be brought to have a longing desire for that event, and so receive the grace. For this reason Christ Himself departed, and then the Spirit descended. For had He Himself been there, they would not have expected the Spirit so earnestly as they did. ... It is the same with us also; for our desires towards God are then most raised, when we stand in need¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

7- As the work of the Holy Spirit is to prepare the bride to bear the icon of her Groom, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples after Christ’s ascension to heaven, in order that they would bear His heavenly features, and would long for the union with Him, not to stay with Him here on earth, but in heaven.

8- “It was fit that our nature should be seen in heaven, and that the reconciliation should be perfected, and then the Spirit should come, and the joy should be unalloyed. For, if the Spirit being already come, Christ had then departed, and the Spirit remained; the consolation would not have been so great as it was²”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1.5).

This, which was already proclaimed by St. John the Baptist (Matt. 3.11), was realized on the day of Pentecost, and during the preaching of the apostles (Acts 11.15-17, 19.1-6). The Baptism of St. John was for repentance, as a preparation for approaching the kingdom of God.

❖ "But now He says plainly, **“John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit”**. And he no longer uses the testimony, but merely adverts to the person of John, reminding the disciples of what he had said, and shows them that they are now become greater than John; seeing they too are to baptize with the Spirit. Again, He did not say, I baptize you with the Holy Ghost, but **“You shall be baptized”** teaching us humility. For this was plain enough from the testimony of John, that it was Christ Himself Who should baptize: **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire”** (Luke 3.16)³”.

(St. John Chrysostom).16

❖ "But why does Christ say, **“You shall be baptized,”** when in fact there was no water in the upper room? Because the more essential part of Baptism is the Spirit, through Whom indeed the water has

¹ Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

² Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

³ Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.

its operation; in the same manner our Lord also is said to be anointed, not that He had ever been anointed with oil, but because He had received the Spirit. Besides, we do in fact find them receiving a baptism with water [and a baptism with the Spirit] and these at different moments. ... For in the beginning they were baptized by John¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "And the Layer (font) of Baptism helps not a whir to procure for us a milder punishment. And consider: a man has gotten grievous sins by committing murder or adultery or some other crime: these were remitted through Baptism. For there is no sin, no impiety, which does not yield and give place to this gift; for the Grace is Divine. ... **“For the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable”** (Rom. 11.29). But for those committed after Baptism he suffers a punishment as great as he would if both the former sins were brought up again, and many worse than these. For the guilt is no longer simply equal, but doubled and tripled. Look: in proof that the penalty of these sins is greater, hear what St. Paul says: **“Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much punishment, do you suppose, will he thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace”** (Heb. 10.28-29)?²”

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "Jesus therefore went up into heaven, and fulfilled the promise. For He said to them, **“I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper”** (John 14.16). So they were sitting, looking for the coming of the Holy Ghost; and when the day of Pentecost was fully come, here, in this city of Jerusalem, ... the Comforter came down from heaven, the Guardian and Sanctifier of the Church, the Ruler of souls, the Pilot of the tempest-tossed, who leads the wanderers to the light, and presides over the combatants, and crowns the victors.

- ❖ But He came down to clothe the Apostles with power, and to baptize them; for the Lord says, **“You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”** (Acts 1.5).

This grace was not in part, but His power was in full perfection; for as he who plunges into the waters and is baptized is encompassed on all sides by the waters, so were they also baptized completely by the Holy Ghost. And wherefore do you wonder? Take an example from matter; poor indeed and common, yet useful for the simpler sort. If the fire passing in through the mass of the iron makes the whole of it fire, so that what was cold becomes burning and what was black is made bright, -if fire which is a body thus penetrates and works without hindrance in iron which is also a body, why wonder that the Holy Ghost enters into the very inmost recesses of the soul?³”

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Homily 1.*

³ *CATECHETICAL LECTURES. Lecture 17.13-14.*

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

“Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1.6).

This verse is considered as an extension of verse 3. It was greatly difficult for the disciples to get rid of what has stuck to their minds about the kingdom of God, through the literal Jewish thought, according to which the people sought the Messiah as an earthly king (John 6.15), and looked at the people of God as a political kingdom with temporal authority. All along the 40 days between the resurrection of the Lord and His ascension, He was drawing the minds of the disciples from the human earthly concepts to the heavenly divine thought.

Every hope in setting Jesus a king has been destroyed. Has His resurrection restored into them the hope that He would occupy that same position with that same concept?

The question of the disciples to the Lord reveals the magnitude of the danger of those erroneous thoughts with their roots running deep in their minds. Despite the long time the disciples lived during the ministry of the Lord, His resurrection, and His talks to them about the heavenly kingdom, for 40 days, their old deep-rooted thoughts still lingered in them. They were thus in need of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, to occupy their depths, to renew their thoughts, and to set them free of their old erroneous thoughts.

Their question reveals their confusion, As in their minds, the Messianic era was closely connected to the appearance of the glorious kingdom of Israel, and its victory over the nations and peoples. As the Holy Spirit had not yet dwelt on them, it was not possible for them to recognize the ‘kingdom of Christ’ as it really is.

Will Jesus occupy the chair of Moses, in place of the high priests and the Pharisees?

Will Jesus, the risen from the dead, sit on the throne, to grant Israel the conquest over the nations?

Is it then the time to expel the Romans, and to realize the independence of Israel? The expression “to restore” meant to bring the situation back to how it should be¹.

“And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority’” (Acts 1.7).

This last talk of the Lord Christ to the disciples before His ascension was when their hearts were not yet lifted up with Christ, to seek the heavenly kingdom. While the Lord presented to them the promise of the Holy Spirit, to bring them up, as though with the wings of a dove, to heaven, their hearts were still attached to temporal and earthly glories. They were still harboring in their hearts a strong longing for the earthly kingdom of Israel.

¹ CF. Adam Clerke. *Acts, Preface*

Having been about to ascend to heaven, His last commandment to them was not to preoccupy themselves with times and seasons, but to have their hearts open to eternity, and their thoughts soaring above the limits of time.

The Lord Christ intended for them not to know the times and the seasons, to spare them from falling into pride because of this knowledge; He wished that they be modest. And as **St. Augustine** says, “You wish that I should manifest the kingdom now; let me first gather what I may manifest; you love elevation, and you shall obtain elevation, but follow me through humility¹”.

What does He mean by the ‘**times and seasons**’? By the times, He means knowing the time of the setting of the messianic kingdom. Instead of seeking the kingdom of God, and enjoying its potentialities, man preoccupies himself with temporal reckoning, something that has preoccupied many believers along the centuries. As for the seasons, it means thinking about the coming events, what will happen until the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ.

In our present time, feeling the closeness of the end, many scholars got preoccupied with times and seasons, as for example:

- ❖ When will the world come to an end?
- ❖ What will become of Israel?
- ❖ Will they accept the faith in Christ?
- ❖ Will they reign over the whole world?
- ❖ How can we interpret the events of September the eleventh, 2001 in the light of the book of revelation, and the prophetic books in the Old Testament?
- ❖ Should we expect a devastating world war?
- ❖ Who would take part in this war?
- ❖ How would be the coalitions in this war?

Many have turned from studying the Holy Book with its two testaments, into thinking about the times and seasons, against which the Lord Christ has warned in His final words to His disciples, just before His ascension.

During the 40 days between His resurrection and His ascension, they realized exalted things that they had not so far realized, like the following:

- ❖ That He is the Son of God, equal to the Father in dignity (John 5.17-20).
- ❖ There will be resurrection from the dead (Matt. 17.9).

¹ In Joan. Tr. 25.3.

- ❖ He who ascends will sit on the right hand of the Father (Luke 22.69).
- ❖ He is worshipped by the angels, and He will come again (Mark 16.19).
- ❖ What will happen on the Day of Judgment (Matt. 16.27), when they would sit to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 21.27).
- ❖ The Jews will be driven out, to be replaced by the Gentiles (Matt. 19.28).

Then, all the Lord's sayings before His crucifixion began to be clear before them through His miraculous apparitions. However, they had not yet completely get rid of the materialistic Jewish thoughts since they did not yet have the Holy Spirit who carries them to the heavenly matters to experience the new resurrected life.

St. Jerome discerns between what we have known and what we are in no need to seek. As an example, the Psalmist prays saying, **“Lord, make me to know my end”** (Ps. 39.4), as an important issue to know what God has planned for us. On the other hand, as far as the origin of the human soul and its beginning is concerned, this is not our concern. Is it born from the parents, like the body, or not? This should not concern us. The excellent example for this discernment is what the apostle St. Paul has seen and heard when he was taken up to the third heaven, But whether he went there with his body or outside it, that was not his concern, nor did he inquire about it from God¹.

- ❖ "So eager were they for that day. Indeed, to me it appears that they had not any clear notion of the nature of that kingdom; for the Spirit had not yet instructed them. ... For there they were still affected towards sensible objects, seeing they were not yet become better than those who were before them; here they have henceforth high conceptions concerning Christ. Since then their minds are elevated, He also speaks to them in a higher strain. For He no longer tells them, **“Of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”** (Mark 13.32) But he says, **“It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority”** (Acts 1.7). You ask things greater than your capacity, He would say. And yet even now they learned things that were much greater than this. And that you may see that this is strictly the case, look how many things I shall enumerate²”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ **“Of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”** (Mark 13.32). The Son is ignorant, then, of nothing which the Father knows, nor does it follow because the Father alone knows, that the Son does not know. Father and Son abide in unity of nature, and the ignorance of the Son belongs to the divine Plan of silence seeing that in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. This, the Lord Himself testified, when He

¹ Cf. Letter 144, to Alypius and Augustine. 8.

² Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.

answered the question of the Apostles concerning the times, It is not yours to know times or moments, which the Father has set within His own authority (Acts 1.7). The knowledge is denied them, and not only that, but the anxiety to learn is forbidden, because it is not theirs to know these times¹.

(St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitier)

- ❖ **““The day of the Lord,”** Says the apostle, **“so comes as a thief in the night”** (1 Thess. 5.2). Therefore watch by night that you be not surprised by the thief. For the sleep of death-(if you will it or not)-it will come²”.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "The things then which are seen shall pass away, and there shall come the things which are looked for, things fairer than the present; but as to the time let no one be curious. For it is not for you, He says, to know times or seasons, which the Father has put in His own power (Acts 1.7). And do not venture to declare when these things shall be, nor on the other hand supinely slumber. For he says, **“Watch therefore for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming, ... Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him”** (Matt. 24.42, 44). But since it was needful for us to know the signs of the end, and since we are looking for Christ, therefore, that we may not die deceived and be led astray by that false Antichrist, the Apostles, moved by the divine will, address themselves by a providential arrangement to the True Teacher, and say, **“Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age”** (Matt. 24.3)? We look for you to come again, but Satan transforms himself into an Angel of light; put us therefore on our guard, that we may not worship another instead of you. And He, opening His divine and blessed mouth, says, **“Be careful, do not be deceived by anyone”**, And this word exhorts you all to give heed to what is spoken; for it is not a history of things gone by, but a prophecy of things future, and which will surely come. Not that we prophesy, for we are unworthy; but that the things which are written will be set before you, and the signs declared. Observe, which of them have already come to pass, and which yet remain; and make yourself safe³”.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”(Acts 1.8).

By saying “But”, the Lord Christ corrects the way of thinking of the disciples, Instead of their flaring wish to know the times and seasons which are in the authority of the Father, He directs them to

¹ *On the Trinity.* 9.75.

² *Sermons on the Mount.* 43.8.

³ *Catechetical lectures.* 15.4.

recognize their own mission, having been called to have the power to testify on the level of the whole world, through the WORK of the Holy Spirit that will come upon them.

When they were still looking forward to the kingdom of Christ in a material way, hoping soon to see the day when He will be enthroned a King of Israel to reign over the whole world, He talked about enthroning Him a King over the hearts of the whole world. This would not be realized except by the authority of the Father, by which He draws the hearts to His crucified Son through the work of His Holy Spirit. They inquired about the day; whereas, He diverted their thoughts to the authority that they will have from the Father for preaching. They inquired about Israel; while, He told them about the new Israel that will embrace Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. This is what the prophet David has prophesied (Ps. 2.8), and also the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 21.27).

Because what the disciples sought to know, concerning the day, would not benefit them in the least, He diverted their vision to what is for their edification. St. John Chrysostom likens this situation to a kid who cries out asking to have something that would not benefit him, to which we respond by hiding it, and showing our hands empty, as though we do not have it, then we give him instead what would be useful to him. Thus, when the disciples inquired about the day, He told them that that knowledge is in the authority of the Father, as though He is empty-handed of that authority. Then, He presented to them what is of more importance to them; that is, having the power and authority for the serious work ahead of them to set that kingdom.

St. John Chrysostom says that He is the Teacher who provides His students, not with what they choose, but with what is of benefit to them, and what they should learn and know.

“Power”: They will have a divine power, that does not stop at performing signs and miracles in the name of the crucified Jesus, but they will have the power to draw the soul with all its energies to believe in the Lord Christ, and to enjoy the experience of the new life, the resurrected from the dead. It is only the Holy Spirit who can penetrate the heart and thought, and work in the soul, declaring war against sin (Acts 2.37), and shining in it with the splendor of the Holy Trinity, to receive joyfully the work of God.

❖ “And that they might not be frozen with fear, they burned with the fire of charity” (the Holy Spirit)
1.

(St. Augustine)

“And you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). The book of Acts proclaims the realization of that divine promise: In the first seven chapters, the testimony was confined to Jerusalem; with the beginning of the eighth chapter, it started in Judea and Samaria; and with the eleventh chapter (Acts 11.19), the ministry set forth outside

¹ *The City of God. 18.50.*

those frontiers, until it reached to the capital of the Roman empire, that reined over the world at that time. Here, the Lord Christ refers to all mankind at that time:

1- **The Jews**, who hold fast to the Mosaic Law and the worship in the temple with all its rites in stiff literalism.

2- **The Proselytes**, who, although converted to Judaism, yet in their depths, they do not care for the circumcision according to the flesh, for the literalism of the law, or for the temple with its huge building.

3- **The Samaritans**, who used to mix between worshipping the living God and the worship of idols.

4- **The Gentiles** with their worship of idols, and practicing various rites according to the customs of each nation.

The testimony started in Jerusalem, as, according to **St. John Chrysostom**, the world accepts faith when it sees some of those who crucified the Lord, believe in His resurrection. It would be a sure proof of the resurrection of the Lord, when it comes from His opposing enemies who became believers in Him. In the Book of Isaiah, it is written: **“Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem”** (2.3). In Jerusalem, about 3000 men believed after hearing one sermon (Acts 2).

❖ Because the Lord loved Jerusalem and had compassion on it, He commanded to start preaching in it. No wonder, as by this, He wipes the hatred away from its roots, as in Jerusalem the murderers of Christ live¹.

(St. Augustine)

Having been about to leave them in the flesh, He presented to them what would bring joy to their hearts, support them in the realization of their mission, and comfort them amid their sufferings.

❖ “In truth, they were yet weak. But to inspire them with confidence, He raised up their souls, and concealed what was grievous. Since he was about to leave them very shortly, therefore in this discourse He says nothing painful²”.

❖ The Lord Christ sent His apostles, as the sun sends forth its rays, as the flower spreads its sweet aroma, and as the fire emits sparks. The power of Christ is being known through their virtues, as the sun twinkles in its rays, as the flower proclaims its fragrance, and as the fire emits its sparks. Who would not praise the teacher when he sees the students well educated³?

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ In Joan. Tr. 2.3.

² Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.

³ In Sanctum Matt. Ch10.1.

- ❖ The gospel came to you as it did to the whole world, and had fruits. The Son of God Himself said, **“You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth”**¹

(St. Augustine)

Giving the good news of the birth of the incarnated Word of God, the angel Gabriel presented the promise: **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you , and the power of the highest will overshadow you, therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God”** (Luke 1.35). St. Mary brought forth the incarnated Son of God, and enjoyed that unique motherhood to Him, together with her perpetual virginity. Now, the incarnated divine Word, Jesus Christ, presents a promise of the birth of His bride, the holy Church, the virgin mother, by the power of the Holy Spirit, who would come upon mankind: **“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me”** (Acts 1.8).

The first Newborn is the Holy incarnated Son of God, born by the Holy Spirit, by a power from the highest; and the second Newborn is His bride, the Holy Church, likewise born by the Holy Spirit by a power from the highest.

The first birth was realized from the Virgin St. Mary after sanctifying her, and the second, from the apostles and disciples, also after sanctifying them.

In the first birth, the Heavenly became human to dwell among us, and in the second, the earthly creatures bear the features of the Heavenly, and in His divine bosom they enjoy the heavenly blessings.

The first newborn became for our sake a fetus, then a child, and **“the child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him”** (Luke 2.40). The second newborn, his bride, the church, **”had peace, were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied”** (Acts 9.31).

The first newborn led many to praise God, like St. Mary, Elizabeth, Simon the Elder, etc., and the second newborn turned humanity into a praising congregation (Acts 2.47).

3- THE ASCENSION OF THE HEAD TO HEAVEN

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Acts 1.9).

St. Luke confirms, **”When He had spoken this ...while they watched”**. In His resurrection, He was not seen by anyone. Yet nature testified to Him, together with the empty tomb, and the claim of the guards that His body was stolen while they were asleep, something although ridiculous, yet it confirmed His resurrection, Then the apparitions of the Lord to many, and at various times, speaking and debating with them, so as not to think that what they were seeing was no more than a beautiful dream, or a fantasy. They would not have believed the fact of His ascension, had not they seen it by their own eyes.

¹ Letters. 185.1-5.

They had to watch His ascension, and speak with the two angels, to realize that the kingdom of Christ is not a temporary earthly kingdom, but an eternal heavenly one, and to realize that His mission on earth is finished (John 17.4, 19.30), and that it was fitting for Him to return to His glory that is His with the Father (John 17.4-5; Phil. 2.6, 9-10).

When the Lord consummated His mission on earth, He ascended to send the Holy Spirit to guide His Church in the whole world.

He ascended to the Father, to prepare for us our glory through His atoning intercession to the Father, for the forgiveness of our sins, and our justification in Him, being the Highest Priest (Heb. 9.7-8, 11-12, 25), and to proclaim the opening, for the first time, of the gates of heaven, before the One bearing the human nature, which gives us the right to ascend together with Him.

The Evangelist Luke gave us this actual impressive and amazing scene of the ascension of the Lord Christ to heaven, when a cloud received Him out of their sight. The Psalmist says, **“Who makes the clouds His chariots, Who walks on the wings of the wind”** (Ps. 104.3), and the prophet Daniel says, **“I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him”** (Dan. 7.13). The clouds refer to the exaltation and the divine splendor (Deut 4.11; 2 Sam. 22.12; Ps. 97.2). It also refers to the ‘Shekinah’, as a glory that represents the divine presence (Exod. 33.7-11, 40.34; Mark 9.7).

“He was taken up”: As the body of the Lord became glorified by His resurrection from the dead, the gravity had no more authority over the body risen from the dead. It became natural for it to be taken up, and to lift up with Him everyone who became attached to Him or became a member in Him, **“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all peoples to Myself”** (John 12.32).

After His resurrection, His body became clothed with glory and light. But for our sake, He hid that from the eyes, in order that His disciples and all those around them would come in touch with Him, and come to be convinced of His resurrection. He granted a special grace to His disciples to see Him being taken up, He who, when appeared to ‘Saul’ of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, Saul trembled with confusion, **“Suddenly a light shone around him from heaven, then he fell to the ground”** (Acts 9.3-4).

He hid His glory from the eyes of those who encountered Him, until He was taken up in a cloud before their eyes, then the veil was lifted up from His glory, and it became impossible for the human eye to see Him, except when He grants us the resurrection of our bodies, to come to be like His glorified body, **“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory”** (Mark 13.26).

❖ We were granted this because of “the body” presented by the Lord. He presented to the Father the ‘Firstborn of our nature’. And because of the dignity of the ‘Presenter’, and the perfection of the ‘Receiver’, the Father found the Gift acceptable, received It by His hand, and embraced It, saying to

the incarnated Lord, **“Sit on My right hand”** (Luke 20.42). Has not ‘the humanity united with the Deity’ ascended to what is beyond heavens!

Is this not a non-measurable dignity!

Our nature was lifted up in the Person of the incarnated God, beyond the heavens, exalted above the arch-angels and the Cherubim, soared above the Seraphim, higher than all heavenly hosts, and found comfort in the divine throne alone ...

In the past, the behavior of our race has been so evil, to the extent that all human race became in danger of being wiped out from the face of the earth. But now, we, who were counted before as unworthy of remaining on earth, are now being lifted up to heaven.

We, who were before unworthy of the earthly glory, are lifted up now to the heavenly kingdom, and enter heaven to take our place before the divine throne.

Our nature, against which the Cherubim once guarded the gates of paradise, is now lifted up over the Cherubim!

How can we pass over such a great event (the feast of ascension), so swiftly!

Having offended such great mercies, that we became unworthy of the earth itself, and fell down from every authority and dignity, how could we be worthy of being lifted up to such exalted dignity!

How did the struggle come to an end!

Why did God’s wrath come to an end!

It is really amazing: Peace has come, not through the work of those who have aroused the wrath of God. ... But He, who has been reasonably angry on us, is Himself calling us to peace, the apostle says, **“Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us”** (1 Cor. 5.20). What does this mean? Despite our offense against Him, It is He, who seeks us and calls us to peace. It is really amazing, It is God, the loving God Who calls us¹!

❖ This too was a sure sign that He went up to Heaven. Not fire, as in the case of Elijah, nor fiery chariot but **“a cloud received Him” which was a symbol of Heaven, as the Prophet says; “He makes the clouds His chariot”** (Ps. 104.3). It is of the Father Himself that this is said. Therefore he says, **“on a cloud;”** in the symbol, he would say, of the Divine power, for no other Power is seen to appear on a cloud. For hear again what another Prophet says: **“Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud”** (Isa. 19.1). ... Also on the mount [Sinai], the cloud was because of Him: since Moses also entered into the darkness, but the cloud there was not because of Moses².

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ **“Who makes the clouds His chariots, Who walks on the wings of the wind”** (Ps. 104.3). By this He refers to His divine care that reaches everywhere, riding on winds and clouds. By Himself, He

¹ *In Ascensione. 50.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.*

controls and guides every thing, and at the right time He grants the resulting benefits. He also refers to the fact that the divine nature is present everywhere, searching everything, as the wind is the swiftest of all material things, crossing from the west to the east , and from east to west in a twinkle. Finding no closer analogy to swift motion than the wind, he says that God walks on the wings of the wind.

We also see the God of all, making His personal appearance to the children of Israel in the tabernacle, in a cloud (Exod. 13.21, 40.34). And when King Solomon dedicated the new temple, a cloud covered it (2 Chron. 5.13-14).

Christ the Lord on the mountain, together with the three apostles, gave a glimpse of a bright cloud around Him (Matt. 17.5), And in His ascension, **“a cloud received Him out of their sight”**¹

(Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

❖ “He ascended into heaven and is no longer here. He is there, indeed, sitting at the right hand of the Father; and He is here also, having never withdrawn the presence of His glory”².

(St. Augustine)

❖ “And when He had thus shown them that there is truly a resurrection of the flesh, wishing to show them this also, that it is not impossible for flesh to ascend into heaven (as He had said that our dwelling-place is in heaven), **“A cloud received Him out of their sight”, as He was in the flesh**”³.

(St. Justin)

“And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel” (Acts 1.10).

Longing for ministering and testifying to Him, two angels appeared to testify to His ascension. They were probably the same two angels who, in the tomb, testified to His resurrection⁴.

They saw two angels, human-like, clothed in white apparel, as though clothed in light, a sign of purity, joy, and glory, the way angels used to appear (Matt. 28.3; Mark 16.5; John 20.12). The redeemed appear in heaven walking together with the Savior, clothed in white apparel, as it is said, **“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments”** (Rev. 3.5, 7.9, 13-14).

❖ "Inasmuch, however, as the sight of their eyes even here was not all-sufficient; for in the Resurrection they saw the end, but not the beginning, and in the Ascension they saw the beginning, but not the end: because in the former it had been superfluous to have seen the beginning, the Lord Himself Who spoke these things being present, and the sepulchre showing clearly that He is not there; but in the latter, they needed to be informed of the sequel by word of others: inasmuch then as their eyes do not

¹ Comment. On Ps. 104.

² Joan .Tr. 50.13.

³ On the Resurrection. 9.

⁴ Barnes. Notes on Acts. 1.10.

suffice to show them the height above, nor to inform them whether He is actually gone up into heaven, ... the Angels themselves inform them. Observe how it is ordered, that not all is done by the Spirit, but the eyes also do their part¹"

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "Again, the outward appearance is cheering "**in white apparel**". They were Angels, in the form of men²,"

(St. Chrysostom)

- ❖ "And yet the space between angels and men is great; nevertheless he brings them down near to us, all but saying, For us they labor, for our sake they run to and fro: on us, as one might say, they wait. This is their ministry, for our sake to be sent every way³."

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "And when He comes, loaded with victory and with trophies, with His body which has risen from the dead, ... then there are certain powers which say, "**Who is this who comes with dyed (red) garments from Bozrah?**" Then those who escort Him say to those that are upon the heavenly gates, "**Lift up your heads, O you gates, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in**" (Ps. 24.7)⁴."

(The Scholar Origen)

- ❖ Today, the feast of ascension, the angels got back those whom they lost a long time ago. Today, the archangels saw those whom they longed to see, a long time ago. Today, they saw our nature (as the Son, the Word, united with it) in the divine throne, glittering in an eternal beauty and an everlasting glory. That was what the angels have so long wished to see. That was what the archangels anticipated. Although the human nature exalted above them in dignity, yet they rejoiced for the good that came to us, having been sad when we were punished.

Despite the fact that the Cherubim stood guarding the gates of paradise (when we were driven out), they were grieved for our affliction, Just like, when a slave holds the hand of a fellow slave in the presence of his master, to put him in prison, and guard him, yet he grieves for the affliction of his friend. This is to demonstrate how the Cherubim were sad for the fate of humans; the heavenly hosts are definitely more compassionate than humans. Who among humans does not grieve, when he sees others punished, even if the punishment is justified for what they have committed!

This compassion is something to commend, as despite their knowledge of the offenses of humans, and their realization that they have committed a serious crime, the Cherubim grieved for them

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Homily 2.*

³ *Homilies on Hebrews. Hom. 3.4.*

⁴ *Comm. On Joan. 6.37.*

from their hearts. This is also demonstrated by Moses, who, after his people committed idolatry, said to God, **“And now, if You will forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written”** (Exod. 32.32). What do you mean Moses? Despite their idolatry, you grieve to see them punished! He responds saying: Yes I do, I grieve to see them punished, despite their horrible offense! If Moses, Ezekiel (Ezek. 9.8), and Jeremiah (Jer. 10.24), all grieved for the sake of sinners, do you find it strange that the heavenly hosts show compassion for the sake of our afflictions?

They consider our affairs as though their own; that is why, their joy is immense when they see our reconciliation with God. They would not so rejoice, if they did not grieve for our sake in the first place. Their joy is clear from the words of the Lord Christ Himself, **“I say to you that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents”** (Luke 15.7). If the angels rejoice when they see one sinner going back to God in repentance, how could they not greatly celebrate when they see the whole human nature, in its Firstborn, ascending today to heaven!

Listen also, in another situation, to the joy of the heavenly hosts, when we resume our friendship with God. When our Lord was born in the flesh, knowing that, from this moment on, God’s friendship with mankind replaces animosity, or else, He would not have come down among them ... Having seen that, a heavenly legion praised, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”** (Luke 2.14).

Do you want to know the extent of their joy, as they watched Christ ascending to heaven? Listen to His words about them, how they perpetually ascend and descend, as though they are anticipating a new amazing thing to happen. And where were they ascending and descending? Listen to the words of the Lord, **“Hereafter, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”** (John 1.51).

That is the sign of the compassionate hearts, full of love, not waiting for the pre-assigned time, but acting in precedence of the hour of joy. They kept on ascending and descending with yearning and love, anticipating that new and amazing revelation, concerning the incarnated God, who appears in heaven. Because of that, angels appeared when He was born; when He resurrected; and when He ascended to heaven; the Holy Book says, **“Two men stood by them in white apparel”** which proclaims their joy. They said to the disciples, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? The same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven...”** (Acts 1.10, 11).

Concentrate with me! Why did they say that to the disciples? Have not the disciples seen what occurred before them? Did not the Evangelist say, **“While they watched, He was taken up?”** Why then, did the two angels stand by them and told them about His ascension to heaven? This was for two reasons:

1- Because the disciples started to feel sad because Christ was leaving them ... **“None of you asks Me: Where are you going? But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts”** (John 16.5-6).

That is why the angels stood by those who were sad, to assure them that He was going to come again: ***“The same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven”*** (Acts 1.11).

Are you sad because He ascended? ... Do not be, because He will come again. So they said, so that they would not do like Elisha who tore his own clothes, when he saw his master Elijah going up into heaven (2 Kings 2.12), There was no one to tell him that he will come again. To spare them from doing that, the two angels stood by them, to comfort them, and to take away the sorrow that filled their hearts.

2- **The second reason** is not less important than the first one, as they added: **“The same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven ...”** As the distance between them and heaven is vast, and their sight could not follow as His body is taken up there, the two angels stood by them, to clarify the situation, so that they would not assume that He was taken up to where Elijah is; He actually ascended to heaven. **“He, who was taken up from you into heaven”**: That was not added without reason: Elijah, being just a servant, was taken up, (as though) to heaven; Whereas Jesus, the Lord, was actually taken up to heaven (where the divine throne is).

Elijah was taken up in a chariot, whereas Jesus was taken up in a cloud. When the servant was called, a chariot was sent to him, whereas the Son has the divine throne -the throne of His Father. It came in the Book of Isaiah: **“...Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud”** (19.1).

As Elijah was taken up, his cloak fell upon Elisha (2 Kings 2.13); whereas, when Jesus ascended, He sent grace to all His disciples, and not to one prophet, but to many like Elisha, and to those who are even more glorious than him.

Let us stand up, beloved brethren, and lift up our eyes toward Him, who will return, as Paul says, **“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. ... Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”** (1 Thess. 4.16-17). Yet, not everyone will enjoy that. Some will ascend to heaven, while others will be left back. ...

Listen to the words of Christ: **“Two women will be grinding at the mill, One will be taken and the other left”** (Matt. 24.41).

Shall we be among those who will ascend?

When I say “we”, I count myself as (unworthy) of being among them; for, I am not without feeling or understanding to disregard my sins. And for fear that I would spoil the joy of this holy feast, I cry with bitter tears, when I recall in my mind those words, and remember my sins.

Not wishing to take away the joy of this feast, I shall bring this sermon to an end, leaving the joy of this feast radiating in your minds. So, let the rich not rejoice much in their riches, and the poor, let them not be sad for their poverty. Let every man do his work, whatever it is, according to his own conscience.

The happy man is not the rich, nor the poor is miserable, But He is blessed, and even three times blessed, who is found worthy to ascend upon the clouds, even if he is the poorest of all. And he is truly miserable, and three times miserable, who is counted among the lost, even if he is the richest of all¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“They also said: ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Acts 1.11).

As their hometown was Galilee, the angels called them ‘Men of Galilee’.

There is no event in the history of mankind that can amaze man, like the ascension of the Lord Christ over the clouds, which is just the same way as His second coming, to carry His Church in an exalted heavenly procession, and bring her into the eternal glories.

Why were they gazing up into heaven?

1- All of them had their eyes lifted up to watch their Lord ascending to Heaven, probably anticipating in their depths what would happen after that. They were confused: What is His role? And what would be theirs after His ascension?

2- Some believe that they, having been debating with the Lord Christ about the time when the kingdom would be restored to Israel, they assumed that it was high time for Him to reign, and to set the people free from the Roman occupation. But now, as He is ascending before their eyes, they were in great doubt that this would ever happen.

3- Having told them beforehand, that He is ascending to heaven, then coming back, they probably assumed that as he ascended, he is coming back at once, So they kept gazing in anticipation of His soon return.

4- The scene of His glorious ascension was so incredibly fascinating; they kept gazing up into heaven, as though trying to keep it engraved in their minds, the same way as it happened during the event of the transfiguration, when St. Peter asked the Lord, **“It is good, O Lord, to be here”**.

The angels appeared in white apparel to prepare those present for the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ. They talked to them as though His coming would take place in one day or few days, as the angels were not preoccupied with time, but with encountering their God. They wanted the heart of the Church to kindle yearning to the coming of her Groom, as though He is coming within few moments. And as the apostle says, **“It is the last hour”**, now, after 2000 years, we are yearning to see Him coming, as though we are in our last moments.

❖ **“God has gone up with a shout, The Lord with the sound of a trumpet”** (Ps. 47.5). To consummate all that, God first became human, cast away the avenging devil, then ascended to heaven with the heavenly hosts, preceded by the angels. To those on earth, it was said, **“The same Jesus**

¹ *In Ascensione. Pg.50.*

who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1.11); Whereas, those in the highest, will say, **“Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors”** (Ps. 24.7) ¹.

(Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ “His ascent from earth to heaven, and again, His descent from heaven to earth, are manifestations of the energies of His circumscribed body²”.
- ❖ “And when He was received again into Heaven He was borne towards the East, and thus His apostles worship Him, and thus He will come again in the way in which they beheld Him going towards Heaven; as the Lord Himself said, **“For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also the coming of the Son of Man be”** (Matt. 24.27). So, then, in expectation of His coming we worship towards the East. But this tradition of the apostles is unwritten. For much that has been handed down to us by tradition is unwritten³”.

(Fr. John of Damascus).

While gazing up in amazement, two angels drew their hearts to another similar scene, when the Lord Christ will come on the clouds, as though by a divine chariot, to carry His holy bride, with Him to the heavenly home, the home of matrimony, to live in the divine bosom.

- ❖ As they were amazed to see Him ascending to heaven, they were equally overjoyed, because the lifting up of the head is the hope of the other body members. Moreover, they heard the angelic message: **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus ... will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven”** (Acts 1.11). What is the meaning of **“will so come in like manner?”** He will come in the same shape, to fulfill the Scripture: **“They shall look on Him whom they pierced”** (Zech. 12.10; John 19.37). He will come to mankind, in a human shape, as an incarnated God; He will come both as a true God and a true Man, to make out of men what is like God. He ascended into heaven as a judge, So let us be justified, so as not to fear the coming judgment⁴.
- ❖ "In what manner did they see Him go? In the flesh, which they touched, which they handled. the wounds even of which they proved by touching; in that body in which He went in and out with them for forty days, manifesting Himself to them in truth, not in falsity; not a phantom, or shadow, or ghost, but, as Himself said, not deceiving them, **“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have”** (Luke 24.39). That body is now indeed worthy of a heavenly habitation, not being subject to death, nor mutable by

¹ *Comment on Ps. 47.*

² *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith. 4.1.*

³ *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith. 4.12.*

⁴ *Sermons. 265.1.*

the lapse of ages. It is not as it had grown to that age from infancy, so from the age of manhood declines to old age: He remains as He ascended, to come to those to whom He willed His word to be preached before He comes. Thus will He come in human form, and this form the wicked will see; both they on the right shall see it, and they that are separated to the left shall see it: as it is written, **“They shall look on Him whom they pierced”** (Zech. 12.10; John 19.37). God hidden in the body they will not see: after the judgment He will be seen by those who will be on the right hand¹.

- ❖ “that is, in the form of man in which He was judged, will He judge, in order that also that prophetic utterance may be fulfilled, **“They shall look on Him whom they pierced”**. **But when the righteous go into eternal life, we shall see Him as He is; that will not be the judgment of the living and the dead, but only the reward of the living²**”.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within. And upon the coming of an affectionate father, his children indeed, and those who are worthy to be his children, are taken out in a chariot, that they may see and kiss him; but those of the domestics who have offended remain within. We are carried upon the chariot of our Father. For He received Him up in the clouds, and **"we shall be caught up in the clouds."** **Do you** see how great is the honor? And as He descends, we go forth to meet Him, and, what is more blessed than all, so we shall be with Him³”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Pope Athanasius the apostolic⁴ believes that this is a confirmation that we worship the ascending incarnated Lord, who will also come in a like manner, As some have stumbled in Christ because of His body.

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey” (Acts 1.12).

That scene flared their heart, and **“they returned to Jerusalem with great joy”** (Luke 24.52). The distance between the Mount and Jerusalem was “a Sabbath day’s journey”, namely, one kilometer. Although not fixed by the law, yet according to the Jewish tradition, this distance was about 2000 steps, as it was not allowed for anyone, including the Levites, to dwell more than 2000 steps away from the tabernacle, to be able to walk to the tabernacle to worship on the Sabbath.

¹ Joan. Tr. 21.13.

² Joan. Tr. 36.12.

³ Hom. On Thess. Hom. 8.

⁴ Epistles, 60 to Adelpium, 5.

The Lord's ascension brought them an inner joy, as they began to realize that the kingdom of Christ is in heaven; and where He reigns they will also do. That inner joy granted them strength to challenge all circumstances, as it is said, **"The joy of the Lord is your strength"** (Neh. 8.10). All what preoccupied their minds was to testify to Him before the whole world, to be **"looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God"** (2 Pet. 3.12).

The apostles did not ask the two angels about the time when the Lord would come again, as their thoughts were absorbed by Him who ascended to heaven, and they realized the meaning of what the Psalmist has said before, **"The (clouds) and the**

Darkness under His feet" (Ps. 18.9). They realized that He is the Lord of heaven, and as St. John Chrysostom says, "For as a king is shown by the royal chariot, so was the royal chariot sent for Him¹".

***"And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the brother of James"** (Acts 1.13).*

The list of the twelve apostles came in (Matt. 10.2; Mark 3.16; Luke 6.14).

Simon the Canaanite, namely of Caana, was also called the Zealot, having been a member of the Zealot group, that sought freedom from the Roman occupation through the use of force, drawing their principles from Phinehas who showed zeal for the house of the Lord (Num. 25.10-13). Josephus, the Jewish Historian, believes that they were connected to "Theudas" the revolutionist (Acts 5.37), who led an uprising against the Romans in the year 6 AD. Although he failed, his followers continued to adopt his lead, and carried out an uprising in the year 66 AD, that ended by the entry of Titus into Jerusalem in the year 70 AD, and the burning and complete destruction of the temple.

They used to assemble in the upper room of the house of Mary the mother of St. Mark the apostle, that seemed to be big enough to accommodate a great number of them, as is said, **"Where they were staying"**. The women might have stayed in the lower floor, while the upper room was for the men. And when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven as a rushing mighty wind, it filled the whole house (Acts 2.2).

St. John Chrysostom says that the disciples did not show any sign of distress when the Lord Christ ascended to heaven, unlike Elisha who tore his clothes when his master Elijah was taken up to heaven (2 kings 2.12). The Evangelist St. Luke says, **"They worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God"** (Luke 24.52, 53). It seems that the secret of their Joy was what the angel said, **"He will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven"** (Acts 1.11). His ascension and their hope in His Second Coming have turned their life into continuous praise in the temple of God.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 2.

“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1.14).

The words “**continued**” in prayer and supplication, in Greek, do not mean just keeping on doing that, but carry the sense of doing that with a flaring zeal, with honesty, and loyalty. That most probably means praying those ritual prayers of the hours, with all what they include of 18 supplications or blessings.

The book of Acts reveals the nature of the Church, being a holy congregation, continuously praying and supplicating with one accord.

❖ ”For this is a powerful weapon in temptations; and to this they had been trained.[“Continuing with one accord.”¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The Church embraced “women”, who followed Him from Galilee (Luke 8.1-3): those who were with Him at the crucifixion and the tomb (Matt. 27.55-57), as well as, “**many other women who came up with Him of Jerusalem**” (Mark 15.41). His brothers, according to St. Jerome, were the sons of His aunt (Mark 15.40).

4-THE CONSUMMATION OF THE NUMBER OF DISCIPLES

“And in those days, Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said” (Acts 1.15).

The expression “**stood up**”, means that he set forth to do something. Why did St. Peter play that role, when he was not the Bishop of Jerusalem?

Some believe that this was because he was the eldest of them all, while others believe that it was because he was zealous by nature. Anyway, the disciples were not preoccupied by who among them to stand up and do something.

Choosing the twelfth disciple, to replace Judas Iscariot, took place in the presence and fellowship of the whole congregation (**about 120**).

❖ “The priest should be chosen in the presence of the people under the eyes of all, and should be approved worthy and suitable by public judgment and testimony; as in the book of Numbers the Lord commanded Moses, saying, “**Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor, ... in the sight of all the congregation**” (Num. 20.25- 27). God commands a priest to be appointed in the presence of all the assembly; that is, He instructs and shows that the ordination of priests ought not to be solemnized except with the knowledge of the people standing near²”.

(Martyr Cyprian)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

² Epistles. 67.4.

As to mentioning the figure 120, it is because, according to the Jewish tradition, this is the smallest number that qualifies any group to be called a congregation that has the right to manage its own affairs. That does not mean that there were no other believers in the Lord Christ, but those were the ones who assembled in the upper room. They were called ‘disciples’, as they counted themselves students in the school of the Lord Christ.

St. Peter the apostle stood up to talk to the congregation about God’s choice of a disciple to replace Judas Iscariot.

St. John Chrysostom wonders “Why did he not ask Christ to give him some one in the room of Judas? It is better as it is. For in the first place, they were engaged in other things; secondly, of Christ's presence with them, the greatest proof that could be given was this: as He had chosen when He was among them, so did He now being absent. Now this was no small matter for their consolation¹”.

❖ “Again, consider the moderation of James. He it was who received the Bishopric of Jerusalem, and here he says nothing. Mark also the great moderation of the other Apostles, how they concede the throne to him, and no longer dispute with each other. For that Church was as it were in heaven: having nothing to do with this world's affairs: and resplendent not with wails, no, nor with numbers, but with the zeal of them that formed the assembly. They were "**about a hundred and twenty,**" it says. The seventy perhaps whom Christ Himself had chosen, and other of the more earnest-minded disciples, as Joseph and Matthias (5.14). There were women, he says, many, who followed Him (Mark 15.41)²”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

In his comment on that event, **St. John Chrysostom** compares between what happened at that time and what was going on in his days. At the time of the apostles, there was no controversy between those chosen for the apostolic or Episcopal work, as the Episcopate is the receiving of the burdens of others, and not the enjoyment of comfort and dignity.

❖ "But let me say why it is that the thing has become a subject of competition: it is because we come to the Episcopate not as unto a work of governing and superintending the brethren, but as to a post of dignity and repose. Did you but know that a Bishop is bound to belong to all, to bear the burden of all; that others, if they are angry, are pardoned, but he never; that others, if they sin, have excuses made for them, he has none; you would not be eager for the dignity, would not run after it. So it is, the Bishop is exposed to the tongues of all, to the criticism of all, whether they be wise or fools. He is harassed with cares every day, nay, every night. He has many to hate him, many to envy him. Talk not to me of those who curry favor with all, of those who desire to sleep, of those who advance to this

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.*

office as for repose. We have nothing to do with these; we speak of those who watch for your souls, who consider the safety and welfare of those under them before their own¹".

❖ "I do not think there are many among Bishops that will be saved, but many more that perish: and the reason is, that it is an affair that requires a great mind. ... The loss of one soul carries with it a penalty which no language can represent. For if the salvation of that soul was of such value, that the Son of God became man, and suffered so much, think how sore a punishment must the losing of it bring! ... Do not tell me, that the presbyter is in fault, or the deacon. The guilt of all these comes perforce upon the head of those who ordained them²".

❖ "I mean, that even if you have sinned, but in your own person merely, you will have no such great punishment, nothing like it: but if you have sinned as bishop, you are lost³".

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus"(Acts 1.16).

"Men and brethren" is an expression directed to someone of dignity and integrity, whether man or woman.

❖ "**Men and brethren,**" says Peter. For if the Lord called them brethren, much more may he. ["Men," he says]: they all being present. See the dignity of the Church, the angelic condition! No distinction there, "neither male nor female." I would that the Churches were such now! None there had his mind full of some worldly matter⁴".

(St. John Chrysostom)

The reference to the prophecies concerning Judas Iscariot, and his ultimate destiny (Ps. 41.9), proves that those events, of utmost importance, happened according to a divine plan. It also reveals that the Church since its early days was preoccupied with all the prophecies of the Old Testament.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Here, St. Peter presents to us the way of divine comforts; the enjoyment of the prophecies of the Old Testament gives comfort to the soul, and assurance that the faith we live, is an indisputable truth, as all those events were previously proclaimed by God through the prophets, hundreds and in some cases thousands of years before the coming of the Lord Christ. A scholar can recognize by the Spirit, all the events of salvation, from the Old Testament, that was, and still is, in the hands of the Jews before the coming of the Lord Christ. That is concerning the salvation plan of God for the whole world, through which we realize the care of God for the salvation and glory of every one of us personally.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

⁴ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

- ❖ **“This Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before”**. Always he comforts them by the prophecies. So does Christ on all occasions. In the very same way, he shows here that no strange thing had happened, but what had already been foretold¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

This is the secret of our comfort on the level of the world, the Church, and the individual himself; what comforts us is that the Holy Spirit Himself is the Leader of the Church since its beginning. That is why St. Peter did not say: “spoken by David”, but **“which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David”**, being the true leader along the generations, to carry the Church of God, both in the Old Testament, and the New Testament, to the eternal glory.

St. John Chrysostom comments on this phrase, “Do you see, that it was not for nothing that I said in the beginning of this work, that this book is the Polity (leadership) of the Holy Spirit?²”.

St. John Chrysostom often commented on what the gospels and the book of Acts said about Judas, as the evangelists, and here also St. Peter, speak about him, referring to the events and the prophecies without mocking from their sides. St. Peter presents the bare fact, not accusing him as a traitor to His Lord, or describing him as a miserable creature. The speech of the apostle confirms that what the prophet David said about him in the psalms was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

- ❖ Wherever the Word is, there is also the Spirit. ... The Spirit is not separated from the Son. ... When the word came to the prophet, the prophet was talking by the Spirit, about the issues given to him by the Word. Thus, in the book of Acts, it was written that Peter said, **“This Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before”** (Acts 1.16). And Zechariah, when the word came to him, he said, **“Yet surely My words and My statutes which I commanded My servants the prophets”** (Zech. 1.6). And when he rebuked the people, he said, **“Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts has sent by His Spirit through the former prophets”** (Zech. 7.12). The Lord Christ spoke in Paul, as he said about himself, **“Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me”** (2 Cor. 13.3). No one could grant him the strength to talk except the Spirit that he had, as he said, **“through ... the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (in me)”** (Phil. 1.19). And also when Christ spoke in him, he said, **“... except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me”** (Acts 20.23). Because the Spirit is not outside the Word, but as He is the Word, He is in God by the Word. The spiritual talents are so granted in the Trinity³.

(St. Athanasius)

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.*

³ *On the Holy Spirit. 3.5.*

- ❖ The action of the Trinity is one. The apostle does not mean that what is given (2 Cor. 13.13) is given various and divided, but is so given in the Trinity, and all of One God. ... Therefore when the Word is given to prophets, they prophesy by the Holy Spirit; and when the Book says, “... **to whom the word of the Lord came**” (Jer. 1.2; Mic. 1.1). This means that he is prophesying by the Holy Spirit¹.
(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

“For he was numbered with us, and obtained a part in this ministry” (Acts 1.17).

Our Lord Jesus Christ has chosen Judas as an apostle (Luke 6.13-16); thus, he was counted as one of the apostles, But he was not a believer true in his faith, as before betraying his Master, the Lord called him “**a devil**” (John 6.70).

The Lord Christ definitely knew about him, So why did he choose him, and handed him the treasury, when he knew that he was a robber and a thief?

Some believe that the Lord Christ chose Judas despite His foreknowledge of what he was going to do, because, at that time, he was ready to believe in the Lord, and to follow Him; that is, he had some good in him. The Lord did not deal with him on account of what he would be, but on account of what he was, at the time he was chosen. St. Augustine believes that the Lord Christ chose him and did not judge him, even at the time of the actual treason, to teach the Church not to be much preoccupied with judgment, but with the positive aspect of preaching, of ministry, and of the proclamation of love, so as to give the chance, even to the traitors, to return to God in repentance, if they intend to.

God allowed the presence of Judas among the disciples, and did not publicly reveal his identity as a traitor and a thief, until the end, so as to let us realize that it is not only among the ministered, but even among the ministers themselves that we find tares and not wheat, and that it is not for us to uproot the tares as long as they are hidden among the wheat, until the time comes to sort them out.

God allows even the evildoers to work, and being a Sanctifier of the freedom of man, He would not commit them to repent. If they do repent, that would be for their own edification and glory, but if they persist on their evil, He will turn even their evil for the edification of many. He also allowed the presence of Judas among the disciples, to give a lesson to all generations, about the danger of greed and the love of money, even among the ministers of the word, as there would never be a more serious crime in history, than that of Judas, the lover of money. It is an old sin that had and still has authority on many. God warned us against it, as He brought up His people into Canaan, when Achan the son of Carmi hid the silver, the garment, and the wedge of gold, breaking the commandment of God, for the sake of his love for money, and he perished (Josh. 7.21). And here, Judas betrays his Lord, and Simon, in the Book of Acts, seeks to acquire the power of the Holy Spirit for money.

The Greek word “**numbered**” means ‘a pebble or a tiny stone’, as pebbles were used in counting.

¹ *On the Holy Spirit. 1.33.*

He calls the choice of somebody a “**part**”, -lot- as man has no favor in his being chosen as a minister, but it is the grace of God that chooses and works in whom it does, if they faithfully walk in their call.

- ❖ “He calls it everywhere "lot," showing that the whole is from God's grace and election, and reminding them of the old times, inasmuch as God chose him into His own lot or portion, as of old He took the Levites¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“(Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity, And falling headlong, He burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out)”(Acts 1.18).

The Evangelist St. Matthew mentioned how Judas gave back the silver to the chief priests and the elders, feeling remorse for betraying innocent blood, yet with no hope in the Lord the Forgiver of sins. They refused to take it back, counting the money as his, and probably because they felt as well that it is the price of innocent blood. When Judas threw down the pieces of silver in the temple, they bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in it. St. Peter considered as though it was purchased by Judas himself. In the Greek version ‘Lostkot and Hort’, came the phrase “**purchased a field with the wages of iniquity**”, between brackets, indicating that it is not said by St. Peter, but is rather a comment by St. Luke the author of the Book of Acts.

The Lord Christ covered up for Judas all along those years, Yet Judas did not cover up for himself, he was exposed before the world, as he will be in the great day of the Lord. His body entrails gushed out, as well as those of his soul that were corrupted by his betrayal to the Lord Himself.

There were different theories as far as Judas’ death is concerned:

1- The prevailing theory was that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself, but, because of his weight, the rope was torn, and Judas fell headlong, probably on a rock, burst open in the middle, and all his entrails gushed out.

2- He hanged himself in a waste land, where his body rotted, his belly swollen, then burst open, and the stray dogs came and violated his remains.

3- Having been overcome by despair and terror, he threw himself down from the roof of his house, and his belly burst open.

4- The scholar Lightfoot believes that, as the devil entered into him, he carried him up in the air, and then cast him down to the earth, to have his belly burst open.

5- The scholar Wakefield believes that he died because of his intense grief.

Yet, some other scholars give a symbolic interpretation of the death of Judas by hanging, and the gushing of his entrails, that this refers to his falling down from his exalted position as an apostle of the

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

Lord Christ, to the bottom of the abyss, as a betrayer to the Lord. He lost his position and dignity, became in shame and disgrace before everyone, as his entrails gushed out to be despised by all.

“And it became known to all those dwelling in Jerusalem, so that field is called in their own language, ‘Akel dama’, that is, (field of blood)” (Acts 1.19).

Some believe that Judas, intending to carry the image of piety and love, even while negotiating treason, he claimed before the Jewish leaderships that he was going to use the pieces of silver to purchase a field to bury strangers. Throwing the silver down in the temple, they realized his wish and counted it as though he himself has done the purchase, as it was his own money. The Jews probably spread such news among the people, to proclaim that, because Judas did not ask for the silver as a price for handing over his Master, out of greed, but for the sake of doing a service to the strangers, they realized his wish even after his suicide.

That field was called in the Chaldean- Syrian language (Syro-Chaladic), ‘Akel Dama’; that is, (field of blood), on account that it was purchased with the price of the Lord’s life, or of His blood shed on the cross. This name remained testifying to the crime of treason that was committed by Judas, for several generations to come.

“For it is written in the book of Psalms: ‘Let his habitation be desolate, and let no one live in it’, and, ‘let another take his office’” (Acts 1.20).

What is mentioned here came in psalms 69.25, 28, 109.8, and was not said by St. Peter to judge Judas or to defame him, but out of a feeling of responsibility to fulfill the command of the Lord Christ to him, **“When you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren”** (Luke 22, 32). He felt committed to consummate the number of the apostles to twelve, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22.29-30): **“And I bestow upon you a kingdom just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on the thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel”**

The prophecy about Judas in (Ps. 69.25, 28), came in the plural form, as it does not only refer to Judas alone, but to all those who followed his lead, namely the chief priests and the elders of the people. That applied to all of them, and having committed treason, they were deprived of their priestly work, and their ministry as overseers of the temple or the new house of the Lord.

That field became his dwelling place that he purchased with the silver he earned for betraying his Master, It became a burying field for the strangers who die in Jerusalem. With his silver, they purchased that field full of desolation, and which is, according to St. John Chrysostom, a prelude to what was going to happen to Jerusalem as a whole, when it turned into a field of blood for a great multitude of Jews, by the hands of ‘Titus’ the Roman leader in the year 70 AD.

The word **“his office”** in Greek means (his Episcopate); that is, acting as an Overseer.

“Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time That the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John to the day when He was taken up from us, One of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection”(Acts 1.21, 22).

What are the qualifications of the one called to that ministry?

1- He must have been a contemporary of the Lord Christ, watched His baptism, listened to Him, and was enlightened by His teachings.

2- The expression **“went in and out”** refers to being in the company of that person in every aspect of life. He must have accompanied the Lord Christ until the day of His crucifixion, and must have accompanied the disciples. His choice is not to be just a realization of the figure 12, but he should be well qualified for the apostolic work.

3- By saying: **“a witness with us of His resurrection”**, St. Peter concentrates on his enjoyment of the experience of resurrection with Christ, that truly changed the believers’ concepts and their capabilities, as St. Peter says in his epistle, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”** (1 Pet. 1.3).

❖ “He said not, a witness of the rest of his actions, but a witness of the resurrection alone. ... For the other matters were manifest and acknowledged, but the resurrection took place in secret, and was manifest to these only. And they do not say, Angels have told us; but, We have seen. For this it was that was most needful at that time: that they should be men having a right to be believed, because they had seen¹”.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surname Justus, and Matthias”
(Acts 1.23).

Those two were most probably characterized by being prudent, wise, and pious, and might have been older than others. As it was difficult to choose one of them, they resorted to God to do the choice, by casting their lots after praying. Here we notice how God gave His Church the freedom to choose the ministers, based on commitment to criteria that are fitting for them.

“Joseph called Barsabas” or ‘Bashaba’ means who is born on a Sabbath, or the son of the Sabbath. Some believe that ‘Barsaba’ is derived from two Syrian words: ‘Bar’, meaning (son), and ‘Sabas’, meaning (comfort, calmness, and captivity).

Some believe that he is the same person mentioned in Acts 4.16, by the name of ‘Barnabas’, but there is no proof of that. Whereas the scholar Lightfoot believes that he is the son of Alpheus, James’ younger brother, and that he was chosen because of his relation to the Lord Christ. He was called Justus, a Latin name meaning (righteous), probably because of his straightforward personality.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

Eusebius of Caesarea tells about Philip of Sidon: that Pabius tells about the virgin prophetesses daughters of Philip (Acts 21.9), that Justus drank the venom of a snake in the name of our Lord Jesus, and was not harmed, challenging some of those who denied the faith, depending on the promise of the Lord, **“If they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them”** (Mark 16.18).

Matthias means (God’s gift). We know nothing about his background or his person, more than that he shared with the apostles their labor, suffered persecution, and got the blessing of preaching the gospel. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, he was one of the 70 chosen by the Lord Christ, and preached in Ethiopia¹.

St. John Chrysostom comments on mentioning Matthias after Joseph called Barsabas, saying,

❖ “Again, it is not without reason that he puts Matthias last; he would show, that frequently he that is honorable among men, is inferior before God²”.

“They prayed and said: ‘You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen’ (Acts 1.24).

They resorted to the spirit of prayer to God who knows the hearts, to show which of these two was more qualified for the work. Knowing the hearts is something only for God. **“I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind”** (Ps, 139.1, 23; Jer. 17.10). Our Lord Jesus Christ was described by this divine trait, that is only His: **“All the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts”** (Rev. 2.23).

Some believe that this procedure -that was followed in the Old Testament- was no longer followed after the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the day of the Pentecost, who intervenes in the life of the Church, to seek the counsel of God, as it came in separating Barnabas and Saul to minister among the Gentiles (Acts 13.2-3).

“O Lord”: After the crucifixion, the disciples used to address the Lord Christ as ‘The Lord’ or ‘God’, with no discerning between the two titles (John 20.28; Acts 1.6, 7.59).

“To take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place” (Acts 1.25).

Judas fell from his ministry to desolation, and was replaced by Matthias, to enjoy the ministry of glory.

The word “lot” or ‘Tov’, in the Coptic versions, in the Vulgate, and Bezae, meant (position) or to occupy his apostolic position.

“... That he might go to his own place”: When Judas purchased the ‘field of blood’, or the chief priests and the Pharisees purchased it on his behalf, Judas gave away his apostolic position to go to the place that he purchased by the silver of treason. Some believe that the word **“his own place”** here

¹ H.E. 3.39.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 3.

refers to his original place. When he was chosen as an apostle, he left his place among his family to become a member of the divine family, but having practiced treason of his own accord, he returned to his family and old friends. Other people believe that the expression **“that he might go to his own place”** is a common one, and refers to death, by which one goes to his final place, whether it is with Christ, or in hell with the devil, until the ultimate day of the Lord. That is why, according to the Jewish interpretation of the expression¹: **“Then Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place”** (Num. 24.25), that he returned to hell, his destiny.

In the Targum, namely, rewriting the Chaldean version of the phrase that came in the book of Ecclesiastes: **“Even if he lived a thousand years twice over – but has not seen goodness”** (without studying the law and practicing justice), on the day of his death, his soul will go down to the abyss – the place where all sinners go. In a letter from St Ignatius to the Magnesians, he says, +“Seeing, then, all things have an end, these two things are simultaneously set before us-death and life; and every one shall go unto his own place.”

Thus, Judas went to the place that fits his greed and treason, as he had no place in the Church of Christ here, and in paradise, where the Lord Christ is.

By saying “his own place”, the Holy Book reveals that the evildoers have no right to complain, as they go to the place that they have chosen for themselves, and that fits their persons. They cannot cross over to heaven, where they have no place.

❖ **“He went to his own place”** (Acts 1.25): that evil man himself chose to be a sinner, he did what he would, and suffered what he would not. In that he did what he would, his sin is discovered; in that he suffered what he would not, the order of God is praised².

(St. Augustine)

“And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1.26).

Actually the mere death of Judas was not the reason for the need for filling his apostolic position, as when the apostle James was martyred by the sword of Herod, the disciples did not assemble to choose an apostle in his place, but the falling down of Judas from the apostleship and his treason created the need for this.

We do not know exactly how the lot was done, but it was the custom to bring two pieces of wood, metal, or paper, write the name of one of the two persons on one of them, and the name of the other person on the other piece, then put them in a pot. After prayers and supplications, someone would put his hand and draw a piece, and the name on it would be God’s choice.

¹ Jewish Tract. Baal Urim.

² Sermon on the Mount. 75.5.

It was not for the sake of the completion of the figure 12, but because the figure 12 in both the Old and the New Testaments refers to the kingdom of God on earth, where the Holy Trinity (3) reigns on the four corners of the earth (4), to end up with the figure 12.

- ❖ “The number remained a sacred number, a number containing twelve: because they were to make known the Trinity throughout the whole world, that is, throughout the four quarters of the world. That is the reason of the three times four. Judas, then only cut himself off, not profaned the number twelve: he abandoned his Teacher, for God appointed a successor to take his place¹”.

(St. Augustine)

St. Augustine believes that the Lord Christ, as the ‘Light of the World’, is symbolized as (the Day), and the disciples, as the ‘children of the day’ are symbolized as the 12 hours of the day. Christ is the Day or the Light, who dwells among the twelve hours of the day. As Judas became darkness, he was separated from the twelve hours, to be replaced by Matthias².

St. John Chrysostom says that Joseph Barsabas was not disturbed by the choice of Matthias, as every one had his own qualifications and mission. **Not choosing him had not deprived him of his role.** **John Chrysostom** reveals the bitterness of his soul because of the concept of the Episcopate in his time, when people used to fight for what they saw in it of authority and dignity, instead of realizing that the Episcopate is actually the receiving of the burdens of others, and bearing the criticism of all: the prudent and the idiots. Despite caring for every one -day and night, he is the object of hate and envy of many.

Some may wonder: how could Judas fall in betraying his Lord, having realized His divine power and authority, and when he had in his hands the treasury, to steal from it at leisure?

Scholars present several interpretations, of which:

1- Judas, like the rest of the disciples and apostles, even after the resurrection of the Lord, and up till the moments of His ascension, was anticipating a temporal kingdom. And when Judas realized that Jesus flatly refused to become a king, even if it is the request of the multitudes, his hopes were completely destroyed.

2- As someone who loves silver, it was not difficult for the chief priests and the Pharisees, to bait him with silver to betray his Lord.

3- He probably, realizing the authority of His Lord, assumed that he could take the bribe and benefit from it, while nobody could lay his hand on the Lord, or harm Him, on whom death has no authority. Although he would indeed guide them to Him, the Lord would undoubtedly take care of Himself.

¹ In Joan. Tr. 27.10.

² In Joan. Tr. 29.8.

The perpetual preparation for setting the church and its growth

Having gone through what came in this chapter, we can deduce that the Lord Christ has prepared his disciples and apostles and all those around Him, for the birth of the Church; He has prepared them to become His holy Church. This preparation was not a historical event that passed with time, but was a daily preparation and experience, that is fitting for the Church to live, in order to remain a fertile mother, to grow all the time, to become an icon of its Christ, and to embrace every day those who are saved, until the ultimate coming of the Lord. This preparation, as we saw, is the following:

1- We bear our Christ who works and teaches (Acts 1.1), and share this trait with Him, through translating our faith into a work of love, and a true practical testimonial to the sweetness of salvation.

2- We see Him with His disciples, and get in touch with Him every day of our temporal life (the 40 days), to proclaim surely that He is living in us, by true practical proofs (Acts 1.3).

3- We respond to His Holy Spirit, His greatest gift, or even the Giver of gifts, whom we got in the water of Baptism and the anointment of the Myron (Acts 1.5), to lead us all the days of our sojourning, in our daily life, and in our testimony before many.

4- To avoid being preoccupied by the vain knowledge, as for instance, getting to know times and seasons, but to seek the strength and authority given to us, to live by the Spirit of power, not by that of failure and weakness (Acts 1.7-8).

5- We should have always the unique scene of the ascension before our eyes that brings joy to our hearts, and lifts them up to the bosom of the heavenly Father, looking forward with great yearning, to His ultimate coming on the clouds, to carry us with our whole being to His eternal glory (Acts 1.9-11).

6- We should practice the Church life, as though in the upper room, together with the disciples and the whole congregation, and keep praying with one accord (Acts 1.13-14).

7- We should supplicate all the time to God, to send ministers to testify to His resurrection, as He chose Matthias to be numbered with the eleven apostles (Acts 1.24-26).

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 1

TOWARD A NEW BEGINNING

- ❖ Your apostle Luke presented to us the story of how Your Church started.
With every morning we see in this book how Your Church started.
Although it is an old story, it will always remain new,
Crying out: 'Let us start well'.
- ❖ Your speech about the kingdom is sweet and enjoyable
Because it is a proclamation of Your Person, O the perfect love.
You are specifically the kingdom, and without You, there is no kingdom.
- ❖ You promise me not to depart from Jerusalem
- ❖ Until I am clothed with a power from the highest.
You fulfilled Your promise, and granted me Your Spirit, the fire and the light.
Your Spirit makes me an unquenched lamp and a consuming fire.
My soul will not find rest before I see all mankind in Your bosom.
- ❖ Let me go out with You to the Mount of Olives;
What an amazing scene to see You ascending to heaven!
The gravity has no effect on Your body risen from the dead.
The heaven with all its hosts was waiting for Your ascension.
Carry my heart with You,
In it I see Your throne,
And realize the secrets of Your glory.
My heart is ready My Lord, It is ready;
Lift it up with You, so that all my being would also be lifted with You.
- ❖ There, in heaven, You are preoccupied with the salvation of the world,
And on earth, Your apostles are preoccupied with testifying to You,
You are preoccupied with us, and we with You, O Savior of all!
- ❖ Blessed is Your apostle Peter, and blessed are all the other apostles with him.
With his heart flaring with zeal, he seeks someone to bear the portion of Judas.
He sought that, not with the spirit of authority,
But with the spirit of love, and the motivation of ministry and preaching.
Blessed are his brethren, among whom the thought of envy did not sneak,
But, with the spirit of modesty, they all walked together.

Nobody sought dignity, and nobody sought temporal glory.
All are members in Your body, O the heavenly Head.

- ❖ I am perplexed! Shall I bless Matthias, whom You have chosen an apostle?
Or shall I bless Joseph Barsabas, who rejoiced for the choice of his friend!
Blessed are both of them, as they are witnesses for the resurrection of the Lord.
Blessed are you Matthias, for your strife as an apostle;
And blessed are you Joseph for your strife with the talents that the Lord gave you.
- ❖ And now, O Lord listen to my prayer:
Let us start well with each new day!
Let us listen to Your secret talks in the heart!
Let us trust in Your promise, that Your fiery Spirit would work in us!
Let our eyes steadfastly look at Your joyful ascension!
Let us, together with Your apostles, seek ministers with fiery Spirit!
And finally, let us find no rest before we see the world becoming heaven!

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST

In the first chapter, the Evangelist Luke presented a living portrait of the preparations for the birth of the Church of the New Testament, through the speeches of the Lord Christ, risen from the dead, to His disciples, about the kingdom of God, His promise to them that they would gain power from the highest, then His ascension, for the Church to realize her new nature, through her union with the Heavenly, Flaring the hearts for the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ, And finally through the choice of the twelfth disciple in the place of the traitor Judas.

Now, the author of the Book of Acts is presenting a truly amazing scene of the birth of the Church on the day of the Pentecost, when the disciples were baptized by the Holy Spirit, who became the heavenly Leader of the Church, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who grants mankind a renewal of their nature, to bear the icon of the heavenly Groom, and to enjoy new exalted relationships with the Holy Trinity.

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1- A COLLECTIVE ENCOUNTER

“Now, when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord” (Acts 2.1).

The Pentecost used to be seven weeks following the first day of the Passover. It was called **“the feast of the weeks”** or **“the feast of the firstfruits”**, when the first fruits of wheat are offered. It is celebrated on the fiftieth day I.E., counting from the first day after The Passover¹.

It is called the **“Pentecost”** meaning the (fiftieth) (Exod. 34.22; Lev. 23.15-22; Deut. 16.10). And **“the day of the firstfruits”** (Exod. 28.16; Num. 28.26). It is a thanksgiving feast to God for the blessing of the harvest. Later on, the Jews celebrated in it the day when the law came down in Sinai, on the fiftieth day of their exodus from the land of Egypt. Therefore, they call it ‘shimchath torah’, meaning (the joy of the Torah). They consider it as well a memorial of the signs done by God to set them free of their servitude to Pharaoh. The scholar Lightfoot believes that the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the anniversary of the coming down of the law in Sinai 1447 years before.

The Jews used to honor this feast, as a unique day, that was celebrated even by nature itself, when wind blew; fire appeared, together with earthquakes, lightening, and thunder that revealed the might of God, and His awesome presence among His people. The Holy Spirit came down on a day revered by the Jews and proselytes from all nations, who hasten to Jerusalem to accept the faith, then to return to their own land, to preach the evangelic truth.

The Holy Spirit came down on the first day of the week (Sunday), to make it the new Sabbath, in which the Lord Christ resurrected from the dead, and in which the Church was born. With each weekly worship, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we remember the new resurrected life that became ours through the resurrection of the Lord Christ, by the work of His Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit came down on the Church of the New Testament on the fiftieth day following the resurrection of the Lord Christ, this day became a proclamation of the perpetual presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the Church of Christ, to grant her His divine energy to testify to the Lord Christ, and for the world to enjoy the experience of the resurrected life.

In the Jewish feast of the Pentecost, the people used to celebrate the coming down of the law upon Moses, when nature trembled before that divine action; Whereas, in the Christian celebration of the Pentecost, the world stands in awe, as the Holy Spirit of God Himself comes down upon the Church, when the nature of the inner man trembled, as it received the Word of God, inscribed, not on two stone tablets, but on the heart, and in the depths of the soul, to transform the stony heart into a divine heavenly kingdom. On that day, it is not nature itself that stood in awe, but the heavenly creatures stood in joy and rejoicing before that exalted divine work.

As the birth of the Church was realized on the day of the Pentecost, all the days were sanctified, for the believer to enjoy Baptism, the new birth, or the union with the Church, on any day, as all days

¹ Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty. *Commentary on the Book of Leviticus.*

became a perpetual feast. The Church has banned the erroneous vows of planning to have the child baptized at a certain church or by a specific priest.

- ❖ "When Jeremiah says, "**And I will gather them together from the extremities of the land in the feast-day**" (Jer. 30.8, 38.8 [in the Septuagint Translation]), he signifies the day of the Passover and of Pentecost, which is properly a "feast-day." However, every day is the Lord's; every hour, every time, is apt for baptism: if there is a difference in the solemnity, distinction there is none in the grace¹".

St. John Chrysostom believes that the word "all" in (Acts 2.1) refers to the 120 persons who were present on that day. He says,

- ❖ "Was it upon the twelve that it came? Not so; but upon the hundred and twenty. For Peter would not have quoted to no purpose the testimony of the prophet, saying, "**It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on (all) flesh, Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams**" (Joel 2.28; Acts 2.17). "**And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 2.4)²".

However, some others believe that as the choice of the twelfth disciple to replace the traitor Judas came after the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, the word "all" does not mean the 120, but only the 12. The Church, represented by the 12, received the Holy Spirit, and enjoyed the first Baptism, according to the words of the Lord Christ to His disciples, "**You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now**" (Acts 1.5). What came in the book of Joel concerning the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the servants, the maid-servants, the old and the young was truly realized through the apostles, and not directly from heaven, as it occurred with the twelve. Even with the appearance of the Lord Christ to Saul of Tarsus, and His debate with him, Saul did not get the Holy Spirit directly from heaven, but through the Church, having been instructed by the Lord Christ to go to Ananias. The only exception was the case of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household, during the prayer of St. Peter, which was a proclamation from God that the gates of heaven were also opened before the Gentiles to accept the faith in the Lord Christ.

"**All were with one accord**" bearing a flaring zeal toward one goal and one wish. All were flaring internally toward the realization of the promise of the lord Christ concerning receiving power from the highest (Acts 1.8).

2- THE DWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

"And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting" (Acts 2.2).

¹ *The Scholar Tertullian. On Baptism. 19.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 4.*

Although the disciples were anticipating the realization of the divine promise of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon them, to grant them power from the highest, it seems that they did not expect it to happen through all those circumstances. It was a surprise to them **“and suddenly there came”**. The significance of that way of dwelling was to let that event stick to the minds of the disciples, and to keep it from disappearing from the eyes of the Church along the generations, having been an event that touches all her being and her existence. It was not a regular wind, but a sound from heaven that filled the whole house. All those sitting there heard it, and realized that it must be from heaven: the sound of thunder that proclaims the divine presence.

St. Ephraim the Syrian believes that such a heavenly sound was accompanied by a sweet fragrance, and that such sound did not cross from one room to another, but everyone realized that it came from heaven, and filled all at once. The Holy Spirit filled the place to dedicate it, sanctifying all as a Church for Christ. The sound did not only fill the room where the disciples were sitting to pray, but filled the whole house. That event echoed on the whole city, and in no time a great multitude gathered, of those who came to Jerusalem for the feast.

As when the earthquake and the fire prepared the heart of Elijah to enjoy the divine presence, and to enter into a discussion with God during the **“still small voice”** (1 Kings 19.12), those circumstances proclaimed the birth of the Church, through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon her. Likewise, with the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ on the clouds, to judge the world, His coming will be accompanied by the sound of a great trumpet that will shake the hearts of the evildoers, and will fill the hearts of the believers with joy.

It is as though He, **“Who brings the wind out of His treasures”** (Ps. 135.7) and “Who gathered them in His fists (Prov. 30.4), is crying out with a great voice: Receive My Holy Spirit! The prophet Nahum has previously proclaimed, **“The Lord has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet”** (Nah. 1.3), and the Lord spoke to Job **“out of the whirlwind”** (Job 38.1). This is the same Lord; He is present to dwell in the hearts of mankind.

Here, **St. Gregory of Nyssa** takes us to the book of the Songs of Solomon, in which he sees in the warm south wind, and not the cold north wind, a symbol of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who kindles the soul with the warmth of the Spirit. In the region of the Middle East, people, especially the farmers, fear the north wind because it is cold, and if it becomes strong, it would completely destroy their crops. They prefer the south wind that comes from the equator, as it is warm and help ripen the crops. In the book of songs, the bride asks the south wind to blow upon her garden (Song 4.16), And as the wind, namely the Holy Spirit, blows, she calls her garden, the garden of her Groom (Song 5.16). The work of the Holy Spirit is to turn our hearts to the possession of the heavenly Groom, to become His garden. The Groom considers the pains of His bride as His own pains, and the fruits of the Spirit in her, His fruits; and with joy, He accepts her invitation to enter into her garden to eat and drink, and He even invites His

friends – the heavenly hosts – to share His joy with His garden that is planted with His right hand, and watered with His Holy Spirit (Song 5.1).

❖ **“... Come, O south (Wind), Blow upon my garden, that its spices may flow out”** (Song 4.16 LXX). The Queen (the Church, the bride) was right in commanding, by her authority, to push away the north wind, and to call the wind of the warm mid-day, that we call the south wind, by which a flowing current of joy would prevail: **“Come, O south wind, blow upon my garden, that its spices may flow out”**. It is analogous to the strong wind that was heard in the upper room, where the disciples were sitting (Acts 2.2): **“Then there appeared to them tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them”** (Acts 2.3). They were like living plants that are helped by this wind to produce fragrant spicy herbs producing prophecies that flow of sweet fragrant teachings of salvation, through the mouths of the apostles, in all languages. This south wind made the teachings of those 120 disciples, who were planted in the house of the Lord, flow over all the nations of the earth (Acts 1.15).

Now, the bride says to the south wind, **“Blow upon my garden”**, because her Groom made her the mother of gardens -- the text includes gardens and a spring – For this, the Groom wishes for the wind to blow over His garden, filled with living trees, to carry from it its sweet fragrance. The prophet says, **“Stormy wind, fulfilling His word”** Ps. 148.8).

The bride was adorned like a glamorous queen, and changed the rivers that flow of fragrance, to what is more beautiful, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through this portrait, we learn the difference between the Old and the New Testaments: The river of prophecy is filled with water; whereas, the rivers of the gospel are filled with fragrance. The rivers of the apostle Paul carry the sweet fragrance of Christ, and flow from the Church by the Holy Spirit. The other examples of John, Luke, Matthew, Mark, and all the other apostles, All symbolize precious plants in the garden of the bride, on which the south wind blows, to make them all the source of sweet fragrance of the gospel¹.

“Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them” (Acts 2.3).

It is not possible to realize the nature of the Holy Spirit, as it is with the Father and the Son. That is why, the Old and the New Testaments present several symbols that reveal the nature of the Holy Spirit in us, the most important of which are:

1- The dove: In the book of Songs, the heavenly Groom commends His bride, saying, **“You have dove eyes”** (Songs 1.15). He admires His bride, who always looks at His Holy Spirit, who alone can unite her with Him, and make her beautiful to bear His icon. He watches her eyes, to see whom she sees, as the eyes bear the image of whom she looks at. As the work of the Holy Spirit is the

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Homilies on Song of Songs*. 10.

enlightenment, When He dwells in the heart of the believer, He enlightens his/her inner eyes to be able to see the Groom and His glories, and to make sure of His true promises.

The Lord Christ Himself asks His bride, **“Be simple like doves”**, as the bride should bear the simple nature of her Groom, should not accept complications, but should walk along His one way, with no division of heart.

❖ **“Behold, You are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair! You have dove eyes”** (Songs 1.15) Now, as her overall beauty became apparent, He commends the beauty of her eyes, saying that she has dove eyes! This bears the following meaning: When the eyes are pure, it clearly reflects the image of the object seen. According to physicists, eyes see through receiving the images reflected by the objects seen. That is why, He commends the beauty of the bride, because the image of the dove is printed on her eyes. When someone looks at something, he receives in himself the image of this thing.

He, who forsakes the material things, namely, the flesh and blood, sees the spiritual life, walks in the Spirit, and with the Spirit he puts to death the works of the flesh. This man becomes wholly in the Spirit, and would never get back to the nature of the flesh. That is why, the soul that forsakes the lusts of the flesh, is described as having the image of the dove apparent in her eyes, namely, the seal of the spiritual life radiates light from inside her; the eyes become pure. The soul that acquires the image of the dove is capable of seeing the spiritual attraction of the Groom. The bride looks at her Groom, when she has the image of the dove in her eyes. Then she can see His spiritual beauty¹.

2- The water: Especially the rain, the early rain refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, who granted several divine gifts, in particular the grace of prophecy about the Person of the Lord Christ and His salvation work. The late rain refers to His work in the New Testament, when He dwells and settles down in the soul, He would not be seen as a guest, as it was the case in the Old Testament, But He makes out of the inner man a temple, holy for Him, where he dwells. The rain turns the wilderness into a garden that flows with divine fruits without limits.

The Lord Christ connected between faith in Him, and the enjoyment of the Holy Spirit, who is like a divine spring flowing in the believer’s spiritual heart, **“Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water”** (John 7.38).

❖ "The Holy Spirit is the River, and the abundant River, which according to the Hebrews flowed from Jesus in the lands, as we have received it prophesied by the mouth of Isaiah (Isa. 66.12). This is the great River which flows always and never fails. And not only a river, but also one of copious stream and overflowing greatness, as also David said: **“stream that make glad the city of God”** (Ps. 46.4). For neither is that city, the heavenly Jerusalem, watered by the channel of any earthly river, but that Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Fount of Life, by a short draught of Whom we are satiated, seems to

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Homilies on Song of Songs*. 4.

flow more abundantly among those celestial Thrones, Dominions and Powers, Angels and Archangels, rushing in the full course of the seven virtues of the Spirit¹.

3-The wind: it is the “**rushing mighty wind**” that shook the house when the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples.

4- The fire: The Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples in the form of tongues of fire. The words of John the Baptist were realized, about the Lamb of God that He baptizes by the Holy Spirit and fire. This is the fire that the Lord Christ “**came to send on the earth**” (Luke 12.49).

The Holy Spirit appeared like tongues of fire that sat upon each of them. This refers to what He presents to them of various tongues and languages, to be able to preach among the Gentiles, and for the Jews to realize that God is not God of the Hebrews alone, but of all mankind, who speaks to every nation with its own tongue.

They felt the Holy Spirit, like a secret wind, “**The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from, and where it goes**” (John 3.8). It appeared as divided tongues, as though of fire, yet not of material fire, but of fire that consumes sin, and scatters every thing that opposes God and His righteousness, that the righteousness of Christ, His holiness, His truth, and His divine justice would be realized in us.

Some believe that the Holy Spirit first appeared in the form of glittering glimpses of fire coming from the highest that were soon divided into tongues and sat on the heads of the apostles. In the Syrian versions and in the old Ethiopian versions, it came as “**It sat on them**”, as though the Holy Spirit sat and settled down upon the heads of the apostles, being the throne of God and His divine temple, after the Spirit departed so long from man. The Spirit is no more a temporary guest, but He sat to reign, to renew, and to lead His Church, working in her along the generations, until He brings her into heaven as a bride adorned for her heavenly Groom. The settling of the Holy Spirit confirms that what they see is not imagination or fantasy.

God appeared to the prophet Moses in the form of a burning bush that was not consumed with the fire (Exod. 2.2-3). And on the mountain, He appeared to Him amid thunder, lightening, fire, and smoke, a sign of His presence and might (Exod. 19.16-20).

“**... sat upon each of them**”: upon the twelve, having found comfort in their apostolic being, to make out of them a holy temple in which to dwell (1 Cor. 3.16), in and with whom He works, as they became referred to God, dedicated to Him alone. What preoccupied the disciples was not the wind, the sound, or the fire, but the dwelling of the Spirit in them, to work by them for the sake of the kingdom of God².

¹ St. Ambrose. *On the Holy Spirit*. 1.16.77-8.

² St. Jerome. *On Ps. Hom.* 57.

- ❖ “For a servant of the Lord should be diligent and careful, yea, moreover, burning like a flame, so that when, by an ardent spirit, he has destroyed all carnal sin, he may be able to draw near to God who, according to the expression of the saints, is called **“a consuming fire”**¹” .
- ❖ "(Concerning the tongues of fire) “And they were of Fire, perhaps because of His purifying Power (for our Scripture knows of a purifying fire, as any one who wishes can find out), or else because of His Substance. For our God is a consuming Fire, and a Fire burning up the ungodly²”.
- ❖ If that fire catches us, may it find us solid and inconsumable. May that fire consumes in us the destructive thorns of our sins³.

(Father Caesarius, Bishop of Arles)

- ❖ "Do not wonder when you read that God the Father said, **“I am a consuming fire”, and again: “They have forsaken Me, the Fountain of living water”** (Jer. 2.13). The Lord Jesus, too, like a fire inflamed the hearts of those who heard Him, and like a fount of waters cooled them. For He Himself said in His Gospel that He came to send fire on the earth (Luke 12.49), and to supply a draught of living waters to those who thirst (John 7.37-38)⁴".
- ❖ "And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying, **“So the light of Israel will be for a fire”** (Isa. 10.17). So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: **“For our God is a consuming Fire,”** as Moses said. For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: **“I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”** (Exod. 3.6). The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin⁵".
- ❖ The voice came out of the fire. The voice was in the bush that was burning but not consumed by the fire. The secret of God is proclaimed, that He comes to give light to our bodies, not to burn those who are in misery, but to take away their misery, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, giving grace and destroying sin (Matt. 3.11). So in the symbol of the fire, God keeps His word.

¹ *Pope Athanasius the Apostolic. Paschal Epistles. 3.3.*

² *St. Gregory Nazianzen. On Pentecost.*

³ *Sermon 96.1.*

⁴ *St. Ambrose. The Duties of the Clergy. 3.18.105.*

⁵ *St. Ambrose. On the Holy Spirit. 1.14.164-5.*

❖ “Rightly was the sacrifice consumed, for it was for sin. But that fire was a type of the Holy Spirit Who was to come down after the Lord's ascension, and forgive the sins of all, and who like fire inflames the mind and faithful heart. Wherefore Jeremiah, after receiving the Spirit, says, **“It became in my heart like a fire, burning in my bones, and I cannot hold my peace”** (Jer. 4.19)¹.”

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ “that You, Lord, **“a consuming fire,”** may burn up their lifeless cares and renew them immortally²”.
- ❖ When the Lord sends His live coal (red with fire), we seek unity, and what was built in us of evil will be destroyed. And when this location (the heart) is purified, the building of the temple (the Sanctuary) will be erected, in which a kind of eternal happiness will flow. Yet, I do not want you to miss what the Psalmist means when he speaks about the **“coal”** (Ps. 120.4). The return to God is a crossing over from death to life. Before it ignites, we have to say that it is dead. Then when it ignites with fire, we call it alive. This is a marvelous portrait of the change that happens, when someone, a man or a woman, returns to the Lord, after being dead.

Sometimes we hear people saying with astonishment, ‘You should have seen him as he was before. He was a drunkard, his life was a disgrace’. Or, ‘He was the most deceitful human being’. Then they add, ‘Really, I can’t believe how he is now. He serves the Lord with zeal, he leads an innocent life, as though what happened before was non-existent’. What is strange about that? That sinner was dead, but now he is a living coal.

The spiritual who know these spiritual facts concerning someone like that used to cry on him as though on someone dead, but now, seeing him alive, they are swallowed by joy. In this instance, there is something I want you to apply on yourselves: we rejoice and praise God when we see someone becoming like a coal that caught fire. But, if we are prudent enough, we should zealously search what is inside us that has become dead. Be ready and arm yourself with the word of God. To turn to God, you are committed to fight your old ways; you should turn away from the deceitful voice inside you³.

- ❖ The Lord Himself says, **“I came to send fire on earth”** (Luke 12.49). And the apostles say, **“Warm in Spirit”**, as from Him comes the zeal of love, **“because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us”** (Rom. 5.5). On the contrary to this zeal, the Lord says, **“the love of many will grow cold”** (Matt. 24.12). The perfect love is the perfect gift of the Holy Spirit⁴.
- ❖ "And lest men should be ignorant of the greatness of the mighty gift coming down to them. there sounded as it were a heavenly trumpet, For suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the

¹ St. Ambrose. *The Duties of the Clergy*. 3.18.102.

² St. Augustine. *Confessions*. 5.3.4.

³ Hom. On Ps. 5.

⁴ In Joan. Tr. 21.19.

rushing of a mighty wind signifying the presence of Him who was to grant power unto men to seize with violence the kingdom of God; that both their eyes might see the fiery tongues, and their ears hear the sound. And it filled all the house where they were sitting; for the house became the vessel of the spiritual water; as the disciples sat within, the whole house was filled. Thus they were entirely baptized according to the promise, and invested soul and body with a divine garment of salvation. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost. They partook of fire, not of burning but of saving fire; of fire which consumes the thorns of sins, but gives lustre to the soul. This is now coming upon you also, and that to strip away and consume your sins which are like thorns, and to brighten yet more that precious possession of your souls, and to give you grace; for He gave it then to the Apostles. And He sat upon them in the form of fiery tongues, that they might crown themselves with new and spiritual diadems by fiery tongues upon their heads. A fiery sword barred of old the gates of Paradise; a fiery tongue which brought salvation restored the gift¹.

- ❖ When the prophet Jonah fled from the face of God, he searched for a ship that goes to Tarshish. The great prophet says that the ships of Tarshish were broken by the east wind (Ps. 48.7). Such a wind blew on the disciples as they sat in the upper room, recognized as a rushing mighty wind, then appeared as divided tongues, as of fire (Acts 2.3). Wind of various forms destroys the evil that fights against the human nature. The wind is known as the ships of Tarshish that symbolize evil².

During the Baptism of the Lord Christ, the Spirit appeared in the form of a dove, and we did not hear about any sound like a rushing mighty wind, or about divided tongues of fire, because in the Lord Christ there is no sin, to get purified by a divine fire. He is the Holy Word of God, who **“will not cry out, nor raise His voice”**. What was heard was the voice of God the Father gently proclaiming His pleasure with the incarnated Son. In the birth of the Church, on the other hand, there is a need for the fiery Spirit that purifies us from sin, for the sound of rushing mighty wind, to wake us up, and to anticipate the work of God; and for the fiery tongues, to call the whole world to unite together in Jesus Christ, through faith in Him.

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2.4).

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit”: In Baptism we enjoy being filled with the Holy Spirit Who qualifies us to become members in the body of Christ, and to enjoy sonhood to the Father by a divine grace. By this filling we will have the right to fellowship with Christ, and to the enjoyment of His resurrected life. That filling enjoyed by the twelve disciples of the One Holy Spirit grants unity to the Church, that is not an artificial unity, nor realized by the mere gathering of persons or churches

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 17.15.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. 13.

together, or through mere debate, but is a divine work, the secret of fellowship in the One Christ. It is a new creation, where all enjoy One Father and one Mother, enjoy the kingdom of the One God in the hearts of all, and experience the One Bible. Unity here is the work of the Holy Spirit who lets us abide in the One Christ, to sing, **“For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones”** (Eph. 5.30).

St. Augustine believes that, on the day of the Pentecost, each one was granted to speak all the languages of the world, to be able to preach. Now, the Church, the one body, has spread to the whole world, and became able to speak with all the languages of the world¹.

❖ In the bible we read, **“Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned ...”** (Luke 4.1). And in the book of Acts, the Holy bible says about the apostles that **“they were filled with the Holy Spirit”**. Beware of assuming that the apostles are on the same level of the Savior. Let us realize that Jesus, the apostles, and others are filled with the Holy Spirit, according to the capacity of the vessel. After receiving Baptism, the Savior was filled with the Holy Spirit that came upon Him from heaven in the form of a dove (Luke 3.32), and was led by the Spirit (Luke 4.1). Many are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Rom. 8.14), But He, being the Son of God in a distinct sense, it was fitting for Him to be led by the Holy Spirit².

The expression **“became filled”**, especially in the book of Acts, means filled the soul, spread in it, moved the whole being of man with all his feelings and energies. When the Virgin St. Mary entered the house of Zechariah, while bearing in her womb the incarnated Word of God, **“Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit”** (Luke 1.41). And when John the Baptist was born, **“Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied”** (Luke 1.67). And here, as the Church got the gift of the Holy Spirit, **“they were all filled with the Holy Spirit”** (Acts 2.4). When the lame was healed at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, those who knew him were filled with wonder and amazement (Acts 3.10). And when envy prevailed over the opponents of the truth, **“they were filled with indignation”**, and they laid their hands on the apostles (Acts 5.17). The same thing happened again during the ministry of St. Paul in Antioch in Pesidia, where the Jews were filled with envy, and opposed what the apostle Paul said, contradicting and blaspheming (Acts 13.45). On the contrary, the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13.52). Therefore, it is fitting for us to open the door for the work of the Holy Spirit, to receive the leadership of the heart, of the mind, and of all feelings, to reign inside, and no one but God, the Holy Trinity, would have a place in us.

“And began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2.4): They were Galileans who do not know even the Greek language, yet they began to speak other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. **“They speak with new tongues”** (Mark 16.17), realizing an old promise: **“With stammering lips and another tongue, He will speak to this people”** (Isa. 28.11).

¹ *Sermons on N.T. 37.9.*

² *The Scholar Origen. Homilies on Luke. 29.1.*

When the people assumed that they could oppose God by building a tower in Babel, to protect them against a divine wrath through a great flood as in the days of Noah, God confused their language; they were scattered to several nations; and humanity lost its unity. And now, at the establishment of the Church of Christ, God did not intend for them to use one tongue in the whole world as a sign of unity. But He granted the disciples to speak with tongues, in order that all the nations would unite together under the leadership of the One Holy Spirit, in one faith, and one Baptism, for all to become members in the one body of Christ. By the divided tongues after the great flood, the actual atheism of the people and their opposition to God was revealed. And after more than 2000 years, the divided tongues became the divine remedy to bring the pagan nations back to the knowledge of God.

What does it mean to speak with other tongues, or with new tongues they did not know before?

1- It is obvious that they spoke with tongues that they did not learn, but people coming from various places, everyone heard them speak in his own language (Acts 2.8). Those were real and deciphered human tongues, not just meaningless words.

2- Those present realized that it was God's gift to the disciples, neither for showing off, nor without an aim. Rather, it was to confirm that the gate of faith is no more confined to a certain people, or a certain tongue, but became open before all peoples, nations, and tongues. Salvation is for the whole world.

3- The tongue was not through a certain training, but a gift from the Holy Spirit, so that the speaker is to realize that he is only speaking with what God has given him utterance, and not according to his human experience and past knowledge. With the tongue was given material to speak. The tongue is not to be used except to proclaim the word of God, presented by the Holy Spirit Himself. The speaker would feel that he is a tool in the hand of God, to work through him to the account of his kingdom.

4- That gift was not given to believers to show off along the generations; but it was an event to reveal the beginning of a new era. It was a spreading of the hands of the Savior to all humanity to receive the word of preaching.

5- The apostles, after the day of the Pentecost, were not much preoccupied with that gift. For Example, St. Paul, who was gifted with speaking several languages (1 Cor. 14.18), was in no need for them as it was enough for him to speak in Hebrew (or in Aramaic) or in Greek, to spread the gospel among nations. And as some misunderstood the significance of that gift, the apostle Paul revealed the exaltness of the constructive love above the confusion that prevailed among those who claimed to have the talent to speak with tongues (1 Cor. 13.1, 14.33). He even preferred the preaching of the word to speaking with tongues (1 Cor. 14.39).

6- After this gift has fulfilled its mission, for the Christian faith to touch the life of all humanity, it was not anymore the main factor of preaching, despite its existence with the spirit of order under special circumstances (1 Cor. 12.7-11). This gift did not persist after the apostolic era, although God allowed it in few instances, as a confirmation that it truly happened. Some individuals, along the

generations, turned to the use of (gibberish) tongues, and to pretend to enter into a state of unconsciousness: practices by which the devil deceived many, caused offenses to believers and unbelievers, and diverted from the ways of the Lord Christ, whose voice was never heard in the streets.

❖ **“They began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”** The Galilean Peter or Andrew spoke Persian or Median. John and the rest of the Apostles spoke every tongue to those of Gentile extraction; for not in our time have multitudes of strangers first begun to assemble here from all quarters, but they have done so since that time. What teacher can be found so great as to teach men all at once things which they have not learned? So many years are they in learning by grammar and other arts to speak only Greek well; nor yet do all speak this equally well; the Rhetorician perhaps succeeds in speaking well, and the Grammarian sometimes not well, and the skilful Grammarian is ignorant of the subjects of philosophy. But the Holy Spirit taught them many languages at once, languages which in all their life they never knew. This is in truth vast wisdom, this is power divine. What a contrast of their long ignorance in time past to their sudden, complete and varied and unaccustomed exercise of these languages!

The multitude of the hearers was confounded;-it was a second confusion, in the room of that first evil one at Babylon. For in that confusion of tongues there was division of purpose, because their thought was at enmity with God; but here minds were restored and united, because the object of interest was godly. The means of falling were the means of recovery. Wherefore they marveled, saying, **“How is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we are born?”** No marvel if you be ignorant; for even Nicodemus was ignorant of the coming of the Spirit, and to him it was said, **“The wind blows to where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes”** (John 3.8). But if, even though I hear His voice, I know not from where he comes, how can I explain, what He is Himself in substance¹?”

- ❖ Speaking with tongues was a sign that suited that time, to reveal that the gospel of God had to spread through all tongues over the whole earth².
- ❖ The Holy Spirit at that time was so given, visibly, as those who received Him, spoke with the tongues of all nations, meaning that the Church among the Gentiles spoke with the tongues of all³.
- ❖ **“And in that diversity of tongues announced in a way beforehand, that the Church should be throughout all nations⁴”**.

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 17.16-7.

² St. Augustine. *In Joan. Tr.* 4.10.

³ St. Augustine. *Sermons on Nt.* 9.10.

⁴ St. Augustine. *Sermons on N.T.* 39.1.

- ❖ “For now the power of truth began to be made known to all. For then even one man having received the Holy Ghost, spoke by himself with the tongues of all nations. But now in the Church oneness itself, as one man speaks in the tongues of all nations. For what tongue has not the Christian religion reached? To what limits does it not extend? ¹”.

Eunomius used to believe – as did some Jews – that the Hebrew language had been God’s own language, with which He spoke, even before creation, and that, what the prophet Moses or the other prophets recorded have literally been God’s own speech in its Hebrew text. This was debated by **St. Gregory of Nyssa** as follows:

- ❖ "For to suppose that God used the Hebrew tongue, when there was no one to hear and understand such a language, I think is no reasonable being will consent. We read in the Acts that the Divine power divided itself into many languages for this purpose, that no one of alien tongue might lose his share of the benefit. But if God spoke in human language before the Creation, whom was He to benefit by using it? For that His speech should have some adaptation to the capacity of the hearers, with a view to their profit, no one would conceive to be unworthy of God's love to man, for Paul the follower of Christ knew how to adapt his words suitably to the habits and disposition of his hearers, making himself milk for babes and strong meat for grown men. But where no object was to be gained by such use of language, to argue that God, as it were, declaimed such words by Himself, when there was no one in need of the information they would convey-such an idea, I think, is at once both blasphemous and absurd. Neither, then, did God speak in the Hebrew language, nor did He express Himself according to any form in use among the Gentiles. But whatsoever of God's words are recorded by Moses or the Prophets, are indications of the Divine will, flashing forth, now in one way, now in another, on the pure intellect of those holy men, according to the measure of the grace of which they were partakers. Moses, then, spoke his mother-tongue, and that in which he was educated. But he attributed these words to God, as I have said, repeatedly, on account of the childishness of those who were being brought to the knowledge of God, in order to give a clear representation of the Divine will, and to render his hearers more obedient, as being awed by the authority of the speaker²".
- ❖ “But He came down to clothe the Apostles with power. And to baptize them; ... This grace was not in part, but His power was in full perfection³”.
- ❖ “The Holy Spirit taught them many languages at once, languages which in all their life they never knew. This is in truth vast wisdom, this is power divine⁴”.
- ❖ “The means of falling were the means of recovery¹”.

¹ *St. Augustine. Sermons on N.T.*

² *St. Gregory of Nyssa. Answer to Eunomius. Book II.*

³ *St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Catechetical Lectures. 17.14.*

⁴ *St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Catechetical Lectures. 17.16.*

3- THE REACTION OF THE FOREIGN VISITORS IN JERUSALEM

“Now, there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2.5).

“Dwelling in Jerusalem”: Those devout men probably came to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover, then stayed the fifty days until the feast of the weeks, of the harvest, or of the firstfruits, sightseeing in Jerusalem, the holy city of God, and enjoying the temple. Those, when they heard a sound, like that of a rushing mighty wind, which cause the voices of those praising God to tremble, they rushed to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the disciples, or to witness the birth of the Church of the New Testament in a marvelous way. That is why, **“When they heard this, they were cut to the heart”** (Acts 2.37).

It is assumed that those were probably either Jews born in various nations, who came to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast; transit travelers from one country to another, who stayed for some time in Jerusalem; or proselytes of Gentile origin, who became Jews, and came to Jerusalem for the same reason. According to Philo, a Jew from Alexandria, and Josephus the Historian, there was not one commercial city in the world, at that time, where the Jews had no role, especially in the countries of the Mediterranean.

“dwelling”: The Greek expression, ‘Kateikointes’, was most probably used to indicate a temporary or permanent residence, that the rich Jews from foreign countries purchased for themselves in Jerusalem, as a sign of their attachment to the temple, having pride in their Jewish identity.

“Devout” refers to individuals who led a life of integrity and prudence, serious in their worship, and seeking the salvation of their souls in the fear of God.

Some may wonder how those thousands could have assembled together in one house. Most probably, those multitudes assembled in the streets of the neighborhood to enquire about that amazing sound, until the disciples led them to a public place near the temple.

“And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused because everyone heard them speak in his own language” (Acts 2.6).

It is obvious that that incident shook the hearts of the devout people who came from outside Jerusalem, more than the native Jews of Jerusalem, as everyone heard them speak with their own language.

“Then they were all amazed, and marveled, saying to one another: ‘Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?’” (Acts 2.7).

The day of the Pentecost has been a unique one, unprecedented for humanity, and will never be in the future. God set devout men of fifteen different tongues, who came to watch a marvelous scene, and to hear the word of God, each one with the tongue in which he was born, uttered by simple Galilean

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 17.17.

men who had no previous knowledge of those tongues, and to believe in the exalted love of God, then to return to the world, with its different languages known at that time, to testify to the living faith.

All those devout Jews from various nations came with one common goal, which was their yearning to see Jerusalem, the city of God, and to enjoy the temple of Solomon, the holiest place on earth, then returned to their lands, with hearts yearning toward the higher Jerusalem and the heavenly temple, which embrace the Church of God of all the nations, peoples, and tongues. They all testified to the inner Jerusalem, and to the temple of God, set inside the soul, and to the inner glory of the King's daughter. They returned praising God on His amazing work, having heard Galilean men uttering in Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Arabic, etc., with different accents, praising God and glorifying the greatness of His love.

"... devout men from every nation under heaven": This title was given by the Jews of Jerusalem to those coming from every nation (to their brethren, the Jews by birth, or those who converted to Judaism), to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem, after going through long wearisome and expensive travels, only taken by those who could afford it, and had the spirit of devotion, especially that they used to donate generously to the poor natives and to the ministers of the temple.

"And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we are born" (Acts 2.8)?

The educated multitudes that came from various countries marveled and rejoiced, when they heard uneducated Galileans speak with all the tongues of the world, with eloquence and prudence; whereas, the native Hebrews in Jerusalem were bigoted to their language, and used to ridicule any other, counting their language as that of God and of the heavenly creatures. But now, and for the first time in the history of Jerusalem, a call to recognize, worship, and believe in God is presented in all the tongues of the world. While some believe that the disciples were talking languages that they did not learn before; others think that they were talking in their native tongue but the hearers, each heard them speaking in his/her own tongue. Anyhow, this indicates that the gate of faith became wide open before the Gentiles; and that everyone would worship God, with the tongue in which he was born.

"Parthians, and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia" (Acts 2.9).

Those mentioned here were Jews, or Proselytes converted to Judaism: **"Parthians, Medes, and Elamites"**, which were eastern land, to which Israel was previously taken into captivity (the 10 tribes). Then, some chose to stay there, when the captivity came to an end.

Parthians: The people of Parthia, that included the northern territory of the modern Persia, located in the south-east of the Caspian Sea, between the River Euphrates and the Persian Gulf, on the eastern side of both. This almost conforms with the province of Khorasan nowadays, north-east of Iran. Its inhabitants were of Scythian origin. The Parthians were mentioned in the writings of Darius Hestaspes, having made a rebellion against the Persians in the year 521 AD, which was soon devastated.

Later on, it was taken over by Alexander the Great, then by his Seleucid successors. The great Parthian empire began in the year 256 BC, when Arsaces the first rebelled against the Macedonian-Syrian authority, starting a new governing dynasty that was known as the Arsaciadae, and extended in the Christian eras. That empire lasted for about 400 years. The Parthians were known for their military reputation as able horsemen, who used to pretend to be withdrawing in battles, then, while withdrawing, would throw their arrows on the enemy behind with amazing accuracy. They entered in struggle with the Roman State in the East for a long time, to take over the province of Armenia. They blocked the Roman extension to the east, from the year 64 BC, until the year 226 AD, and between the year 40 BC, and 37 BC. Their language was the Persian. In the old days, the two words: 'Parthia' and 'Persia' most probably refer to one state. They invaded Asia Minor and Syria, and took over and plundered Jerusalem, and put Antigonus the last of the Achaemenids on its throne. Some Jews from Parthia came to Jerusalem on the day of the Pentecost, then probably carried back with them the good news of the gospel. In the year 226 AD, the Persians invaded their country, under the leadership of Ardashir the Sasanid, and destroyed their kingdom.

The Medes: Media has been a state, bordered by the River Araxes and Qazwin Sea on the north and the north-east, by Parthia, Hyrcania, and the Persian desert on the east, Persia and Sosiana on the south, and Assyria on the west. It covered an area of 15,000 square miles, extended about 600 miles from north to south, and about 250 miles from east to west. It was divided into 6 provinces; and in the days of the Greeks and the Romans, it was divided into two provinces: Atropaene and the greater Media, The first in the north that embraced the land between Qazwin Sea and the mountains north of the River Zagros; whereas, the greater Media was on the south, and east to Atropaene. Media, in its turn, was divided into small provinces. It has been one of the richest regions of Asia, and was called in the Holy Book Madai (Gen. 10.2). The Medes used to speak the Indo-European language. The Assyrian kings joined forces with the tribes of Media, as from the beginning of the ninth century BC, and remained on good terms with them all along 200 years. Then the Medes joined forces with the Scythians and the Babylonians, to overcome the kingdom of Assyria in the year 612 BC. During the seventh and the sixth centuries BC, they ruled an empire that extended from Persia to Asia Minor, with Akpatana as its capital, the modern Hamadan, north-west of Persia. The Medes were long connected to the Persians, under one government (2 Kings 17.6, 18.11; Jer. 25.25). The expression 'Media and Persia' has been so common, that the Greeks called their great Persian war, 'the war against the Medes'.

The Elamites: Nowadays, the inhabitants of this region are mostly called Persians. The Medes and the Elamites have been neighbors, inhabiting the region beyond the River Euphrates. The Elamites, descendants of Elam the son of Sheth (Gen. 10.22) were an isolated nation, who shared the culture and language of the Somers, in the ancient cities. Their king Chedorlaomer joined the attack on the valley of the Jordan, and suffered defeat on the hand of Abraham, the father of the patriarchs. The Elamites were mostly under the authority of their neighbors in the west. The Assyrians sent some of the inhabitants of

Samaria to Elam, and sent some of the Elamites to Palestine to replace them. Elam, later on, became part of the Persian Empire; their language was undoubtedly the Persian; and their capital was Shushan, called Susa by the Greeks. It was said that the prophet Daniel lived in Shushan in the province of Elam (Dan. 8.2), that is why the Elamites are called the Shushanites. They still claim that they still have the grave of the prophet Daniel. By the return of the Jews from captivity, the remnants of the Shushanites, who immigrated to Palestine, opposed the idea of rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4). The Greeks and the Romans used to call it Elymias; and nowadays, it is called Khuzestan, bordered by the kingdom of Persia to the east, by Assyria and Media to the north, by Babylon to the west, and by the Persian Gulf to the south. The Elamites were men of war who were masters of the quiver (the bow) (Isa. 22.6; Jer. 49.35). Elam was the center of an old empire; and around the year 200 BC, the Elamites got back their might, and some of their kings submitted certain cities in Babylon.

Those dwelling in Mesopotamia: these are the Jews of Babylon, who did not wish to return from the Babylonian captivity, and settled down there. They had their own prominent theologian school. They had such profound influence on the north of the Euphrates that many of the inhabitants there converted to Judaism. It was located between the River Tigris and the River Euphrates (in the valley of Syria), bordered by Assyria to the east, Syria to the west, Armenia to the north, and Babylonia to the south. The Jews of the old days used to call it Feddan Aram; and nowadays, it is called Moverannhar, namely the city beyond the river. In this region, there are important locations that were mentioned in the Holy Book, like: 'Ur of the Chaldeans, the birth place of Abraham (Gen. 11.27-28); 'Haran', where Tareh dwelt and died (Gen. 11.31-32); 'Carchemish' (2 Chron. 35.20); 'Hena' (2 kings 19.13); and 'Sepharvaim' (2 kings 17.24). It is a spacious, flat, and fertile region. Its inhabitants used to speak the Syrian language, mixed by the Chaldean.

Judea: Some believe that he means here, 'Iouaian', meaning the Jews dwelling in Mesopotamia; whereas, others believe that it is Judea in Israel, whose accent was different from that of the Galileans.

Those dwelling in Cappadocia: some Jews settled down there and got the right of citizenship. It is the largest province in Asia Minor (Turkey), located in the east, and covers the entire region between the Mountain of Taurus (meaning the tower of light), and the Sea of Euxine. It is located south of Pontus, west of the River Euphrates, north of Syria, and Cylycia, and to the east of Galatia. It is an elevated plain crossed by a chain of mountains. It was made by Tiberius, after the death of King Archelaus, in the year 17 AD, a Roman province. Then, it was united by Vespasian, in the year 70 AD, with Armenia Minor, to become one of the largest of the border provinces. Their language is still unknown. It was probably a dialect mixed of the Greek and the Syrian, together with that of their neighbors, the Lycaonians (Acts 14.11). Cappadocia was one of the three largest, yet the most evil provinces of the region: Cappadocia, Crete, and Cylycia. Yet, after receiving the Christian faith, prominent and magnificent personalities came out of it, like St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, and St. Cyril the Great.

In Asia, especially on its western shores, the Jews had one of the largest minorities. Although they had an influential school, they were corrupted, About whom the book of Revelation says addressing the Bishop of Philadelphia, **“Indeed, I will make those of the Synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews, and are not, but lie – Indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you”** (Rev. 3.9). Beside the Jews of Pamphylia, Galatia, and Pontus, the Jewish minorities had their influence, and converted many to Judaism.

Pontus: A Greek and Latin name, meaning (Sea), the old name of the Black Sea, together with the lands located all along its south shores. It was a kingdom with authority and strong influence in the old days, originally part of Cappadocia, bordered on the east by Colchis, on the west by the River Halys, on the north by the Black Sea, and on the south by Armenia Minor. Its famous king was Mithridates, who was later submitted by the Romans.

Pontus was the birth place of the disciple Aquila (Acts 18.2; 1 Pet. 1.1).

Asia: Meaning Asia Minor, a section of Turkey in Asia, known nowadays as Natolia.

“Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya adjoining Cyrene, Visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes” (Acts 2.10).

Phrygia: A great section of Asia Minor (Turkey). Its frontiers changed with time. After Galatia was cut off it, its borders became: Pethinia at its north, Lycaonia and Galatia at its east, Lycia, Pisidia, and Isauria at its south, and Caria, Lydia, Mysia at its west. This region is an elevated plain in between a chain of Taurus Mountains in the south, and those of Olymp in the north and of Temos in the west. Its people used to speak an Indo-European language. Their kingdom was established at the beginning of the first millennium BC, after the collapse of the Hitites. In the ninth century BC, the Cymerians invaded Phrygia that became later on part of the kingdom of the Lydians.

In the Assyrian documents, and in the Old Testament, it is called Meshech, Its people used to be warriors, and traded in bronze and slaves (Ezek. 32.26, 38.2-3, 39.1, 27.13, 38.39). Many of its rulers were called Midas, which was probably a title, like Pharaoh in Egypt. Some of its rulers were buried in magnificent graves, recently discovered, around the capital Gordiom. In the year 116 BC, it became part of the Roman Empire; and since the year 25 BC, its eastern section, known as Galatia, was cut away from it. The New Testament mentioned some of its cities, like Laodicia, Colossy, Herapolis, and Antioch Pisidia. At that time, Phrygia was no more a province, but became the name of the city of Phrygia. The apostle Paul has gone through Phrygia during his second and third trips (Acts 16.6, 18.23).

Pamphylia: Its old name was Natolia, and is nowadays, Caramania, in between Lycia and Cylicia, close to the Mediterranean Sea. It is a region on the south-eastern shore of Asia Minor (Turkey), 80 miles long, and 30 miles wide, through which three rivers flow: Kestros, Eurymedon, and Orinidon. Its capital was Perga, that was visited by the apostle St. Paul (Acts 13.13, 14.24, 27.5); and its port was Atalia. Clodius added to it Pisidia and Lycia.

The Jews of Egypt: The Jewish minority has been one of the strongest minorities in Egypt, and in the Diaspora as a whole. They carried out the translation of the Old Testament to the Greek language, known as the Septuagint Version that helped to spread the Christian faith among the Gentiles and the Greek-speaking Jews. According to the Tradition, it was completed in the days of Ptolomy II or of Philadelphes (285-246 BC). According to Philo, a Jew of Alexandria (20 BC-50AD), whose Philosophy and Interpretations were characterized by a Platonic impression, their number was one million. He tells that, in Alexandria, there was a Jewish suburb that occupied two of the five sectors of the city. In about the year 38 AD, the Jews there suffered a horrible persecution by the hands of the pagan citizens of Alexandria, which led Philo to immigrate to Rome in the year 39 BC, to submit a complaint to Emperor Caligula that was known as Legatio ad Caium. Another influential Jewish minority, in those days, existed in the province of Fayum. Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, who is mentioned in the first epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, because of his eloquence, philosophy, his fiery spirit and preaching, a group of believers, from the four groups there, referred themselves to him.

Libya: The Greek, in general, used to call it ‘Africa’, but here, it refers to the Northern Province around Cyrene. As to the Jews in Libya, we are proud and blessed that one of them – St. Mark – has preached Christianity in Egypt and Libya. He was born there, but his parents had to move to Jerusalem with their son, John Mark, because of persecution. It is also worthy to mention the prophet Lochius in Antioch. The Libyan Jews used to have their special Synagogue in Jerusalem.

Cyrene: On the northern Mediterranean shores of Africa, It is located south of the island of Crete, and 500 miles west of Alexandria. It was also called Pentapolis, meaning, the five western cities. Simon the Cyrenian had the great blessing of carrying the cross, on the way to Calvary.

The Jews of Rome: They were originally among the captives who were taken by Pompe from Jerusalem in the year 63 BC, then were later liberated. They formed a Synagogue with a congregation of a modest number, then grew to be influential even on the governmental level, before they were expelled by Claudius. Afterwards, they returned to form again an important minority that was represented in Jerusalem by the Libertians. Josephus, the Jewish Historian, says that, in his days, they had eight Jewish Synagogues in Rome. Having been persistent on applying the law, on keeping the Sabbath, and on abstaining from partaking of the pagan rites of the Romans, when they were liberated, they separated themselves, to live together across the River Tiber in Rome.

“Cretans and Arabs – we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2.11).

Cretans: The inhabitants of the island of Crete, a huge island in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Nowadays, it is called Candia; it is 200 miles long and 50 miles wide. It is 500 miles south-west of Constantinople, and the same distance west of Syria. The minority of Cretan Jews were the nucleus of the Church on which the apostle Paul ordained Titus as a Bishop. They constituted a large and prominent minority in Cyprus, as they rebelled against Trajan, he killed 240,000 of them, according

to the Historian Dio Cassio¹. the Jews of Cyprus again returned to the Christian faith, and had an important role in the spreading of the gospel. Among them was Barnabas, a Levite, citizen of Cyprus, and the uncle of the apostle St. Mark.

Arabs: The inhabitants of Arabia, a famous region in Asia, bound to the west by the Red Sea, to the east by the Persian Gulf, to the north by Judea, and by the Indian Ocean to the south. They spoke the Arabic language. The king of Arabia Aretas (2 Cor. 11.32), east and west of the Jordan, joined forces with the Jews, and established an empire, with Petra as its capital. Herod Antipas, the ruler of the quarter of Galilee, married the daughter of Aretas the Arab, then divorced her to marry Herodea, his brother's wife. Aretas made a war against Herod, and conquered him. As Herod resorted to Rome, Vitellius was sent to punish Aretas, but had to withdraw when Emperor Tiberius died in about the year 39 or 40 AD. During the reign of Caligula, in the year 36 AD, Aretas took Damascus, appointed a Deputy to govern it, before Augustus Caesar sent a garrison that was first defeated, Then Rome finally, in the year 70 AD swept the Arabs, and took over Aden.

“The wonderful works of God”: The apostles were speaking, with the tongues of those present, about the wonderful works of God, like the incarnation of the Word of God, His amazing miracles, the exalted work of salvation, of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and the plan of God for the sake of the salvation of mankind. Jerusalem has been like a center, not of the Jewish people alone, but of the whole world, where devout Jews and Proselytes from all over the world came. The day of Pentecost was the day when the seeds of faith were sown in the soil of the whole earth within a short time. Those multitudes returned to their lands to testify to the wonderful works of God.

❖ He calls all the kingdoms of the world saying, **“Sing to the Lord, O kingdoms of the earth. Oh, sing praises to the Lord”** (Ps. 68.32). He says that everyone in the world, who gains the light of the knowledge of God, should praise and sing to Him².

“They were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘Whatever could this mean’ (Acts 2.12)?

Those, serious as far as their salvation is concerned, were amazed and perplexed. Finding no human interpretation of what happened, they did not doubt, but had a true wish to search beyond that incident. They began to ask one another: What is the significance of this? Are these men sent from heaven? Are they like the burning bush that was seen by the prophet Moses?

“Others mocking said, ‘They are full of new wine’ (Acts 2.13).

Those were most probably the Jews dwelling in Jerusalem and Judea, particularly the chief priests and the Pharisees, the opponents of the Holy Spirit of God. They mockingly watched what was happening, assuming that the apostles have consumed too much wine on the day of the feast. They did

¹ Dio Cassio. Lx III.32.

² Fr. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus. Comment on Ps. 68. Article 23.

not stop to think whether drinking too much wine could possibly teach man to speak real foreign languages that he previously knew nothing about. The same people who accused the Lord Christ of casting out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons (Matt. 12.24), were then accusing His disciples, filled by the Holy Spirit, of being drunk with wine.

Dr. McClelland says that trying to cover up for their ignorance, they ridiculously adopted a theory that drinking too much wine could teach man new languages.

❖ “and they spoke truly though in mockery. For in truth the wine was new, even the grace of the New Testament; but this new wine was from a spiritual Vine¹”.

Some scholars believe that, as the house could not accommodate such a huge number of people, who came to Jerusalem, they all headed to the vicinity of the temple, and even there, a kind of chaos prevailed, as they were unable to explain that unique phenomenon in the history of the whole world.

4- PETER’S SERMON

“Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words’ (Acts 2.14).

Some believe that all the eleven apostles spoke, everyone in his turn, beginning by St. Peter. He stood up to confirm to the multitudes that they were not drunk, and that he was capable of revealing the divine truth, through the prophesies in their hands. He did not direct his speech to a certain category of the audience, but to all those who dwell in Jerusalem, either permanently, or who came to celebrate the feast. The speech here was directed to the religious leaderships, as well as to the laymen, as the gift of salvation is for every human soul.

Studying this sermon, some scholars realize that it bears the manner of St. Peter’s speeches, as well as his expressions, in conformity with his first epistle, that reveals that St. Luke honestly presented the sermon as it is. On the other hand, St. Peter’s dealing with the prophesies that he quoted could never be the thoughts of a common Galilean man, but needs the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to comprehend the Holy Books. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and the apostles to use the prophesies, interpret, and apply them to the Person of the Lord Christ.

St. Peter’s sermon came in three sections:

1- (Acts 14-21): Interpreting the event itself, being the gift of the Holy Spirit.

2- (Acts 22-28): Testifying to Jesus of Nazareth that He is the Savior, through the powers and signs that He made.

3- (Acts 29-36): The resurrection and the ascension of the Lord Christ, and His sending the Holy Spirit are all realizations of the prophesies, and a testimony that He is the Lord Christ.

It was amazing that St. Peter, the Galilean apostle, was addressing a multitude coming from 15 nations, each with its own tongue, like the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Arabs, etc, who could

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 17.18.

never understand the vernacular Aramaic accent of the Galileans. The only explanation is that what St. Peter said was heard by each one according to his own language in which he was born. Whether St. Peter spoke in his vernacular Aramaic or in a new language is not the main issue here, but what the book of Acts confirms is that every one understood what he said, and that about 3000 believed, confessed, were baptized, and enjoyed the work of salvation, something that would not be possible unless they fully comprehended and enjoyed the words of the apostle, and unless the Holy Spirit has granted them the enlightenment, and drew them to faith. The Holy Spirit worked both in the speaker and in the listeners.

The expression “raised his voice” means that he spoke with the spirit of power and strong conviction, with no fear, hesitation, or doubt. He did not stand in weakness, trying to present proofs on the truth of his belief, but his words bore the power of bold testimonial, attractive to the souls by the Holy Spirit. He did not adopt the position of begging or defending, but that of the bearer of the Holy Spirit.

“For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day” (Act 2.15).

Some assumed that they were drunk, probably because they were showing great joy, as though they were under a divine trance. St. Peter’s defense that it was only the third hour of the day means that it was still early, as it was rare for a Jew to eat or drink at this hour, even if he was an alcoholic, because it was an hour for prayers, which makes it a serious offense. Moreover, it was the feast of the harvest or of the firstfruits, when the Jews in Jerusalem were preoccupied with offering the firstfruits, sacrifices, and prayers until 10 o’clock in the morning.

❖ **"But others mocking said, “they are drunk”, and they spoke truly though in mockery. For in truth the wine was new, even the grace of the New Testament; but this new wine was from a spiritual Vine, which had oftentimes before this borne fruit in Prophets, and had budded in the New Testament. For as in things sensible, the vine ever remains the same, but bears new fruits in its seasons, so also the self-same Spirit continuing what He is, as He had often wrought in Prophets, now manifested a new and marvelous work. For though His grace had come before to the Fathers also, yet here it came exuberantly; for formerly men only partook of the Holy Ghost, but now they were baptized completely.**

But Peter who had the Holy Ghost, and who knew what he possessed, says, **“O Men of Israel, You whom the prophet Joel gave you the good news, yet you do not know the Scripture, “For these are not drunk, as you suppose” (Acts 2.15). Drunken they are, not however as you suppose, but according to that which is written, “They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasure” (Ps. 36.8). They are drunken, with a sober drunkenness, deadly to sin and life-giving to the heart, a drunkenness contrary to that of the body; for this last causes forgetfulness even of what was known, but that bestows the knowledge even of what was not known. They are drunken, for they have drunk the wine of the spiritual vine, which says, “I am the**

vine, you are the branches” (John 15.5). But if you are not persuaded by me, understand what I tell you from the very time of the day; for **“It is only the third hour of the day”** (Acts 2.15).

For He who, as Mark relates, was crucified at the third hour, now at the third hour sent down His grace. For His grace is not other than the Spirit's grace, but He who was then crucified, who also gave the promise, made good that which He promised. And if you would receive a testimony also, Listen, he says: **“But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “It shall come to pass, ...says God, that I will pour out My Spirit”** (Acts 2.17), **implied a rich gift; for God (does not give) the Spirit by measure, for the Father (loves) the Son, and has given all things into His hand and He has given Him the power also of bestowing the grace of the All-holy Spirit on whomsoever He will);**

“...I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams, and on My menservants and on My maidservants, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2.17, 18).

The Holy Ghost is no respecter of persons; for He seeks not dignities, but piety of soul. Let neither the rich be puffed up, nor the poor dejected, but only let each prepare himself for reception of the Heavenly gift¹.

❖ Establishing the Church is a new creation of the world, and according to the prophet Isaiah: **“I create new heaven and a new earth”** (Isa. 65.17), and according to the apostle St. Paul: **“I rejoice to see the steadfastness of your faith in Christ”** (Col. 2.5). A new earth is created, that absorbs the rain dropping on it. A new man is created, who is renewed according to the image of his Creator by the new birth from above. And there is a new light, about which Christ says, **“You are the light of the world”** (Matt. 5.14), **“... among whom you shine as lights in the world”** (Phil. 2.15). That is why, several stars shine in the power of faith. The huge number of stars that were given names by God is not the only wonder in creation. The Word of God says that your names are written in heaven. The Creator of the new world is heard saying to His stars: **“... but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven”** (Luke 10.20). Beside these stars created by the Lord Christ, there are ‘suns’ that shine on the world by their good deeds, of which their Maker says, **“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”** (Matt. 5.16). Then, **“Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father”** (Matt. 13.43)².

The scholar Tertullian³ believes that, beside the perpetual inner prayer which is not limited by certain time, there are prayers limited by certain time: the third, the sixth, and the ninth, as it came in the Holy Book. The Holy Spirit came down at the third hour of the day (9 O’C). The apostle Peter saw a

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 17.18-9.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. 14.

³ *On Prayer* 25.

great sheet, descending to him, and let down to the earth, at the sixth hour of the day (Acts 10.9). And he, together with St. John, entered the temple, at the ninth hour of the day. Man, at these hours, separates himself from his work to pray. The prophet Daniel used to pray three times a day, according to the Jewish rite (Dan. 6.10), beside praying at dawn, in the evening, before meals and having a bath, as a sign that we give the heavenly matters priority over the earthly matters.

“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2.16):

What is happening is not haphazard, but was prophesied by the prophet Joel (Joel 2.28), before centuries, as an event, connected to the Messianic era. It is as though he was telling them, You have to reconsider your actions, as He, whom you crucified, is Christ, the object of prophesies by the prophets.

❖ ”As for the accusation [of drunkenness], he cleared himself of that by his own assertion; but for the grace, he fetches the prophet as witness. **“I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh”. To some the grace was imparted through dreams, to others it was openly poured forth. For indeed by dreams the prophets saw, and received revelations¹”.**

“It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2.17).

By saying, **“in the last days”**, He proclaims that what happened was the beginning of the end, when humanity enters the waiting stage for the ultimate coming of Christ, and anticipates the day of the Lord with great joy. The Jews knew that term, to be concerning the era of the Messiah, whom they anticipated along the generations (Isa. 2.2; Hos. 3.5). When Jacob prophesied to his sons about what would happen in the Messianic era. He called that era, **“the last days”** (Gen. 49.1). And when the prophet Micah spoke of the Church of the New Testament, as the Mountain of the house of the Lord, he said, **“In the latter days”**, and so did the prophet Isaiah (2.2).

The expression **“In the last days”** reveals the coming of the **“fullness of time”**, in which **“God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law”** (Gal. 4.4), and the **“fullness of the time, when He will gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth – in Him”** (Eph. 1.10); Whereas, some see it as the fullness of time, when the kingdom would be taken away from the old Israel, and the temple would be destroyed, to deliver the kingdom to the New Israel, and to set the new temple in the hearts of the believers².

The latter days dwelt when the Levite priesthood became invalid, to proclaim the priesthood of Christ, according to the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110.4; Heb. 5.6, 6.20). He, who is not a descendent of Abraham and nobody knows his father or mother. Likewise, in Jesus Christ, the call for work is opened through the unknown persons.

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 5.*

² See Matthew Henry. *Comm. on Acts. 2.*

Some believe that the history of salvation includes the following eras:

- ❖ Man in paradise
- ❖ The era of the patriarchs
- ❖ The era of the judges
- ❖ The era of the kings
- ❖ The era of the prophets (especially during and after the captivity)
- ❖ The latter era, or the last days: The Messianic era, until the ultimate coming of

Christ, or the day of the Lord. The Lord Himself used this expression (John 6.39-40, 44.45, 11.24, 12.48). And it was used as well by the apostles (Heb. 1.2; 1 Pet. 1.20; 2 Pet. 3.3; 1 John 2.18; Jude 18).

“On all flesh”, as the work of the Holy Spirit is no more confined to the Jews, but also works in the Gentiles. He works in the children of God, men and women, to the account of the kingdom of God. Rabbi Tanchum says that when Moses put his hand over Joshua, he said, [The blessed God says, ‘At the time of the old Context (Testament), each prophet prophesied alone, but in the days of the Messiah, all Israel will become prophets]. The word “prophesy” is not to be understood as telling about future events that are proclaimed to them, but that they preach the divine truth, especially the salvation by Christ, and the heavenly glories he prepares for the believers.

“The visions and dreams”: God, in the old days, proclaimed His divine presence and His divine will, through two ways: through symbols, like the appearance of fire, as it happened with Moses on the Mount of Horeb, with our father Abraham (Gen. 21.17), and with the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19.11-12); And sometimes through the appearance of angels, as in the days of the Patriarchs, of which there are many examples in the book of Genesis. The other way is by dreams, as what happened with Joseph (Gen. 37.5-9), with Jacob (Gen. 28.1, 46.2), with Pharaoh (Gen. 41.1-7), and with Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4.10-17).

What does the phrase **“your sons and daughters”** mean? The dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was temporary, dwelling upon a special category, like the priests (of the tribe of Levi), the kings (of the tribe of Judah), and the prophets, through a divine call. But in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit became a divine gift presented to all believers, to grant them various graces. Even among the leaders in the Church, like the apostles, the disciples, then the bishops, the priests, and the deacons, it is not confined to a certain tribe or family, but the Lord chose His disciples from among the common people, **“God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty”** (1 Cor. 1.27).

- ❖ “He had said already, that He had poured the Spirit on us; now to give the Spirit with authority, is not in the power of creature or work, but the Spirit is God's Gift For the creatures are hallowed by the Holy Spirit; but the Son, in that He is not hallowed by the Spirit, but on the contrary Himself the Giver of it to all is therefore no creature, but true Son of the Father¹”.
- ❖ The Spirit works in their souls (the prophets) to prophesy and to talk, when there is a need to tell the world about great events. The prophets did not talk all the time, but only according to the will of the Spirit in them; yet, the divine power was always with them. If the Holy Spirit has been so poured in that time, which was just a shadow of the time of grace, how would He be poured in the New Testament, that of the cross and the coming of Christ, in which the pouring out and the filling up of the Spirit occurred²?

(St. Makarius the Great)

“And on My menservants and My maidservants, I will pour out My Spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2.18).

What came here was realized in the time of the apostles through the work of the Lord Christ, starting by the spiritual gifts, that are no more confined to the two tribes of Levi (the priesthood as an inheritance), and Judah (the kings), But the call for ministry became open before every faithful soul that yearns to the work of preaching. Moreover, the call to testify to Christ became open to every living member in the Church, whatever his race, country, age, or capabilities are.

- ❖ “But yet Almighty God, in His most gracious providence, by "pouring out of His Spirit in these last days, upon all flesh, upon His servants and on His handmaidens," has checked these impostures of unbelief and perverseness, reanimated men's faltering faith in the resurrection of the flesh, and cleared from all obscurity and equivocation the ancient Scriptures (of both God's Testaments by the clear light of their (sacred) words and meanings³”.

“I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord” (Acts 2.19-20).

The ministry of the New Testament was accompanied by wonders and signs in the heaven and on the earth, like what happened on the day the Lord Christ was crucified, when the sun was darkened; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and went into the holy city and appeared to many. On the day of His resurrection, as well, the earth quaked; and on that of His ascension, heaven proclaimed His glory, as a cloud appeared

¹ Pope Athanasius the Apostolic. *Adv. Arian.* 2.15.18.

² St. Makarius the Great. *Sermon 2.3-4.*

³ The Scholar Tertullian. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh.* 63.

and received Him out of His disciples' sight (Acts 1.9). On the last day, signs in heaven and on earth will also proclaim the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ (Matt. 24.29).

Some believe that the blood, the fire, the smoke, and the darkness, all proclaim what were to come over them, of both civil and religious devastation, when Titus burned the temple in the year 70 AD, after which the people were dispersed all over the world; and an intellectual darkness dwelt, because of their rejection of salvation.

- ❖ “It is said, indeed, that many such phenomena actually did occur in the sky, as Josephus attests. At the same time the Apostle strikes fear into them, by reminding them of the darkness which had lately occurred, and leading them to expect things to come. ... What means, the moon turned into blood? It denotes the excess of the slaughter. The language is fraught with helpless dismay¹”.

“And it shall come to pass, that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2.21).

What happened is a realization of the prophecy of the prophet Joel, that is the first of the scenes of the kingdom, and the opening of the curtain on the works of Christ, in the dwelling of His Holy Spirit from heaven, not as a temporary dwelling, as has been the case with the prophets of the Old Testament, but a permanent one, and a filling up of the believers' hearts, for establishing the kingdom of Christ, to make out of all, kings, prophets, and priests of the Most High.

- ❖ **“By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit”** (1 John 4.13). Away from the Spirit, we are strangers to God and far from Him; whereas, by the fellowship of the Spirit, we became close to the Deity. Consequently, we are in the Father, not out of our own doing, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us².

(St. Athanasius the Apostolic)

- ❖ “Thus far, however, he makes the discourse light, by introducing that which relates to faith, and that terrible which relates to the punishment. For in the invocation is the salvation³”.

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, A Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, And signs, which God did through Him in your midst, As you yourselves also know ...” (Acts 2.22)

In our commentary on the gospel according to St. John, we saw how many have been offended because of the Person of the Lord Christ, being a Nazareth. Nathaniel protested against Philip, when he invited him to encounter with the One on whom Moses has written, and said, **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth”** (John 1.46)? And mockingly, the reason for crucifying Him was put on the cross: **“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”**.

¹ St. Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 5.*

² St. Athanasius the Apostolic. *Contra Arians. 2.42, 3.24.*

³ St. Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 5.*

It was called ‘Nazareth’, because it was a small town of little value, like a small off-shoot coming out close to the root of a tree, in an inconvenient place, that would be probably cut off by the caretaker, called ‘Netzer’ in Hebrew, and hence the name ‘Nazareth’ was driven from it.

It is obvious that the miracles and signs, which the Lord Christ did, were to confirm that the era of the Messiah, for which the fathers and the prophets have for so long yearned and anticipated, has already come, **“The kingdom of God has come upon you”** (Matt. 12.28).

“... which God did through Him”: to confirm the sayings: **“... for I proceeded forth and came from God”** (John 8.42), **“My father has been working until now, and I have been working”** (John 5.17), and **“If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me, But if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I am in Him”** (John 10.37-38).

St. John Chrysostom¹ speaks about the wisdom of St. Peter:

1- He began by saying: **“Men of Israel”**, not to flatter them, but to draw them to listen to him.

2- He did not proclaim a verdict in the matter of Jesus, but said, **“Hear these words”**, to let them reach their own verdict, and recognize Him with prudence.

3- He did not start by proclaiming Him as being the only-begotten Son of God, and His Word, but said, **“A Man”**, in a modest way.

4- Referring to His miracles, he said, **“that God did through Him”**. Thus, he descended to the level of their thoughts, to lift their minds up to the Truth. As it would have not been possible for them to receive it in one installment, He sets forth with them from down upwards.

In his response to Valentinus, **the scholar Tertullian**² used this expression, to confirm that the Lord Christ took a true body, and became Man, that His body was not spiritual or a shadow.

“Him being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death” (Acts 2.23).

The Jews used to call the kingdom of Rome ‘the kingdom of evil’. Hence, the word ‘lawless’ here refers to the Romans, meaning ‘those without law’. In the gospel according to St. Mark, it came, **“The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners”** (Mark 14.41).

Here, St. Peter clarifies that the death of the Lord Christ was not haphazard, Even though it occurred **“by lawless hands”**, yet they cannot claim their innocence of what they themselves did, except by believing in Him. What happened has been through an eternal divine plan that He had previously proclaimed by the prophets, who have got divine knowledge.

“Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains (pangs) of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2.24).

¹ St. Chrysostom. Homilies on Acts. Hom. 6.

² On the Flesh of Christ. Chap15.

God the Father, for His love, has delivered His only-begotten Son for the salvation of the world (John 3.16), and raised Him up to justify all. Indeed, in obedience to the will of the Father, which is One with His own will, He delivered Himself, and in like obedience, He raised Himself from the dead, loosing “**the pangs of death**” (Ps. 18.4-5). As to saying “**the pangs of death**”, he likens death to a woman in labor. Death tried in vain to hold on the Lord Christ in him. Death labored with pain; and the Lord Christ split the womb and abyss of death, and raised Himself. The Psalmist also called them “**snare of death**”. Death assumed that he could cast its snares of authority on the Lord; But the Lord loosed those snares, as did ‘Samson’, when he broke the bowstrings as a strand of yarn breaks when it touches fire (Judg. 16.9-12).

In the Version of Bezae, as well as the Syrian, the Coptic, and the Vulgate, the word ‘death’ came as ‘Hades’, the place where souls are held after death. He indeed died, and His soul entered into ‘Hades’, not to be held there eternally, but in order to break its bolts, and to bear the spoils to paradise. He brought the good news to the departed, not by human uttered words, but by the power of His authority, loosing their chains, and carrying them to the place of comfort.

“For David says concerning Him: ‘I foresaw the Lord always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken’” (Acts 2.25).

The state of joy expressed by the Psalmist is not his own, but concerns the Messiah, as death could not separate the only-begotten Son from the Father. The Son is on the right hand of the Father; and the Father is on the right hand of the Son, as they both do not submit to place limits. The right hand here refers to power. Christ is not preoccupied by death, as it is under His feet, but He is rather preoccupied by the fact that, by His resurrection, He opened the gate of hope to His believers to enjoy it.

“Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad, moreover my flesh will rest in hope” (Acts 2.26).

The apostle here quoted from the Septuagint Version, “**My tongue was glad**”, In the Hebrew Version, it came as “my glory” instead of “my tongue”.

“Because You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will you allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (Acts 2.27).

What a magnificent portrait of the truth of ‘putting death to death’! The body was placed in a tomb for a certain time, to put the dead at ease in having Him among them temporarily. Then His soul set forth to Hades to break its bolts, to set forth with the souls of those departed on the hope of the enjoyment of paradise.

The Lord Christ did not fall under the verdict: “**For dust you are, and to dust you shall return**” (Gen. 3.19). For, as He is without sin, He will not see corruption. It was not possible for humanity that became the ‘Word’, to submit to what befell the falling nature of Adam. Indeed, His soul could separate from His body, but just temporarily, with no corruption to either the soul or the body.

By His resurrection, He destroyed the abyss, and **“said to the prisoners: ‘Go forth’, and to those who are in darkness: ‘Show yourselves’”** (Isa. 49.9), and ascended to His Father up in heaven, where no human can enter. He took on Himself our sins, and became an atonement for us¹.

“You have made known to me the ways of life, You will make me full of joy in Your presence” (Acts 2.28).

It was not possible for the Psalmist to say, “You have made known to me the resurrection from the dead”, as no one could ever realize that, But, in the resurrection of the Lord, he saw **“the ways of life”**, where death is destroyed; and the believers are lifted up to eternal life.

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the Patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2.29).

The Jews assumed that what the prophet David said concerned him personally. It came in the Midris² that no worm or insect had authority over David. That is why the apostle Peter intended to clarify to them that David was buried, was not raised up; and his grave was still there testifying to this. What is said concerns the Lord Christ. Rabbi Jose said that David died on the fiftieth day; and all Israel mourned him, then offered sacrifices the next day³].

David, called ‘a Patriarch’ by St. Peter, and his grave is in the southern part of Jerusalem close to Selwam, talked about the resurrection of the Lord Christ, who came from his seed (according to the flesh), saying that His soul was not left in Hades, and his body did not see corruption.

St. John Chrysostom says that beginning to refer to the greatness of the Lord Christ, he talks to them as though he is starting his speech anew, saying, **“Men and brethren”**. St. Peter, being aware that the Jews did not believe that what David says does not concern him personally, but is a prophecy about Christ, the Son of David, he confirm to them that what David said was realized in Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified.

“Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God has sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, he would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption” (Acts 2.30-31).

❖ “His flesh saw no corruption; ours, after corruption, shall in the end of the world be clothed by Him with incorruption: He had no need of us, in order to work out our salvation; we, without Him, can do nothing: He gave Himself as the vine, to us the branches; we, apart from Him, can have no life⁴”.

¹ St. Cyril the Great. Lettens. 41.13.

² Midris Tillin.

³ Chagig, Fol.78.

⁴ St. Augustine. In Joan. Tr 84.2.

In a letter by St. Jerome to Pammachius, he confirms the resurrection of the Lord, and His enjoyment of the fellowship of the glory with the human soul. That is why we have a holy and revered view of the flesh. As an example, the fasting of the flesh, as far as we are concerned, does not mean that we consider it as a corrupt thing, but it is a way to enjoy a fellowship with God, not just on the level of the soul, but of man as a whole.

❖ “What we aim at in fasting, they have through fellowship with God. They feed on heavenly bread, and are satisfied with every word of God, having Him as their food who is also their Lord. Listen to the Savior saying: **“My flesh will rest in hope”** (Ps. 16.9). And elsewhere, **“His flesh did not see corruption”** (Acts 2.31), and again, **“The glory of God shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together”** (Isa. 40.5) ¹”.

“This Jesus, God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses” (Acts 2.32).

After presenting the testimony of the prophets, concentrating on the book of Psalms, concerning the coming of the Messiah from the seed of David, His death, and His resurrection, he ended it by the testimony of the disciples themselves; and in another location, the apostle referred them to the Holy Spirit, as a witness to the Lord Christ (Acts 5.32). All those present: the disciples, the apostles, and others have seen Him after His resurrection from the dead; and they all were ready to testify to this, even in the face of persecution and death.

“Therefore, being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this, which you now see and hear” (Acts 2.33).

The apostle Peter confirms that Jesus was not only raised from the dead, but was also glorified on the right hand of God; and through that glory, He sent the Holy Spirit, that was prophesied by the prophet Joel, and promised by the Lord Christ Himself (John 14.16, 16.17).

The apostle Peter quotes the psalm: **“The right hand of God lifted me up, the right hand of God made strength”** (Ps. 119). The right hand does not refer to a place, but to a status. It refers to the equality in glory and dignity to “the saving strength of His right hand” (Ps. 20.6). **“Your right hand, O Lord, destroys the enemy”** (Ezek. 15.6).

He refers to the promise of the Lord Christ to send the Holy Spirit, who consummates the work of Christ in our hearts, as the apostle Paul says, **“... that he would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ dwells in your hearts”** (Eph. 3.6).

The Father poured out the Holy Spirit from heaven, to testify publicly, and to be seen by those who crucified Him. He poured Him on the disciples who closed the doors on themselves in fear and terror, lest they face what their Lord did. He poured Him out to turn their terror into courage to testify to

¹ St. Jerome. *To Pammachius against John of Jerusalem*. 29.

the Truth, to turn their grief into joy, and their weakness into strength, to testify by the Holy Spirit, and to deliver the message from one generation to another.

“For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand’ (Acts 2.34),

What David uttered did not concern him personally, or was realized to him, but to the ‘Son of David’.

St. John Chrysostom says that St. Peter was not any more talking modestly about Jesus, but he was revealing His Person, that He, and not David, is the One who ascended to Heaven, which is not strange, as He is the Lord of David, who said, **“The Lord said to My Lord ...”**¹.

❖ Having Himself, ascended to heaven, He brought man as a gift to God².

“Till I make Your enemies Your footstool” (Acts 2.35).

The apostle paraded the works of the Lord Christ, the blessings He offered, and the testimonies of the prophets to Him; and now, having not accepted Him through love, they had to submit to Him through fear, lest they fall as enemies under His feet.

❖ “For men are not so much attracted by benefits as they are chastened by fear³”.

“Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36).

St. John Chrysostom says that St. Peter spoke with the language of confirmation to all the house of Israel, that they were committed to accept Him, whom they crucified, as Lord and Christ.

As what preoccupied the minds of the Jews was to enjoy the coming of the Messiah, the apostle confirmed to them that He had already come, and the signs of the truth of His coming are the following:

❖ His resurrection from the dead, as testified by many.

❖ His ascension to heaven.

❖ His sitting on the right hand of the Father in the highest.

❖ His sending the Holy Spirit, as a realization of the prophecies, and which is the first fruit of His glory after the ascension.

❖ The fall of the devil under His feet, he who, by the cross, has lost his authority.

The apostle explained to them gradually, through the testimony of the psalms, until he reached with them to the prophecy of the prophet David about the ascension of the Lord Christ, and His sitting

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 6.*

² *St. Hippolytus.*

³ *St. John Chrysostom. Homilies on Acts. Hom. 6.*

on the right hand of the Father, and that He is the Lord of David. The apostle Paul says, **“Therefore God has also highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”** (Phil. 2.9-11). Those, who intended to take Him down to the abyss through the cross, had fallen down into it themselves. He carried His believers with Him to heaven, and His enemies came to be under His feet and those of His believers. His Lordship has been proclaimed: everyone bowed to Him; and the devil and all his hosts were crushed under His feet.

With simplicity, yet with theological depth, St. Peter set forth with them through the prophecies, to recognize the secret of salvation, the realization of the work of the cross, to get in touch with the resurrection of the Lord Christ, His ascension to heaven, and His sitting on the right hand of the Father, to lead them to realize the end proclaimed by God, that the One whom they crucified is the Lord Christ, the Savior. It is, as though he was ending his speech about the Lord Christ, by asking those who crucified Him to cast off from themselves the ancient man, and to attach themselves to the Crucified, the Grantor of victory, and the Source of joy and heavenly peace.

- ❖ “while on our part it is said that it is not pious to refer the word "made" to the Divine Nature of the Only-begotten, but that it is to be referred to that "form of a servant which came into being by the Incarnation in the due time of His appearing in the flesh¹”.

Both Arius and Eunomius used this phrase, to claim the essence of the Son, as being created by the Father, and that He has made Him a Lord and Christ. St. Athanasius the apostolic contradicted Arius; and St. Basil contradicted Eunomius; and both were included in the work of St. Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, the fifth book.

- ❖ "At all events the great Basil writes expressly as follows: Nor, moreover, is it the intention of the Apostle to present to us that existence of the Only-begotten which was before the ages (which is now the subject of our argument), for he clearly speaks, not of the very essence of God the Word, Who was in the beginning with God, but of Him Who emptied Himself to take the form of a servant, and became conformable to the body of our humiliation (Phil. 3.21), and was crucified through weakness.' And again, `This is known to any one who even in a small degree applies his mind to the meaning of the Apostle's words, that he is not setting forth to us the mode of the Divine existence, but is introducing the terms which belong to the Incarnation; for he says, Him God made Lord and Christ, this Jesus Whom ye crucified, evidently laying stress by the demonstrative word on that in Him which was human and was seen by all²".

5- THE APPEALING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Against Eunomius*. 5.2.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Against Eunomius*. 5.2.

“Now when they heard this, they were cut (Pierced) to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do’ (Acts 2.37)?

Those present did not enter in debate or discussion with him, because the Holy Spirit, who gave the word to St. Peter, has likewise worked in the hearts of the listeners, who feared falling under judgment for opposing the divine truth. The Holy Spirit (pierced) the hearts of the listeners, to enquire what they should do. The Greek word that was translated ‘cut’ is itself the one translated ‘pierced’, when one of the soldiers pierced the side of the Lord Christ with a spear (John 19.34). If the evil ones have pierced Him with a spear, to cut His heart with a deadly wound, The Lord Christ is now casting the spear of His Holy Spirit, to pierce their hearts, and to rebuke them, in order to bear the healing wounds of love, through the true repentance.

If the Holy Spirit has uttered by the mouth of the apostle Peter, He has also pierced the hearts of some of the listeners to respond to the word. The Holy Spirit, by the first sermon said in the Church of the New Testament, caught in His net about 3000 souls in one batch.

❖ "Do you see what a great thing gentleness is? More than any vehemence, it pricks our hearts, inflicts a keener wound. For as in the case of bodies which have become callous the man that strikes upon them does not affect the sense so powerfully, but if he first mollify them and make them tender, then he pierces them effectually; so in this instance also, it is necessary first to mollify. But that which softens, is not wrath, not vehement accusation, not personal abuse; it is gentleness. The former indeed rather aggravate the callousness, this last alone removes it. If then you are desirous to reprove any delinquent, approach him with all possible mildness. For see here; he gently reminds them of the outrages they have committed, adding no comment; he declares the gift of God, he goes on to speak of the grace which bore testimony to the event, and so draws out his discourse to a still greater length. So they stood in awe of the gentleness of Peter, in that he, speaking to men who had crucified his Master, and breathed murder against himself and his companions, discoursed to them in the character of an affectionate father and teacher. Not merely were they persuaded; they even condemned themselves, they came to a sense of their past behavior. For he gave no room for their anger to be roused, and darken their judgment, but by means of humility he dispersed, as it were, the mist and darkness of their indignation, and then pointed out to them the daring outrage they had committed. For so it is; when we say of ourselves that we are injured, the opposite party endeavor to prove that they have not done the injury; but when we say, we have not been injured, but have rather done the wrong, the others take the contrary line. If, therefore, you wish to place your enemy in the wrong, beware of accusing him; nay plead for him, he will be sure to find himself guilty. There is a natural spirit of opposition in man¹".

¹ *St. John Chrysostom. Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

❖ Let them learn that the ‘Logos’ is the Son of God, as it was said before, and that He is not created, They should refrain of referring such words to Him, but should rather search why those things were written. Then, the fact of incarnation that He made for our sake will undoubtedly answer their enquiries. When Peter said, **“He made Him a Lord and Christ”**, he added at once, **“whom you crucified”**, which made the matter clear to all. The word **‘made’** does not apply to the essence of the Word but to His humanity, because it was the body that was crucified.

“He made Him Lord”, and not only that, but **“He made Him your Lord”**, and **“in your midst”**. This is what He means by saying **“attested”** in (Acts 2.22). He proved that He is not an ordinary man, but He is God in flesh, the Lord, and the Christ. The Father made Him Lord and king in our midst, and for us, who were rebels before. It is obvious that He, who appears now as Lord and king, has not started as such, but has started to show His Lordship, extended even to those who rebel against Him¹.

❖ “but that very Word who was by nature Lord, and was then made man, has by means of a servant's form been made Lord of all and Christ, that is, in order to hallow all by the Spirit²”.

❖ “They had slain, not Him so much, as themselves. They were saved by Him who was slain for them. For, as the Apostles spoke, they were pricked; they were pricked in conscience, who had pricked Him with the spear; and being pricked they sought for counsel, received it when it was given, repented, found grace, and believing drunk that Blood which in their fury they had shed³”.

“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sin, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2.38).

❖ “The Jewish people repenting of their misdoing are sent forthwith by Peter to be baptized⁴”.

❖ “Who should despair of the forgiveness of his sins, when the crime of killing Christ was forgiven to those who were guilty of it? ... They came to the Lord's Table, and in faith drank that Blood, which in their fury they had shed⁵”.

❖ “What can be a greater sin than to crucify Christ? Yet even of this Baptism can purify⁶”.

❖ “So great was the grace which wrought in all the Apostles together, that, out of the Jews, those crucifiers of Christ, this great number believed, and were baptized in the Name of Christ, and continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and in the prayers (Acts 2.14) ¹”.

¹ *Adv Arian. 2.15.12.*

² *Ibid. 2.15.14.*

³ *St. Augustine. Sermon on the Mount. 39.1.*

⁴ *St. Jerome. Letter 69 to Oceanus.*

⁵ *St. Augustine. Sermon on the Mount. 27.4.*

⁶ *St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Lect. Catech. 3.15.*

Whoever did not listen to St. John the Baptist when he called for repentance (Matt. 3.1-2), and did not respond to the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, who also called for repentance (Matt. 4.17), can start now, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to offer repentance or 'Metanias' I.E., to change his heart, will, and mind, to reconsider his inner life and his apparent behavior, to give God the face, instead of the back (Jer. 7.24, 22.33), and to give the back, instead of the face, to sin.

Repentance is to discover the exalted love of God. And as it was said about the sinful woman, **"Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much"** (Luke 7.47), the sinner finds in God's love the source of forgiveness, comfort, and exalted joy.

The scholar Origen, referring to the Baptism of even the little children "for the remission of sins", asks whose sins these are; and when they ever committed them; or how we can explain the cleansing by Baptism, that happens even to the little children. As no man is without (wrinkles), even if his life is only one day, by the sacrament of Baptism, every wrinkle will be wiped out. Little children are baptized because **"Unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"** (John 3.5) ².

Through giving God the face instead of the back, by repentance, they receive Baptism to gain sonhood to God, to have their sins forgiven, and to enjoy the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells in them.

We can say that repentance is like a life boat for the traveler. When the ship is broken and destroyed by the waves of sin and the storms of rebellion, he should jump in this boat. Whereas Baptism is throwing oneself into the bosom of one's Father, and to enter as though into His eternal dwelling place. He would find his comfort in his sonhood to the Father, his fellowship with the only-begotten Son, and his joy by the work of the Spirit of God dwelling in him. By repentance, medication is presented for healing the wounds of sin; whereas, by Baptism, man's dignity is restored, to become in truth an icon of Christ, whose righteousness he bears, and to have the right of fellowship in the eternal glory.

❖ "He does not yet say, Believe, but, **"Let every one of you be baptized"**, for this they received in baptism. Then he speaks of the gain; **"for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"**. **If you are to receive a gift, if baptism conveys remission, why delay?"** ³.

Cleansing our sins and our renewal do not mean the death of the body, but death of the body lusts, or of the old man with his works; whereas, the body is good and holy.

❖ When I wish this body to die to sin, I do not ask for the death of the body, but that it does not sin again. And, as the dead body is beyond the possibility of sin, so is he who come out of the water of Baptism would be saved from sin. If you happen to die in this water, you should stay dead to sin ⁴.

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Lect. Catech.* 17.21.

² *Homilies on Acts.* 14.5.

³ St. John Chrysostom. *Hom. On Acts.* Hom. 7.

⁴ *In Epis Ad Rom.* Hom. 2.

❖ It is fitting for the repentant to keep away from the sins he repented, for which reason we are commanded to say before being baptized, “I deny you, O Satan”, so as not to return to him¹.

❖ Baptism is a gate that leads to paradise, through which man enters to be with God.

Baptism is a new ship that carries the dead, by which they cross to eternity.

Baptism is made for the sake of the new world, in which man crosses over from the land of the dead to that of life.

❖ Come over, O indebted, and enter! Take back your bills for free; Your sins will be forgiven in the water.

Come over, O poor! Acquire the riches by the spiritual baptism And the great safe box instead of poverty.

Come over, O prodigal sheep of the Master of the herd and be baptized, as with you, the figure will be a whole hundred.

Come over, O sinner, tired, contrite and heavily wounded! Cut off yourself the burden of transgression by baptism.

Come over, O blind and darkened by choice! Be baptized to have your eyes opened, and to get enlightened by the daughter of the day.

Come over, O perishing! The good Shepherd has come after you to gather you at the spring.

Come over! The ways leading to God’s house are open in the waters.

Come over, O ancient, who grew old and worn out! Acquire renewal in the new font of Baptism².

“For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2.39).

This promise that was prophesied by the prophet Joel, is very spacious, offered to **“all who are afar off”**, offered to all humans. The promise is to everyone who is called by the Lord, the Philanthropist. From God’s side, the call is to all; it remains for man to respond to the call, **“Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, there shall be deliverance. As the Lord has said, Among the remnant whom the Lord calls”** (Joel 2.32), **“Peace, peace to him who is far off and to him who is near”** (Isa. 57.19).

It can be easy for man to neglect enjoying his rights, but he would never be, as far as his children are concerned. That is why the apostle confirms, **“The promise is to you and to your children”**. That is why it is said, **“I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring”** (Isa. 44.3), **“My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not**

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Baptismal Instructions*. 12.22.

² St. Jacob El-Sorougi. *A Hymn on Baptism*. A manuscript found in St. Anthony’s Monastery transcribed in 1488 M.A.

depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants, says the Lord" (Gen. 17.7; Isa. 59.21).

"And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying: 'Be saved from this perverse generation'" (Acts 2.40).

At the end of his sermon that was not given in its entirety by the Evangelist St. Luke, St. Peter concentrated on the sin of that generation, that he called it "**the perverse generation**", who said, "**His blood be on us and on our children**" (Matt. 27.25). Offering repentance for what they did to the Savior, they would enjoy forgiveness of their sins, or reconciliation with the Forgiver of sins. It became within their authority, as God has offered every thing. The Father proclaimed His love by giving His Son up; The Son paid the price; and the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the Church. It is their turn to receive the Holy Spirit, the Giver of every thing. It is time for salvation before their eternal devastation, and the divine punishment of the destruction of the temple.

He warns them against joining the unbelievers and the wicked, as the Psalmist says, "**Depart from me, you evildoers, for I will keep the commandments of my God. ... You put away all the wicked of the earth like dross, therefore I love Your testimonies**" (Ps. 119.115, 119).

- ❖ I beg you, O beloved, and throw myself at your feet, Give me and give yourself this one prayer: to "be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2.40).
- ❖ "Withdraw, dearly beloved, from the heresy of Origen and from all heresies¹".

"Then those who gladly received his word were baptized, and that day about 3000 souls were added to them" (Acts 2.41).

St. Peter's call for repentance led them to the life of joy, because they offered a true repentance, and enjoyed what the prophet and king David yearned for: "**Restore to me the joy of Your salvation**" (Ps. 51.12).

The sign of the work of the Holy Spirit is to receive the Word with joy that made them worthy of repentance, confession, and Baptism.

- ❖ Whoever truly wishes to live according to the gospel would destroy both the beginning and the end of his evil condition, and would practice every virtue, both by words and by action. He would set himself free from all the temptations of lusts; and once his mind is set free from that struggle, he would be possessed by the hope of happiness, and would know nothing but the perpetual joy that nourishes the soul.

(St. Mark the Hermit)

Some believe that the addition of 3000 souls was realized not by St. Peter's sermon alone but by those of the other apostles as well, each in one language or another. The profit of their preaching on that

¹ St. Jerome. *Letters: Letter LI. From Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, in Cyprus, to John, Bishop of Jerusalem.*

whole day was 3000 souls from all over Jerusalem; that is why, it is said, “**that day**”, not “**that hour**”. It was not an easy matter for 3000 souls, on a single day, to forsake their submission to the chief priests and the Sanhedrin, and to proclaim their acceptance of the crucified Jesus as Lord and Christ.

6- A REJOICING SPIRITUAL CHURCH

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts 2.42).

The Greek word for “continued steadfastly” bears the meaning of the dedication, sanctification, and attachment of the soul to that work.

“The apostles’ doctrine” includes the living belief in Jesus as the Lord and Christ, the Savior of the world; together with a new understanding and comprehension of the goal of the Old Testament, especially what it contains of Messianic prophecies; and teachings of the Church’s oral tradition which they received from the Lord Christ during His ministry.

The “fellowship”: The early Church practiced the fellowship on several levels:

- 1- The fellowship in practical giving love, apparent in taking care of the poor, the needy, the afflicted, the captives, the strangers, the grieved, and the sick.
- 2- A fellowship in the banquets of love, in which all partake, with the spirit of joy and love.
- 3- A fellowship in collective worship, prayers and fasting, etc.
- 4- The fellowship in the Eucharist to partake of the body and blood of the Lord.
- 5- The fellowship of the Spirit, and realization of unity, on the level of the different members of the one body -that of Christ- in harmony together.

- ❖ “Here are two virtues, perseverance and concord. ... All in common, all with perseverance¹”.
- ❖ Imagine a circle, with rays or lines diverging from its center. The farther these lines travel away from the center, the more they depart afar from each other; and the more they converge toward the center, the more they get closer to each other. Assume that this circle is the world, its center is God, and the lines from the center to the circumference, or from the circumference to the center, are the ways of life of men. We shall find the same thing: The more the saints move inside the circle toward the center, wishing to get closer to God, the more they approach each other.

The more men get closer to God, the more they get closer to one another, and the more they get closer to one another, the more they get closer to God. And the more they depart from God, and preoccupy themselves with materialistic matters, every one of them departs from the other, and accordingly would depart more from God. The same applies to acquiring love: the more we are afar off the love of God, each one of us would depart from the other. But if we love God, the closer we get to Him, we unite with love with our brethren, and the more we do that, we unite with God.

¹ *St. John Chrysostom. Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

(Father Dorotheus)

- ❖ The perfect love is for man to wish to offer his life for all men. Yet, can this love reach such level all at once? No, getting born, it needs to flourish, to get stronger, then to become perfect¹.

(St. Augustine)

“Breaking bread” is the early term for the communion in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

- ❖ The angel could not touch the live coal with his fingers, but with tongs, he brought it close to Isaiah’s mouth (Isa. 6.6). The angel did not touch it; and Isaiah did not eat it; yet our Lord allowed us to do this and that (in the Communion of His holy body and blood).

(St. Ephraim the Syrian)

- ❖ In truth, Christ gives even His body, by which the believers flourish, like little children.

(St. Hippolytus the Roman)

The “prayers”: They began by partaking together of the prayers of the temple, with all what they included of psalms, praises, and the 18 prayers of blessing, according to the season, beside other prayers at home. In their prayers, they were not preoccupied except with offering praise and thanksgiving to God who shined with His light on them and drew them to His love and the realization of His secrets, and seeking the same gift for every human soul in the world. In their minds, they did not have yearning neither for huge Church buildings nor for other ambitions, except for spreading the Word, and edifying the Church of Christ.

- ❖ “Let us apply ourselves to Prayer. It is a mighty weapon if it be offered with earnestness, if without vainglory, if with a sincere mind. It has turned back wars, it has benefited an entire nation though undeserving. **“I heard their bemoaning,”** (He) says, **“and came down to save them”** (Acts 7.34). **It is itself a saving medicine, and has power to prevent sins, and to heal misdeeds²”**.
- ❖ Let us gather together in a congregation, to offer a unified prayer. Let us wrestle with God in our supplications, this pleases Him.

(The Scholar Tertullian)

- ❖ “(You have) as the glory of Baptism the Son Himself, the Only-begotten of God. For why should I speak any more of man? John was great, but what is he to the Lord? His was a loud-sounding voice, but what in comparison with the Word? Very noble was the herald, but what in comparison with the King? Noble was he that baptized with water, but what to Him that baptizes with the Holy Ghost and with fire? The Savior baptized the Apostles with the Holy Ghost and with fire, when suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they

¹ Llewelyn, Robert. *The Joy of the Saints: Spiritual Readings throughout the Year*. Springfield: Elinois, 1989. 114.

² St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Hebrews*. Hom. 27.9.

were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire: and it sat upon each one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost¹.

“Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles” (Acts 2.43).

“Then fear came upon every soul”: The Holy Spirit filled the Church with the spirit of apprehension, especially because many of them have previously taken part in the crucifixion of the Lord Christ, or approved of it.

All were filled with the fear of God which is the head of wisdom, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit, about which it is said, **“The spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of God”** (Isa. 11.2).

- ❖ The fear of God exhorts people to keep the commandments, through which the mansion of the soul is established. Therefore, let us fear God and establish mansions for ourselves, in order to find shelter from rain and thunder in winter, as whoever without mansion would suffer greatly at the time of winter.

(Father Dorotheus)

- ❖ If somebody wishes to gain God’s love, let him first have the fear of God, as fear produces crying, and crying produces strength. And when all these are consummated in the soul, it starts to give fruition in everything. When God sees these nice fruits in the soul, He smells them as good fragrance of incense that brings joy to Him and His angels. He satisfies the soul and keeps it in all its ways, until it safely reaches its place of comfort. As the devil sees such great and exalted guard keeping an eye on the soul, he fears approaching or attacking it.

Acquire therefore such a great power to scare the demons before you, in order that your affairs would be easy, and you enjoy the divine work, as the sweetness of God’s love is more delicious than honey. Indeed, many monks and virgins have not tasted that divine sweetness, or acquired that divine strength, on the assumption that they have already did, despite their lack of strife. Whereas, whoever strives for them will certainly acquire them through the divine mercies, as God does not look at faces.

Whoever wishes to have God’s light and strength has to forsake the dignities and uncleanness of this world. He has to despise all the things of the world and the lusts of the flesh, to purify his heart of all unclean thoughts, and to offer God fasts and tears, day and night, persistently, as pure prayers. Then God would pour out on him His light and strength. Diligently seek this strength, so as to do all your works with ease, and to have great favor before God, who would grant you all what you ask for².

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures*. 3.9.

² St. Anthony the Great. *Letters*. 9.

Finally, the Holy Spirit supported the apostles with numerous wonders and signs, in the name of our Lord Jesus.

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common” (Acts 2.44).

Before speaking of the fellowship in possessions and material needs, the Evangelist St. Luke spoke of the fellowship in the Spirit, the heart, and the thought, saying, **“they were together”**. Physically, we cannot say that the 120, beside the 3000 souls, lived together in a single room or a single house for a whole day, but they were together in Spirit, in thought, and in true love.

- ❖ “They have all become angels on a sudden; all of them continuing in prayer and hearing, they saw that spiritual things are common, and no one there has more than other, and they speedily came together to the same thing in common, even to the imparting to all. ... This was an angelic commonwealth, not to call anything of theirs their own. Forthwith the root of evils was cut out. By what they did, they showed what they had heard: this was that which he said, **“Be saved of this perverse generation”** (Acts 2.40) ¹”.
- ❖ “There is nothing equal to unanimity and concord; for so one is manifold. If two or ten are of one mind, the one is one no longer, but each one is multiplied tenfold, and you will find the one in the ten, and the ten in the one; ... Each of these has twenty hands, twenty eyes, and as many feet. For he sees not with his own eyes alone, but with those of others; he walks not with his own feet alone, but with those of others; he works not with his own hands alone, but with theirs. He has ten souls, for not only does he take thought for himself, but those souls also for him. And if they be made a hundred, it will still be the same, and their power will be extended²”.

“And sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2.45).

The apostles did not commit the believers to a certain law for giving, but the believers became fond of giving love, and giving generously, with the love for God. As the Holy Spirit gave them what is God’s, they forgot what is theirs’, and counted every thing in their hands as valueless, compared to acquiring that pearl of high price.

- ❖ They did not act senselessly like what some Greek Philosophers did, when they forsook their land, or foolishly threw all their immense wealth in the sea, something that actually gave pleasure to the devil, who seeks to let man underestimate God’s creation, as though there was no better way to use the wealth, which is God’s gift.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

² St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on John. Hom. 28.4.*

The Church presented, not by commands and laws, but by love, a living example before the world, of how it is possible through fellowship to make all fulfilled, joyful, and rejoicing, with no body in need.

- ❖ Feeding the hungry is greater than raising the dead.
- ❖ Look at how much God gave you: take from it what you need, then what remains somebody else may need it.
- ❖ Present to Him the dignity that He Himself seeks from you by offering your money to the poor.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart” (Acts 2.46).

With love, they set themselves free of any depressing worries, and dedicated their hearts and life to collective worship and collective life. Thus, their life turned into what is like a perpetual wedding feast, joyful, even while eating their meals together.

- ❖ Remember, O beloved, that we should not stop praying, until we see the day in which we become one, a united congregation, not divided in thought, as we would be indeed strangers to God, if we find pleasure in dissensions and seditions that threaten the safety of the Church.

(St. Basil the Great)

- ❖ “Give heed then, brethren, and from this acknowledge the mystery of the Trinity, how it is we say, There is both the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and yet there is one God. See! There were so many thousands of these, and yet there was one heart; there were so many thousands, and one soul. ... If by approaching God many souls by love become one soul, and many hearts one heart, what of the very fountain of love in the Father and Son?”¹

They neither departed from the temple, nor bore the spirit of animosity toward the Jews. Yet, they undoubtedly did not partake of offering animal sacrifices, and so they remained until they were driven out from the temple, and banned from worshipping with the Jews.

By saying “from house to house”, it is obvious that every group that spoke one language assembled together under the leadership of one or more apostles, who were given the gift of speaking that language to worship with that (intelligible) language, both by Spirit and mind.

- ❖ “They cast away their riches, and rejoiced, and had great gladness, for greater were the riches they, received without labor. None reproached, none envied, none gruded; no pride, no contempt was

¹ St. Augustine. *On John. Tr. 39.5.*

there. As children they did indeed account themselves to be under teaching: as new born babes, such was their disposition”¹.

❖ “The poor man knew no shame, the rich no haughtiness. This is gladness. The latter deemed himself the obliged and fortunate party; the others felt themselves as honored herein, and closely were they bound together”².

❖ “Fear there was none; yea, though they had taken their position in the midst of dangers”³.

“Simplicity of heart”: Unfortunately, the image of simplicity has now become distorted, and many count it as ignorance, lack of wisdom, and of prudence. As God Himself is described as being Simple, the simplicity of heart is therefore considered as sharing in one of God’s attributes: when in the heart, there is only one straight way, with no twisting or intermingling with another way. St. Felixinus presented a magnificent essay on simplicity, (which I have already published.)

❖ ““For it is written, "Blessed is every simple soul." (Prov. 11.25). And again, **“He who walks simply, walks surely”** (Prov. 10.9). "True," you will say, "but prudence also is needed." Why, what is simplicity, I pray you, but prudence? For when you suspect no evil, neither can you fabricate any: when you have no annoyances, neither can you remember injuries. Has any one insulted you? You were not pained. Has any one reviled you? You were nothing hurt. Has he envied you? Still you had no hurt. **Simplicity is a high road to true philosophy.** None so beautiful in soul as the simple. ... A man of this last description may be safely made a friend, and when at variance easily reconciled. No need of guards and outposts, no need of chains and fetters with such a one; but great is his own freedom, and that of those who associate with him. But what, you will say, will such a man do if he falls among wicked people? God, who has commanded us to be simple-minded, will stretch out His hand. What was more guileless than David? What more wicked than Saul? Yet who triumphed? Again, in Joseph's case; did not he in simplicity approach his master's wife, she him with wicked art? Yet what, I pray, was he the worse? Furthermore, what more simple than was Abel? What more malicious than Cain?”⁴.

❖ The Lord, in His preaching, gave us an easy principle; that is, the true simple faith. Simplicity is not the one known in this world, as slothfulness and fantasy, but it is rather a simple thought, that would listen and does not investigate, would receive and does not research. ... When Abraham was called, he departed and followed God, without investigating the voice that called him. He was not hindered by relatives, friends, possessions, or by any human bonds. ... Look now, and let your departure be like his, Do not linger before the voice of Christ, who calls you in His preaching saying, **“If anyone**

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

² St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

³ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

⁴ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on John. Hom. 75.5.*

desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9.23). He thus did call every one. When He called the apostles, they left their nets and followed Him (Mark 18.1). As they were not burdened by the possessions of this world, they responded to the call of the Lord.

- ❖ Rejoice in simplicity to become beloved by God and people; and if you think that you are mocked by people, and counted as ignorant and halfwit, with no mind or discernment, Know for sure, that there is no goodness without offense. If you escape before the obstacles in the way of goodness, You will never be able to acquire virtue.

(St. Felixinus)

- ❖ “For they who now trembled and feared, after they had received the Spirit sprang into the midst of dangers, and stripped themselves for the contest against steel, and fire, and wild beasts, and seas, and every kind of punishment; and they, the unlettered and ignorant, discoursed so boldly as to astonish their hearers. For the Spirit made them men of iron instead of men of clay, gave them wings, and allowed them to be cast down by nothing human. For such is that grace; if it find despondency, it disperses it; if evil desires, it consumes them; if cowardice, it casts it out, and does not allow one who has partaken of it to be afterwards mere man, but as it were removing him to heaven itself, causes him to image to himself all that is there. On this account no one said that any of the things that he possessed was his own, but they continued in prayer, in praise, and in singleness of heart. For this the Holy Spirit most requires, for **“the fruit of the Spirit is joy, peace-faith, meekness.”** (Gal. 5.22)”¹.

7- A PRODUCTIVE CHURCH

“...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily, those who were being saved” (Acts 2.47).

They were a rejoicing Church, incessantly praising God, for what all the congregation have got of divine grace. The congregation was in a state of spiritual satisfaction that floods joy in every soul. The Church cares for praise, as it is an angelic work, the only work that will not stop by our departure from this world. Praise is the support of the believer in the midst of this valley of tears, that swallows up every affliction, grief, or bitterness, to let the believer live, as though in a perpetual heavenly banquet.

As for the grace that the whole congregation enjoyed, it is that of the Holy Trinity, working incessantly in their life. We have already presented an annex to the first chapter of the gospel, according to **St. John**, that I called, ‘A grace beyond grace’, to which you can refer.

As to the fruit of the life, rejoicing in the Lord, and perpetually praising, it is: “The Lord added to the Church daily, those who were being saved” (Acts 2.47). This is the work of the divine grace in the life of the people, rejoicing in the Spirit, and perpetually praising.

¹ *St. John Chrysostom. Homilies on Acts. Hom. 7.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS2

TO UTTER WITH A FIERY TONGUE

- ❖ With the gentle breath of the wind, You have ascended, O My Savior, to heaven.
The whole heaven trembled with joy.
The Son of Man, carrying humanity in Him, entered to the divine throne.
- ❖ You sent Your Spirit to our land like fiery tongues,
For my depths to shake by a sound like that of a rushing mighty wind.
Indeed, You have granted me Your fiery Holy Spirit to dwell in me.
- ❖ Your fiery Spirit transforms me into a fiery minister.
Even my silence and inner tranquility utter as though with a fiery tongue:
The exalted tongue of love that draws many to You.
+ You know that I am illiterate, unable to utter divine things.
Your Spirit dwelling in me,
Speaks through me in the hearts of many.
He alone knows the tongue of every man, his thoughts, feelings, and faults.
He alone speaks to everyone according to his inner intellect.
- ❖ Your Spirit fulfills the needs of everyone,
Pours out joy and comfort in the hearts of the sad and the suffering.
He fills every soul and fulfills it,
To become in need of nothing.
He shines inside it,
To scatter the kingdom of darkness,
To be her leader,
That no enemy can get to her.
He lifts her up to heaven.
The World can not bring her down.
Indeed, He grants me a fiery tongue, He, the Grantor of light,
To draw many.
- ❖ Together with Peter I cowardly refrain from testifying to You before a maidservant.
Yet by Your Spirit I can draw thousands,
To become members in Your body.

THE SECOND SECTION

IN JERUSALEM
(CHAPTERS 3 to 7)

CHAPTER 3

HEALING THE LAME

THE TREASURE OF THE CHURCH: THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST

In the two last chapters, we saw how the Lord Christ prepared the Church to set forth to work to the account of the kingdom of God. The first chapter showed that, as her Head is heavenly (the ascension) it fits her to be heavenly as well. In the second chapter, we saw that her leader is the fiery Holy Spirit to kindle her with the fiery love. Now, the work in Jerusalem starts according to the command of the Lord Christ. The Evangelist St. Luke presents an important biblical fact: **the treasure of the Church is the name of Jesus Christ.**

- 1- Healing the lame in the name of Jesus of Nazareth 1– 10
- 2- A speech about faith in Jesus' name 11– 16
- 3- Testimony of all prophets to Jesus Christ 17– 26

1- HEALING THE LAME IN THE NAME OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

“**Many wonders and signs were done through the apostles**” (Acts 2.43). Those signs were neither done haphazardly, nor to demonstrate the abilities of the apostles, but to draw every soul to enjoy the greatest sign: the exalted love of God, proclaimed on the cross. The book of Acts mentioned only few examples of those signs, for all generations to realize the capabilities of the Church of God for a divine kingdom on earth.

“*Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour*” (Acts 3.1).

St. Peter, St. James, and St. John, the selected group to accompany the Lord Christ in several events, were counted as pillars (Gal. 2.9). They alone accompanied the Lord Christ at His transfiguration (Mark 9.20), and were closer to Him at the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14.33).

Despite the difference in nature between St. Peter and St. John, they were closely connected by an amazing friendship. The first was known for his zeal and rashness; whereas, the second was known for tranquility and love. The first denied the Lord Christ thrice during His trial, while the second followed the Lord even to the cross. Notwithstanding, the Lord chose these two to go and prepare the Passover (Luke 22.8). It is obvious from the Book of Acts that their attachment to each others grew closer after the resurrection of the Lord Christ and His ascension to heaven. They went together to the tomb of the Lord (John 20.2); and they were both among the delegation sent by the apostles to deliver to the people of Samaria the faith and Baptism (Acts 8.14).

Although each of them had a brother among the disciples, their relation to one another was much stronger than their relation to their brothers according to the flesh. Friendship in Jesus Christ, and in the spiritual work, is often stronger than blood relation.

- ❖ There is nothing to heal pains like a true friend, who comforts you during your affliction.
- ❖ Indeed, you should have a friend, whom you may call ‘half your soul’.
- ❖ There is no true friendship, unless it is like a welding joint between souls, to connect them together with love, poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ “Among all these then there is one kind of love which is indissoluble, where the union is owing not to the favor of a recommendation, or some great kindness or gifts, or the reason of some bargain, or the necessities of nature, but simply to similarity of virtue. This, I say, is what is broken by no chances, what no interval of time or space can sever or destroy, and what even death itself cannot part. This is true and unbroken love which grows by means of the double perfection and goodness of friends, and which, when once its bonds have been entered, no difference of liking and no disturbing opposition of wishes can sever¹”.

(Abbot Joseph)

“**Now Peter and John went up together to the temple.**” As the temple building was a little elevated than the rest of the city, they are said to have ‘gone up’. We have already seen the commitment of the apostles and the disciples to worship in the temple with one accord (Acts 2.46).

“**At the hour of prayer, the ninth hour**”: The Jews used to keep three hours of prayer: the third, the sixth, and the ninth. The prophet David says, “**Evening and morning and at noon, I will pray and cry aloud**” (Ps. 55.17). Also Daniel was committed to this in the land of captivity (Dan. 6.10). The early Church continued to keep all the rites of Jewish worship and to partake of the prayers in the temple at the designated hours, but with new Christian concepts.

- ❖ “At the ninth hour”, the hour when the Lord delivered His Spirit on the cross, the apostles prayed².

(St. Basil the Great)

“*And a certain man, lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple*” (Acts 3.2).

¹ St. John Cassian. *Conferences*. 16.3.

² Syrian Monastery. *St. Basil the great*. Year 196. Pg 121

The story of the healing of the lame from his mother's womb was one of the many miracles granted by the Holy Spirit to the apostles, to do in the name of the crucified Jesus, But the Spirit chose it to carry a particular significance.

That miracle was done by Peter and John, and in that short episode, their names were repeated thrice, to confirm that those two names bear a symbolic meaning that touches the life of the Church and that of every true believer, who wishes to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in his depths. The first name represents faith, as the word 'Peter' means (rock); and the name 'John' represents love, by which we can recognize and see the Lord, as he, alone among the disciples, recognized Him at the sea of Tiberius, and said to Peter, **"It is the Lord"** (John 21.7). It is as though the work of the Spirit is shown in the Church, through faith working by love.

As that man had been lame from his mother's womb, the work of the Spirit was a kind of creation, renewing human nature and granting us a new creation, capable of proceeding on the way in Christ, to cross over to the bosom of the Father. As to the reference that he had been lame from his mother's womb, it carries a confirmation that the miracle had no trace of deceit, as he had been lame since his birth, incapable of movement, in need of someone to carry him daily to the temple, to ask for alms, and was known as such by all inhabitants of Jerusalem.

"The gate called beautiful" was the main gate leading to the Women's Court, Israel's Court, and the Priests' Court, through which all the Jewish people: men, women, and children crossed, as well as the priests and the Levites. Testimony to the Lord Christ was directed to all those who entered into the temple to practice the prayer of the ninth hour, with no discrimination. The scholar Lightfoot believes that the gate called Beautiful was the gate leading from the Quarter of the Gentiles to that of the Jews, so that the lame man would be encountered only by the Jews and not by the Gentiles. He saw himself as more exalted than to stretch his hand to ask for alms from a Gentile.

The scholar Whitby believes that the Gate called Beautiful was the entrance of the temple, the house of God. The beauty of the temple is not compromised by the presence of a poor lame man asking for alms. The love offered by those who came to pray and the spirit of giving were integrated parts of the beauty of the house of God.

- ❖ In every family, there should be a place, where Christ hides in the hungry and thirsty strangers.
- ❖ Nothing draws us closer to God and makes us after His image like that good deed.
- ❖ Mercy lifts man up to exalted heights and gives him favor in the eyes of God.

When the queen intends to enter to the place of the king, nobody dares to ask her where she is going, but everyone meets her with joy, So is the one who does mercy and gives alms, he goes before the throne of the king with no hindrance, because God loves mercy dearly and keeps it close to Himself. In the Scripture it is said, **"The queen sits on Your right hand"**. Mercy is favored in the eyes of God, for due to it He became Man for the sake of our salvation.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Give the poor, then dare to pray, I.E. talk to God like a son talking to his father, as Nothing draws the heart closer to the Creator like an act of mercy.

(St. Isaac the Syrian)

- ❖ “For even the Saints who dwell on earth, though in their body they tread the earth, in heart dwell in heaven. For it is not in vain that they are reminded to “lift up their hearts,” and when they are so reminded, they answer, “that they lift them up:” nor in vain is it said, **“If you have been risen together with Christ, then ask for what is up there, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God” Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth. In so far therefore as they have their conversation there, they do bear God, and they are heaven; because they are the seat of God; and when they declare the words of God, “Heaven talks about the glories of God.”¹**”

(St. Augustine)

“...Who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms” (Acts 3.3).

The lame man most probably did not know the two apostles personally, but the apostles must have seen him whenever they entered into the temple to worship.

“And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, ‘Look at us’” (Acts 3.4).

It is natural for him who seeks alms to look at people to get something from them; but, he did not expect to see those two men standing, fixing their eyes on him. What do they want from him? Do they intend to rebuke him about begging? But everyone knew that he was incapable of working since his birth.

The two apostles looked at him before doing the miracle, as God looks at us with the eyes of compassion and personal care. As love should precede giving, they gave their love and care before giving him healing in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. They did not do like many others, who give alms with their hands, while their hearts are far away from the needy.

It is amazing how both of them fixed their eyes on him at the same time, The One Spirit worked in them together, to look at him with their heart, as well as with their eyes.

Peter said to him, **“Look at us”**, yearning for the lame to see the Person of the Lord Christ who dwells in them, and works with His Spirit in and by them.

- ❖ If you intend to give something to a needy person, let your smiling face precedes your alms, together with uttering some gentle words that support his sufferings.

If you do that, his pleasure in your gift will be greater than the need of his body².

(St. Isaac the Syrian)

¹ St. Augustine. *Sermon N.T. Lessons 3.14.*

² A. J. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh, 1923, p 233.*

“So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them, Then Peter said, ‘Silver and gold, I do not have, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk’ (Acts 3. 5, 6).

Peter and John fixed their eyes on the lame, and Peter asked him to look at them; thus, their eyes encountered his, in an inner encounter to the account of the kingdom of God. The two apostles, bearing the spirit of fatherhood, by the work of the Holy Spirit, shared with God His looks at every handicapped and needy soul. They looked at him with the spirit of exalted truth and of compassion, not with the spirit of disability and despair, with the Spirit of power through the capabilities of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, how much the Church is in need of such looks of shepherds, whose hearts are like the loving and compassionate heart of God, in a true fatherhood, together with wisdom and power. In the old days, the prophet Jeremiah had such an experience, as in his compassion he cried out, **“O my soul, my soul! I am pained in my very heart! My heart makes noise in me, I cannot hold my peace”** (Jer. 4.19). In his yearning for the salvation of his brethren, he cried out, **“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no Physician there? Why then, is there is no recovery for the health of the daughter of my people”** (Jer. 8.22)?

As he looked at them expecting to receive alms, Peter told him that they had no possessions of this world, but what they had inherited is the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, which is far better for them and for him, capable of giving him healing, to rise up as though from the dead, and to walk as though along a royal road. According to the words of the Psalmist, **“He sent His word and healed them”** (Ps. 107.20).

Peter’s heart moved by the living faith in the name of Jesus Christ, the Physician of the souls and bodies, and in His divine promise: **“If you ask anything in My name, I will do it”** (John 14.14).

The balm (faith in the Lord Christ) came; and the Physician of souls and bodies descended to us; but the assembly of the Sanhedrin rejected Him; whereas, the simple like St. Peter received Him, and offered Him for the healing of the whole world, to become in truth, the daughter of the new Zion, the true people of God. St. Ambrose believes that St. Peter gave the lame man that balm, and healed him (Acts 3.1-11). He gave it to the paralyzed Aeneas (Acts 9.34) so he rose up and made his bed, and gave it as well to raise Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9.40).

❖ Whoever wishes to acquire wisdom will say, **“Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you, In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk”**. Possessing no silver, he acquired the gift of working love in the name of Christ. That is why you are also told, **“Wisdom is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air”** (Job 28.21). Neither humans nor the angels know where it was, about whom it is said, **“I saw an angel flying in the midst of heaven”** (Rev. 14.6)¹.

¹ *The Prayer of Job and David, B.1, 9: 30.*

- ❖ "Not in his own name, but in the Name of Christ. But "rise" is a command; on the other hand, it is an instance of confidence in one's right, not an arrogant claim to power, and the authority of the command stood in the effective influence of the Name, not in its own might¹".

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ **“Save me, O God, by Your name”** (Ps. 54.1). He says that calling on Your name is a guarantee for my peace. By the same way, the apostles carried out the great miracles. According to the Scripture, **“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk”** (Acts 3.6)².

(Father Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ “But now many, while they do not say it in words, by their deeds declare: 'Faith and pity have I none; but such as I have, silver and gold, these I will not give you³'”.
- ❖ “But now our Lord by His poverty has consecrated the poverty of His house. Let us, therefore, think of His cross and count riches to be but dirt. Why do we admire what Christ calls "the mammon of unrighteousness"? Why do we cherish and love what it is Peter's boast not to possess?”⁴.
- ❖ “For (the apostles) were not weighed down with the burden of riches. Therefore they could stand, as Elijah, in the crevice of the rock, they could pass through the needle's eye, and behold the back parts of the Lord”⁵.

(St. Jerome)

Much wealth has been placed at the feet of Peter and John, as well as at the feet of the other apostles, yet, that did not preoccupy their minds, but they let every one take from it what one needs. The apostles did not set aside a certain portion of it to give the poor on the road, or at the entrance of the temple, but they carried the Lord of the whole world, to grant abundantly what is greater than silver and gold.

In our study of the gospel according to St. John, calling Jesus Christ by the name “Of Nazareth” bore a kind of mocking and ridicule. But here, the apostle uses this title to proclaim that what the world counts as disgrace bears an exalted divine glory. This title became connected to the cross (John 19.19).

Putting the hand of God or stretching it to work probably refers to His compassion and His amazing love toward man. Although He worked by His free grace, yet He used to present it through the human arm. He does not underestimate our hands, although we are completely unable to work; and all what is accomplished through them is nothing but a free gift from God.

¹ St. Ambrose. *Of the Christian Faith*, 3:4 (31).

² Fr. Theodoret. *Comment. On Ps. 54*.

³ St. Jerome. *Letter 32.32*.

⁴ *Letter LII. To Nepotian. 10*.

⁵ *Letter 123.25*.

Although the gift that was given to the lame was a free gift from God, a favor of nobody, Peter proclaims his yearning to work to help the lame.

- ❖ “He does not say, I have none here, as we are wont to speak, but absolutely, I have none”¹.
- ❖ “If any man has silver and gold, he has not those other gifts. Why is it then, you say, that many have neither the one nor the other? Because they are not voluntarily poor: since they who are voluntarily poor have all good things. For although they do not raise up the dead nor the lame, yet, what is greater than all; they have confidence towards God. They will hear in that day that blessed voice, **“Come you blessed of My Father”, (what can be better than this?) “Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”, for I was hungry and you gave Me ...”** (Matt. 25.34-35). Let us then flee from covetousness, that we may attain to the kingdom [of Heaven]. Let us feed the poor, that we may feed Christ: that we may become fellow-heirs with Him in Christ Jesus our Lord”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ The Jewish Sanhedrin was not healed, because that balm crossed over to the Church (Jer. 8.22). The traders came from Gilead (Gen. 37.25), and brought their goods up to the Church, to heal by their balm the sins of the Gentiles, about whom it was said, **“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees”** (Isa. 35.3 LXX). The balm is the pure faith (the uncorrupted), like that faith demonstrated by Peter when he said to the lame, **“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk”** (Acts 3.6); and when, by the same faith he said to the paralyzed, **“Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you, Arise and make your bed”** (Acts 9.34); also when he said to the dead woman, **“Tabitha, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, arise”** (Acts 9.40). By the medication made from that balm, the lame man was healed; the paralyzed man straightened up; and the dead woman arose alive³.
- ❖ Let us purchase the food by which we can confront the famine. Let no one be turned down because of one’s poverty. Let no one fear because he has no money. Christ does not seek money, but faith, which is greater than money. Indeed, as Peter had neither silver nor gold, Christ possessed him. And the prophet Isaiah says, **“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters, and you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price”** (Isa. 55.1). Because He, who paid His blood as a price for us, does not ask us for money, as He did not save us by gold or silver, but by His precious blood (1 Pet. 1.18-19)⁴.

(St. Ambrose)

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on Acts*. Hom. 8.

² St. John Chrysostom. *Hom. On Heb.* Hom. 18.6.

³ St. Ambrose. *Joseph*, 3:17.

⁴ St. Ambrose. *Joseph*. 7:42.

“And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength” (Acts 3.7).

St. Peter took him by the right hand, thus referring to the power that became his in Jesus Christ. Raising Tabitha from the dead, **“He gave her his hand and lifted her up”** (Acts 9.41). In carrying out several of the Church sacraments, the Bishop or the priest stretches his hand to proclaim the stretching, by the Lord Christ, of the right hand of His power, to grant a special grace. In the ordainment of a priest, the Bishop puts his hand on the head of the man nominated for priesthood. And in granting the absolution in the sacrament of Confession, the priest puts his hand on the head of the confessor. Moreover, in the sacrament of Matrimony, the priest puts his hands on the heads of the bride and the bridegroom.

St. John Chrysostom says that St. Peter did not show off, or sought dignity for himself by what he did. He healed the lame man at the entrance of the temple, when no one was there, as all the people were already inside the temple.

The apostle did not ask him whether he believes that, in the name of Jesus, he would be healed; as the parents of that lame man most probably did not believe in Jesus Christ, as they did not carry him to Jesus, or to any of the other disciples. Moreover, that lame man most probably had no friend to tell him what Jesus had done before he was crucified, or what His disciples have done. Therefore, he was not asked to believe, as a prior condition for his healing.

“So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them walking, leaping, and praising God” (Acts 3.8).

He no longer needed someone to carry him around, as he was being carried by the eternal arms, or someone to lean on, as he was raised by the Lord to live by the Spirit and joy of resurrection.

It is well known that man needs a long period of time and practice before he can walk, either for an infant, or for those recovering after an accident that kept them bed-ridden for a long time. That man, in moments, stood and walked. He was not only healed, but got an amazing strength that he showed by leaping and jumping, according to the words of the prophet, **“He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might, He increases strength”** (Isa. 40.29), and, **“Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing”** (Isa. 35.6).

It was a scene that filled those present with awe, amazement, and joy, as they watched the lame joyfully leaping and walking.

The lame, unable to suppress his feelings, leaped as though not wanting to go back to that state of complete helplessness that was almost like death. Once he started to move around on his feet, he hastened to offer the first fruits of this movement to God’s account: He went to the temple, to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to the heavenly Physician.

❖ “And the wonder is, that he believed so readily. For those who are set free from diseases of long standing, hardly believe their very eyesight. Once healed, he remains with the Apostles, giving thanks

to God. Observe how restless he is, in the eagerness of his delight, at the same time shutting the mouths of the Jews”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And all the people saw him walking and praising God” (Acts 3.9).

The healed (feet) of the soul moved, to walk along the way of salvation, to praise and glorify God for the works of His love. We did not hear that he gave thanks to the two apostles, or stood to praise what they did to him; yet, his praise to God brought joy to the hearts of the apostles.

“Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the beautiful gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him”(Acts 3.10).

He, who was carried to be put at the main gate of the temple, barely managing to crawl to stretch his hand to beg alms from the people, the priests, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, who were used to see him always there, was then seen joyfully leaping, and praising Him, whom they crucified.

They were amazed, but they could no longer deny the truth that they assumed they have already suppressed and buried. Now the truth became apparent, and the testimony to it became irresistible. They became confused and did not know how to respond. There, the blood of Jesus Christ cries out in the hearts and that divine work could not be opposed for the following reasons:

- ❖ That man, 40 years of age, had been lame since his birth (Acts 4.22).
- ❖ He was not a crook, as he was carried to that public place every day in the sight of everyone, and was known to all the people of Jerusalem.
- ❖ There could be no relationship between him and the two apostles, as, when he was healed, he did not utter a word of thanks to them, but kept on praising God, although he held on to them, not wanting to leave their company.
- ❖ The lame man, himself, was convinced that what happened to him was from God.

2-A SPEECH ABOUT FAITH IN JESUS’ NAME

“Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon’s, greatly amazed”(Acts 3.11).

While the lame man joyfully leaped around, all the people ran together from the Court of Israel, to the outer Solomon’s porch, to investigate what has taken place. Here, St. Peter found it a good chance to preach before the people, in the hearing of the priests, the scribes, and all the Jewish leaderships. He found it a good chance to speak in the porch of Solomon, about Him, who granted wisdom to Solomon, who is greater than Solomon.

Solomon’s porch: a covered huge court, located on the eastern side of the section of the Gentiles.

¹ St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 8.

- ❖ “Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon," who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart"¹.

(The Scholar Tertullian)

“So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: ‘Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk’ (Acts 3.12).

The apostle Peter started to speak very strongly about the Crucified who was risen from the dead. The Sadducees, who say that there is no resurrection from the dead, could not oppose, as the lame man from his mother’s womb stood testifying to the words of the apostle by a practical testimony that could not be denied nor opposed by anyone.

The apostle started by confirming a serious fact in which many common people, and even knowledgeable leaderships, fall, when they assume that what a certain saint does is done through his piety or godliness. And it often happens that those saints believing what is said about them take the image of false modesty, and refrain from accepting any dignity. Consequently, they fall deep in a destructive inner pride.

Very strongly, the apostle said, **“Why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?”** (Acts 3.12). Indeed, he could have stopped at proclaiming that what happened was by the power of Jesus of Nazareth, but many, in that case, could still assume, that although that was by the power of Jesus, it did happen on the hand of a great pious saint. As for Peter, he insisted that he had no role, other than his acceptance and faith in the power of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth.

- ❖ “And, in truth, much more did they increase their glory by despising glory, and showing that what had just taken place was no human act, but a Divine work; and that it was their part to join with the beholders in admiration, rather than to receive it from them. Do you see how clear of all ambition he is, and how he repels the honor paid to him? In the same manner also did the ancient fathers; for instance, Daniel said, **“As for me, this secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living”** (Dan. 2.30). And again Joseph, **“Do not interpretations belong to God”** (Gen. 40.8)? And David, **“Your servant has killed both a lion and a bear. ... The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine”** (1 Sam. 17.36-37)².
- ❖ “Hence we learn a great doctrine, that a man's willingness is not sufficient, unless any one receives the succor from above; and that again we shall gain nothing by the succor from above, if there be not a willingness. ... For indeed of these two things is virtue's webwoven. Wherefore I entreat you

¹ The Scholar Tertullian. *On Prescription against Heretics*, 7.

² St. John Chrysostom. *Hom. On Acts*. Hom. 9.

neither when you have cast all upon God to sleep yourselves, nor, when laboring earnestly, to think to accomplish all by your own toils. For neither is it God's will that we should be supine ourselves, therefore He does not work it all Himself; nor yet boasters, therefore He did not give all to us; but having removed what was hurtful in either way, left that which is useful for us"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "And so these men gave no credit to themselves for their power of working such wonders, because they confessed that they were done not by their own merits but by the compassion of the Lord and with the words of the Apostle they refused the human hand- our offered out of admiration for their miracles: ***“Why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk”*** (Acts 3.12)? Nor did they think that any one should be renowned for the gifts and marvels of God, but rather for the fruits of his own good deeds. ... And therefore He actually warns those, to whom He Himself has given this glory of miracles and mighty works because of their holiness, that they be not puffed up by them, saying: ***“Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven”*** (Luke 10.20).

Finally the Author Himself of all miracles and mighty works, when He called His disciples to learn His teaching, clearly showed what those true and specially chosen followers ought chiefly to learn from Him, saying: ***“Learn from Me”, not chiefly to cast out devils by the power of heaven, not to cleanse the lepers, not to give sight to the blind, not to raise the dead: for even though I do these things by some of My servants, yet man's estate cannot insert itself into the praises of God, nor can a minister and servant gather hereby any portion for himself there where is the glory of Deity alone. But, says He, “Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart”*** (Matt. 11.29). For this it is which it is possible for all men generally to learn and practise, but the working of miracles and signs is not always necessary, nor good for all, nor granted to all. Humility therefore is the mistress of all virtues, it is the surest foundation of the heavenly building, it is the special and splendid gift of the Savior. For he can perform all the miracles which Christ wrought, without danger of being puffed up, who follows the gentle Lord not in the grandeur of His miracles, but in the virtues of patience and humility. But he who aims at commanding unclean spirits, or bestowing gifts of healing, or showing some wonderful miracle to the people, even though when he is showing off he invokes the name of Christ, yet he is far from Christ, because in his pride of heart he does not follow his humble Teacher. For when He was returning to the Father, He prepared, so to speak, His will and left this to His disciples: ***“a new commandment,”*** said He, ***“that to love one another”***, and at once He subjoined: ***“By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”*** (John 13.34-35). He says not: "if ye do signs and miracles in the same way," but ***“if you have love for one another”***. And this it is

¹ St. John Chrysostom. In Matt. Hom. 82.

certain that none but the meek and humble can keep. Wherefore our predecessors never reckoned those as good monks or free from the fault of vainglory, who professed themselves exorcists among men, and proclaimed with boastful ostentation among admiring crowds the grace which they had either obtained or which they claimed. And so if any one does any of these things in our presence, he ought to meet with commendation from us not from admiration of his miracles, but from the beauty of his life, nor should we ask whether the devils are subject to him, but whether he possesses those features of love which the Apostle describes"¹.

(Abbot Nesteros)

“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go”(Acts 3.13).

Having diverted their sight from counting him as a pious saint, the apostle Peter drew their attention to Him, whom they delivered to be crucified and denied, before the foreign governor who was determined to let Him go. They challenged the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who glorified His only-begotten Son. As usual, they opposed the God of Israel Himself.

The apostle intended to call the Father, **“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”**, to confirm to them that the divine promises that their fathers got were realized by the glorification of the only-begotten Son, in His crucifixion, as well as in His burial, resurrection, and ascension. God the Father set Him a King, a heavenly Chief Priest, an atonement Intercessor, and a Head of the Church, to grant us the fellowship in His glories.

Healing the lame from his mother’s womb is a living testimony to the resurrection of the Crucified and a practical proof that Jesus was crucified, not for one single offense that warranted His death. He diverted their attention from the miracle of healing the lame from his mother’s womb to the miracle of the divine love through the cross, to let them enjoy the power of His resurrection, As everyone is in need of healing the inner soul, to leap with joy, to rise from corruption to non-corruption, and to set forth from the grave of sin to the heavenly temple.

The apostle Peter marveled because they were amazed by that miracle, when they are not amazed by the resurrection from the dead of the Lord Christ that can grant the power of resurrection to the dead souls.

The apostle Peter diverted their attention from the lame to Christ risen from the dead. Instead of being amazed and confused by what they saw, they should be rather amazed by what happened with the Lord Christ, which is far more serious, and touches their life and eternal salvation. If the lame man was healed by the name of Jesus Christ, how could they not be preoccupied by Him who resurrected from the dead, especially that they were the ones who crucified Him!

¹ St. John Cassian. *Conferences: The Second Conference of Abbot Nesteros. 15:6-7.*

If the Jews boast of being the children of Abraham, God the Father, the God of Abraham, has Himself testified to the only-begotten Son and glorified Him. And if they are proud of the righteousness of the law, Pilate the Gentile has done a great effort not to share in the crime of killing Him. It is as though, while the God of heaven Himself is testifying to Him, the inhabitants of the earth, even those who have no law, confess His innocence.

“But you denied the holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you” (Acts 3.14).

Peter presented a serious sheet of charges against them, of the following crimes that they had committed:

- ❖ They opposed God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- ❖ They falsely opposed the temporal authorities, represented in Pontius Pilate.
- ❖ They committed the crime of killing the Holy and the Just Messiah.
- ❖ They foolishly and ignorantly preferred a murderer to the Holy One (Mark 15.7; Luke 23.19).
- ❖ They murdered the Grantor of life, the Leader of the battle of salvation.
- ❖ They opposed, and still do, God the Father who raised Him.

“And killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses” (Acts 3.15).

Pilate went through an inner struggle, he did his best to set Him free, if not for the sake of his innocence, let it be for the sake of the feast, as it was their custom. He demonstrated, even not intentionally, that they preferred a murderer to Jesus Christ. He proposed to set their King free. But, having rejected His Kingdom, and preferred Caesar to be their king, they became with neither a king nor a kingdom.

Their envy and hatred for the truth do not need any testimony. They crucified the Just, and set Barabas, the murderer and robber free. Those leaders have convicted that they do not seek justice or truth, but they fear for their own positions and personal interests, at the expense of their consciences.

Peter, the Galilean, stood to call to account the chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the intellectuals, the keepers of the law. That simple fisherman had simply revealed their twisted measures.

“The Prince of life” is a Greek term that does not refer to superiority, but to being (the Source of life). It is also a military term, presenting the Lord Christ as the Leader of the battle against death, to grant life to those who fell under the captivity of death. They assumed that they were capable of conquering Him by killing Him, and did not realize that, by His death, He trampled on death; and by being killed, He killed and destroyed corruption. He is the Leader of the battle of salvation.

Although they killed the Grantor of life, they could not wipe Him out. They actually killed the life in them, and deprived themselves of enjoying Him as the Life and Resurrection.

The apostle gave a living testimony to the resurrection of Christ, not on the ground that he had seen, touched, talked to, and shared meals with Him during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, but because He testified to Him, lived in him, and enjoyed the resurrected life. And as the apostle Paul said, **“He raised us, and let us sit together with Him in the heavenly places”**.

In a commentary by the scholar Origen on the saying of the Lord Christ, **“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places seeking rest, and finding none, he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself.”** (Luke 11.24-26), He says that this applies to the state of the Jewish people: Those who did not believe in the Son of God, no more had an unclean spirit, as the Jews in Egypt used to have, but became filled with them, that “their last state is worse than the first”. Now they are suffering from things worse than those they suffered from when they were in Egypt. They have, not only denied Jesus Christ, but they killed the Prince of life, so they became deprived of life. There will be no prophet to say to them, “So God says”, and no more sign, or an amazing thing, as a proclamation of God’s presence. Those good things have crossed over to us, the Gentiles, According to the words of the Lord Jesus, **“The kingdom of God will be taken from them, and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it”** (Matt. 21.43). We are those people to whom the kingdom of God is given, the riches of the gospel¹.

❖ "What can be a greater sin than to crucify Christ? Yet even of this Baptism can purify. For so spoke Peter to the three thousand who came to him, to those who had crucified the Lord, when they asked him, saying, **“Men and brethren, what shall we do”** (Acts 2.37)? For the wound is great. You have made us think of our fall, O Peter, by saying, **“You have killed the Prince of life”** (Acts 3.15). **What solution is there for so great a wound? What cleansing for such foulness? What is the salvation for such perdition? O unspeakable loving-kindness of God! They have no hope of being saved, and yet they are thought worthy of the Holy Ghost. Do you see the power of Baptism! If any of you has crucified the Christ by blasphemous words; if any of you in ignorance has denied Him before men; if any by wicked works has caused the doctrine to be blasphemed; let him repent and be of good hope, for the same grace is present even now.**

Have courage. ... The Lord will purify you! “Have courage, O Jerusalem, the Lord will take away from you all your transgressions, The Lord will cleanse the filth of His sons and daughters by the spirit of judgment, and the spirit of burning (Isa. 4.4), “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean” (Ezek. 36.25). Angels shall dance around you, and say, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?” (Song 8.5)”².

¹ Fragment 185 on Luke 11:24.

² St. Cyril of Jerusalem. CATECHETICAL LECTURES. 3.15-16.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

St. Irenaeus¹ believes that the Lord Christ came to save all through Himself. He became a child among the children to sanctify the children, and a boy among the boys to sanctify them. And finally He died to become the firstborn among the dead, “that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1.18), existing before all, and preeminent of all.

“And through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know” (Acts 3.16).

The apostle’s intention in all his speech was to draw every soul to believe in the One resurrected from the dead, and to strongly enjoy His holy name.

What that lame man enjoyed, of strength to his body, of joy to his soul, and of praise, is by the power of Jesus’ name. It is a call for all to believe in His name, to enjoy His person, power, and attributes.

By saying “His name”, he does not mean the title or name in itself, but the Person of Jesus Christ, His power and authority. Faith in Jesus means faith in His person, His authority, and His divine procurement.

“Whom you see and know”: they saw the Lord through His healing of the lame man, and they recognized His person, ability, and exalted love for man.

He was as if saying to them, "As what happened was public and happened before all, you will be testifying against yourselves, if you do not return to Him."

“Yes, the faith which comes through Him, has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all” (Acts 3.16).

❖ Faith is a lamp; and as a lamp gives light to a house, so also faith gives light to the soul².

❖ Faith is the light of the soul, the way of life, and the foundation of eternal salvation³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ The Christian faith is like a seed of Mustard that seems as something tiny and weak. It does not show its true strength, except when various temptations start to attack, then, its activity, strength, and fiery faith in the Lord shows, with some kind of divine love; so that it is not only him who kindles, but all those who are within his range⁴.

(St. Ambrose)

¹ *Adv. Haer.* 2:22:5.

² *in Cap. 25 St. Mat. PG 56: 930.*

³ *in Cap. 25 St. Mat. PG 56: 930.*

⁴ *Sermon 1.*

- ❖ Although many of the Jews who listened to that exalted talk felt bitterness, yet they could hardly rein in their anger, because of the embarrassment they felt before that miracle.

There is another point that we should not forget, that Christ, having provided His saintly apostles with such great powers, provokes them to set forth without delay, to proclaim His secret to the inhabitants of the whole earth, the way the able commanders do, when, after providing their soldiers with weapons, they send them forth against the enemy. Christ, our Savior and Lord, sends the saintly teachers of His secrets, armed with the grace He provides them, and with the spiritual weapon, against the devil and his angels, so as to be strong undefeatable warriors, as they were about to enter a battle against those who had the upper hand on the inhabitants of the earth in the old times, I.E., to fight against the evil hosts of opponents¹.

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ You have to be prepared by faith and fear of God to confront any thing and every thing.

Let the loss of the things close and dear to you, like the loss of health because of a serious illness, or deprivation of wife or children, not be reasons to confuse you, but rather to keep you. Such calamities should not weaken the faith of a Christian, but should be a chance to provide his virtues with renewable zeal during his struggle.

We should disregard the present evils, and be connected by hope to the heavenly reward.

Where there is no struggle, there will be no victory. Only when a battle flares up, will victory be granted, and the victorious will get his reward.

The captain of a ship proves his skill and courage during a storm, so also the warrior during a battle. A tree with deep roots will not fall, even if struck by fierce wind, so also the apostle Paul, as the ship on which he was taken broke down, beside the chains and bodily sufferings, all that did not lead him to talk with a broken heart, but, because of all those calamities, he became in a better condition. The more serious they turned out to be, the more he proved to be worthy of real commendation².

(Martyr Cyprian)

3- THE TESTIMONY OF ALL PROPHETS TO JESUS CHRIST

“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3.17).

After confronting them with all those serious accusations, he started to deal with them gently and with the spirit of compassion, calling them ‘brethren’, a term used by the Jews when talking to persons of their own nation, who have the same hope and the same divine promises. He is not addressing them, haughtily from a high pulpit, but as one of them, with whom he hopes to share what he enjoys.

¹ *Comm. on Luke, Sermon 47.*

² *De Mortalitate PL 4:590 f.*

He is not addressing them as a saint rebuking sinners, but approaching them, to draw them to repentance together with him. Man practices repentance from all his heart, through words of love and encouragement, through the spirit of humility, rather than through that of haughtiness.

St. Peter opens before them the gate of hope, counting what they and their rulers did as “in ignorance”. Pilate warned them more than once and confirmed to them that he found no fault in Him at all. Yet they were ignorant of God’s exalted plan, as well as of the true identity of Jesus. According to the apostle Paul: “Had they Known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2.8); and the Lord Christ Himself said on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23.34). Although all the laws of the world would never acquit someone on ground of his ignorance of the law, this is the law of mercy and love, and “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jam. 2.13).

The apostle Paul persecuted the Church of Christ, with the intention of wiping it, together with the name of Jesus, out of the world. He did that in ignorance, but, once he knew the truth, he turned from ignorance to the wisdom of God, and became a chosen vessel for the divine work, instead of the persecution, the blasphemy, and the continuous opposition.

❖ “For He sent the Apostles also for their salvation, at least you hear them saying, that, “We know that you did that in ignorance” (Acts 3.17), know that through ignorance you did it” (Acts 3.17); and by these means drawing them to repentance. This let us also imitate; for nothing so much makes God propitious as loving the enemies, and doing good to those who despitefully use us. When a man insults you, look not to him, but to the devil that moves him, and against him empty all your wrath, but pity the man who is moved by him”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled” (Acts 3.18).

St. John Chrysostom believes that the apostle Peter, in his sermon, was very compassionate. Without disregarding the fact that his audience was the crucifiers of the Lord Christ, he, with compassion, followed the example of Joseph when he said to his brothers, “for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen. 45.5). They sold him out of envy, but by God’s permission, their evil intentions turned to preserve their life and his. Based on this principle, the apostle Peter proclaimed to his listeners that, for the sake of their salvation and that of the whole world, Jesus was delivered to be crucified².

St. John Chrysostom notices that St. Peter did not quote the texts by which the prophets prophesied Jesus’ crucifixion, death, or burial, but only said, “foretold by the mouth of all his prophets” (Acts 3.18), on the ground that those texts carried the accusations, together with the punishment under

¹ Hom. On John. Hom. 84.2.

² Homilies on Acts. Hom. 9.

which the crucifiers would fall. It is as though he left it up to them to refer to those texts to realize the seriousness of their action. He opened before them the gate of hope to enjoy “the times of refreshing that may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3.19) on account that what they did to the Lord had realized God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3.19).

The apostle once said to them that what they did was in ignorance (Acts 3.17). Then he said that by what they did, God’s plan that He proclaimed by the mouth of all His prophets was realized (Acts 3.18). Afterwards, he said, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3.19). He then added, “so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3.19). According to St. John Chrysostom, he thus gives them hope, and opens before them the gate of repentance, beside warning them, if they chose to persist on their ways of rebellion against God (Acts 3.22).

❖ “For after that grace of baptism which is common to all, and that most precious gift of martyrdom which is gained by being washed in blood, there are many fruits of penitence by which we can succeed in expiating our sins. For eternal salvation is not only promised to the bare fact of penitence, of which the blessed Apostle Peter says, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3.19); and John the Baptist and the Lord Himself: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3.1). But also by the affection of love is the weight of our sins overwhelmed: “Love will cover a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4.8). In the same way also by the fruits of almsgiving a remedy is provided for our wounds, because “As water extinguishes fire, so does almsgiving extinguish sin.” (Sira. 3.33). So also by the shedding of tears is gained the washing away of offences, for “All night I make my bed swim, I drench my couch with my tears” (Ps. 6.6)”¹.

(Abbot Pinufius.)

“And that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before” (Acts 3.20).

He was as if saying to them, “What did happen, although it was through an evil motive on your part, it realized God’s plan for the salvation of the world. The Lord Christ was not harmed by His crucifixion, as it was His Father’s pleasure and His, to die for the world. If you did that in ignorance, now it is the chance to correct the situation by returning to Him in repentance, and with faith in Him. What you did has brought us salvation, so why do not you enjoy with us this salvation? Now is the time for love, “the time for refreshing that comes from the presence of the Lord”. You lost the chance to accept Him when He was in your midst, ministering to you in flesh. Now He yearns to see you returning to Him, so that He may return to you, and faith would dwell in your hearts.”

¹ St. John Cassian. *Conferences*. 20:8.

The Holy Spirit has enlightened to St. Peter the way of salvation of the whole world, even for those who crucified the Lord Christ, and opened his mind to comprehend the holy books, the prophecies, and God's long suffering on humanity.

The apostle did not say, "He told the prophets", but, "foretold by the mouth of all His prophets". Jesus whom they crucified was the subject of interest of all the prophets, the criterion by which the true prophet could be discerned from the false one. So, if His sufferings preoccupied every prophet, since the beginning of creation, up to the time of the forerunner prophet John the Baptist, not believing in Him is nothing but a complete rejection of all the prophets, and of God's work by them.

Although the prophecies of prophets about His sufferings do not give them an excuse for what they did, they open before them the gate of faith to receive Him that all their sins would be blotted out, including the crime of crucifying Him. The prophecies and the proclamation of events beforehand would not relieve them of their evil deed, or change its nature, but would turn their evil into salvation for the whole world, including the crucifiers themselves, if they return to Him.

Moreover, confirming that what happened has been prophesied by all prophets testifies to them and to others that He is the expected Messiah.

"That your sins may be blotted out": The term "blotted out" is used when it is written on a tablet of wax, then smoothed out to appear with nothing written on it. It is as though sins are altogether blotted out off the record; the charges are no more there; and the bill is utterly torn to pieces. The term "blotted out" was used in (Neh. 4.5; Ps. 51.1, 9; Isa. 43.5, 44.22; Jer. 18.23).

"Times of refreshing": Whatever the pleasures that sin brings about, it makes the heart narrow, and creates an inner bitterness that man cannot refer to any cause; Whereas, the return to God in repentance would open the heart wide that no affliction could destroy it, but man's whole life would become "times of refreshing", filled with inner pleasure, and exalted peace, when God's glory dwells inside the soul, turning the heart into a heavenly kingdom.

The word "refreshing" means breathing freely or comfort. It is used when man takes rest after a period of labor, as though taking a deep breath. The preaching of the cross of Christ or His gospel came that humanity would breathe with comfort after a long suffering because of sin.

As to saying, "may come, this does not imply that they would not enjoy it here, But, speaking to the Jews before they accepted the faith, he brings to them the good news of what they would enjoy in the near future, when they repent, as an advance payment of what they would get of glories and eternal comfort in heaven.

"From the presence of the Lord": As we turn our face to Him, and not our back (Jer. 2.27), we enjoy His face shining on us; and His presence as the secret of our joy and comfort.

"And that He may send Jesus Christ": As the Jews were and still are anticipating the coming of the Messiah, getting to believe in Him, whom they had previously rejected, they would see Him coming

into their life, presenting His joyful salvation, and granting them what they have been previously preached through their fathers and their prophets in the Old Testament.

“Whom heaven must receive until the time of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3.21).

Again, the apostle confirms that all what happened was for Jesus’ sake, as God has previously proclaimed by the mouth of His holy prophets. The divine covenants, since the fall of Adam, the call to Abraham, the delivery of the law to Moses, and the appearance of the prophets are now realized. All those forefathers have got covenants and yearned to see the time of their realization. Now, that all those divine covenants are consummated through the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension of the Lord Christ, It is fitting for the listeners to consider themselves blessed, because they have seen what their fathers have yearned to see, and that would be, if they believe in the name of Jesus, and accept His work of salvation in their life.

“... Whom heaven must receive” (acts 3.21): This expression seems to imply, as though heaven is not His natural dwelling place, and yet, it must receive Him. Having become the Son of Man, and descended to us, as heaven receives Him, it receives us in Him. On another hand, the Lord having ascended to heaven, not as though He has consummated His work, but, there, He will keep on ordaining the affairs of His Church, and supporting every one of her members, until all consummate their strife, and enjoy the fellowship of His heavenly glories. There, He is preparing a place for us, until the day of His second coming, when all will enjoy the joyful encounter, the day of eternal wedding.

“Until the times of restoration of all things”: I.E. the realization of God’s plan concerning humanity. As it was the general concept among the Jews that the Messiah would come to reign on earth eternally (John 12), that was the secret behind their rejection of Jesus who rejected that temporal reign. That is why the apostle had to correct their concepts and to confirm that Jesus is truly a King, and His kingdom is in heaven. He ascended to heaven, of which they were witnesses, having personally watched Him being taken up to heaven (Acts 1.9). It was fitting for heaven to receive Him, as He is the heavenly King of Kings (Ps. 110.16; Rom. 8.34; Heb. 7.25, 9.24).

“... Restoration of all things”: If sin has deprived humanity of realizing its mission, and has corrupted the earthly creation, the ascension of the Lord Christ to heaven has restored to man his dignity, to restore his mission for the sake of which he was created, to carry the icon of the Lord Christ, and to reign forever.

“... Since the world began”: an expression that means (since the beginning). As the prophesies about the Lord Christ began since Adam received the divine covenant, some scholars believe that Adam was the first prophet.

It is as though what the apostles preach is not something new, but rather a proclamation of the realization of what humanity has for so long wished, which God has proclaimed through His holy men along the ages.

“For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘The Lord your God will rise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, Whatever he says to you’”(Acts 3.22).

As the authority of the prophet Moses among the Jews was absolute, St. Peter recites his prophecy about the Lord Christ (Deut. 18.15-19). (We have previously dealt with that prophecy in our commentary on the book of Deuteronomy). The apostle discerned here between the one who (hears), and the one who does not. Who does not hear Him is actually disobeying the prophet Moses of whom they are all proud, and should be deprived of being referred to the people of God, and of having a portion in the kingdom of God.

“And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3.23).

As the word flesh is used to mean (man as a whole) (John 1.14), the word soul, likewise, means the same thing (Josh. 10.28; Acts 7.14).

“Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days” (Acts 3.24).

St. Peter began by the prophet Moses, as the first leader of the people, continuing to the prophet Samuel, who was the first prophet after the prophet Moses, who came at the end of the era of the judges, and the beginning of that of the kings, then to the rest of the prophets, when the kingdom was at the apex of its glory, then its breaking up into two, the captivation of the two kingdoms, and the return of the people from captivity.

The descendants of Saul were meant for that covenant; yet, having foolishly disobeyed the commandments of the Lord, the covenant went to those of King David (1 Sam. 15.28), and was renewed through the prophets to follow (Jer. 31.31-41; Ezek. 37.26-27; Joel 2.28-29).

The prophets of those eras were all preoccupied with the coming of the Messiah. Since he had finally come, and God’s covenant with Abraham, the father of believers, was realized, it is fitting for the listeners, as descendants of those prophets and of those meant by that covenant, to enjoy the blessing of Jesus, who was risen from the dead, and who alone can restore all from their evil ways.

The yearning of all the prophets for that day should provoke their children to receive it with joy. It is as though the flaring zeal for faith in the Messiah that the apostle Peter bears is a practical and serious fellowship in the strong yearning of those prophets, and their zeal for enjoying the Person of the Savior. Thus, He was provoking his listeners to partake of these same feelings.

“You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3.25).

The Jews consider themselves the descendants of the prophets, not because they are physically so, but because they are their disciples and followers. As, a disciple, according to the Jewish concept, as

well as that of the Church, is like a son to his tutor; Therefore, as children, they should (obey) them, otherwise, they would lose their right of sonhood.

“Sons of the covenant”: sons of Abraham, who had the right to enjoy the divine covenant, given to their father by God. Being the sons of the kingdom, whether through their discipleship to the prophets, or their reference to Abraham, it is fitting for them not to be like ‘Judas’, ‘the son of perdition’ (John 17.21).

“And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed”: According to the confirmation by St. Paul, “seed” here in the singular form refers to the Lord Christ who came from the seed of Abraham, to bless all nations (Gal. 3.16).

- ❖ “For lest they should think that they received this offer (of repentance and salvation) from the favor of Peter, he shows, that of old it was due to them, in order that they may the rather believe that such also is the will of God”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities” (Acts 3.26).

By saying, “To you first”, he refers to the Jews to whom salvation was first offered, as preaching starts from Jerusalem (Luke 24.47). Jesus Christ Himself dedicated His mission to the Jews.

“God, having raised up His Servant Jesus”: The incarnated God has dedicated His life for the sake of the enjoyment of humanity of the heavenly blessing. He was sent by the Father, And in obedience, the Son came, who by His will, the one with that of the Father, “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2.4).

“Turning away every one of you from your iniquities”: Although man enjoys the free will, he cannot return to God, and give his back to evil, without God’s help, or without the salvation work of Christ.

Although the covenant to Abraham was that in his seed, namely, in Jesus Christ, all nations will be blessed, He first came to turn away every Jew from his iniquities, through the attachment to the source of blessing.

- ❖ “he continues, “Raised up Jesus”, (I.E.) after the resurrection, and when He had been crucified. For that they may not suppose that he himself granted them this favor, and not the Father, he says, “to bless you”. For if He is your Brother, and blesses you, the affair is a promise. “to you first”, That is, so far are you from having no share in these blessings, that He would have you become moreover promoters and authors of them to others. For and what kind of blessing is (to all the old Israel) ”².

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 9.

² Homilies on Acts. Hom. 9.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ “True, you have done deeds worthy of condemnation; still you may yet obtain pardon. Having said this, with reason he is now able to say, “He sent His Servant Jesus (His Son) to bless you”. He says not, to save you, but what is greater; that the crucified Jesus blessed His crucifiers.

Let us then also imitate Him. Let us cast out that spirit of murder and enmity. It is not enough not to retaliate (for even in the Old Dispensation this was exemplified); but let us do all as we would for bosom-friends, as we would for ourselves so for those who have injured us. We are followers of Him, we are His disciples, who after being crucified, sets everything in action in behalf of his murderers, and sends out His Apostles to this end. And yet we have often suffered justly; but those acted not only unjustly, but impiously; for He was their Benefactor, He had done no evil, and they crucified Him. And for what reason? For the sake of their reputation. But He Himself made them objects of reverence”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 9.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 3

GIVE ME TWO FEET TO CROSS OVER TO YOUR HOLY TEMPLE

- ❖ Together with that lame from his mother's womb, my soul moans.
I stand as though at the gate called the beautiful to ask for alms.
But I do not enter into the beauty Himself,
Who yearns to pour out His splendor on me.
I ask for alms, although my Father is the Creator of heaven and earth!
Oh, my helplessness! Oh, my foolishness !
- ❖ Let me hear the voice of Your Church:
Silver or Gold, I do not have, But what I do have I give you.
In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk.
Your wonderful name alone grants me health for both my soul and my body.
By your name, my feet walk to your holy temple.
I enter as though to heaven.
I leap with joy together with Your prophets, apostles, and all Your saints.
- ❖ They nailed You, O Prince of life, to the cross.
And You have loosed my chains,
So I can run toward the throne of Your grace.
They crucified You between transgressors,
And sealed Your grave to lock You in,
But You raised me up together with the heavenly hosts,
And raised my heart up to Your heavens.
You resurrected destroying death,
And raised me up to enjoy the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- ❖ May all the prophets who yearned to see Your day rejoice.
I do testify that Your covenants are true and honest.
Here is the day in which I enjoy joy, and see Your divine face.

CHAPTER 4

PETER AND JOHN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

The Book of Acts revealed the actual position of the Jewish leaderships, who, having rejected the crucified Jesus and persisted after His resurrection on opposing Him, and opposing the gospel of Christ, who was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven, whom the Church preaches.

This chapter describes the outset of this opposition that continued until the Apostle Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, as they plotted to murder him (Acts 23.12-15, 25.1-3).

1- Laying hands on Peter and John	1 – 4
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1- LAYING HANDS ON PETER AND JOHN

“Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them” (Acts 4.1).

It is obvious that not all the priests came, but only those of high status, the members of the Sanhedrin.

The priests did not resort to the Pharisees, but to the Sadducees, to oppose that preaching in the court of the temple of Solomon. With them came the captain of the temple, the one responsible for security, who noticed an unusual gathering there. That captain was the second man after the high priest, committed to keep order and security in the temple.

The captain of the temple usually camped in the citadel of Antonia, especially during the great feasts. Fearing that healing the lame man may cause a riot, he felt a commitment to intervene.

“Came upon them”: This expression implies that their coming was sudden and with some violence. As Peter and John were addressing the people with the spirit of strength and testimony to Jesus, raised from the dead, the eyes of many were opened to the knowledge of truth that about 5000 men believed (Acts 4.5). It was not possible for the hosts of darkness to stand with their hands tied, in particular the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection from the dead, and who counted that event, together with the speech of St. Peter and St. John as a serious threat against their sect, and a serious blow to their dogma.

They probably had no objection for Christians to partake of the worship in the temple, according to the Jewish rites, to assemble in the porch of Solomon, and to set their own affairs. But to preach publicly the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and to proclaim his resurrection from the dead, was considered

by them as a public accusation against the leaderships that delivered Jesus to be crucified, that they are murderers and shedders of an innocent blood, and a testimony that the Crucified was the Messiah. That is why, it was imperative for them to move to crush that threat, dangerous to them and their dogma.

St. John Chrysostom does not marvel that those who caught Jesus and crucified Him had come back even after His resurrection to practice their evil boldly against His disciples. As thoughts are translated into actions, the sinner loses his shyness, to do what he likes. The sinner, while wrestling against thoughts, usually listens to them with a feeling of shame; but, once they turn into action, that would make him more aggressive.

❖ At the first time, they arrested the Lord Christ in the garden, as though shamefully, away from the people. But now, boldly, they came on the two apostles, while speaking to the people in public in the temple¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4.2).

The word “disturbed” implies great anger, as they saw in that preaching a threat to their authority and a challenge to their teachings, regardless of whether they were preaching the divine truth or not.

It was not easy for the priests and the Sadducees to watch a group of illiterate Galileans taking the stand of teaching with such success and power, when they belong neither to the priests nor to the religious leaderships. They counted this as a challenge and a rebellion against the religious authorities.

They did not preoccupy themselves with investigating what was behind that amazing miracle; but what preoccupied them was their religious authority and their popularity that became in jeopardy. Besides, they could not bear to hear about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

They were disturbed and filled with anger, when they saw the gospel preached, and as the Psalmist says, “The wicked will see it and be grieved, He will gnash his teeth and melt away, The desire of the wicked shall perish” (Ps. 112.10). The joyful word of the gospel brought to them disturbance and bitterness, and as the apostle says, “To the one we are the aroma of death to death, and to the other the aroma of life to life” (1 Cor. 2.16). The glory of Christ and the joy of His Kingdom are transformed for those who cannot accept them into loss of peace, grieve, and eternal death. And as the prophet Isaiah says, “No peace, says the Lord, for the wicked” (Isa. 48.22).

The sinful Sadducees were disturbed and grieved because the apostles were preaching the joyful resurrection. Whereas the disturbance of the priests, although they believed in resurrection, was because of its connection to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. According to them, to join force with those who denied resurrection was less painful than to accept the fact of resurrection in the Person of Jesus Christ.

¹ St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.

- ❖ ““Being grieved that they taught the people.” Not merely because they taught, but because they declared, not alone that Christ Himself was risen from the dead, but moreover, that we through Him do rise again. So mighty was His Resurrection, that to others also He is the cause of a resurrection”¹.
- ❖ Beware of keeping yourself under the authority of grief. ... Control yourself. ... The storm is not stronger than your will.
- ❖ Do not ever get depressed, as there is nothing fearsome other than sin.
- ❖ All seek joy, but it is not anywhere on earth.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ The matters pertaining to grace are accompanied by joy, peace, love, and truth. Whereas, forms of sin are accompanied by disturbance, neither love nor joy toward God².

(St. Makarius the Great)

“And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening” (Acts 4.3).

That was the beginning of the series of afflictions against the Church, to partake of the passion of her Christ’s crucifixion. The two apostles of Christ were arrested and put in custody, as it was not the custom of the Sanhedrin to assemble in the evening, beside the fact that its members were committed to their formal duties to practice the prayers of the evening and to offer the sacrifices.

- ❖ “They feared not the multitude; for this also the captain of the temple was with them: they had their hands still reeking with the blood of the former victim”³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Some may wonder why they did not bring the two apostles to Pilate, as they previously did with the Lord Christ. They, undoubtedly, realized that Pilate [who repeatedly tried to let Jesus go, and under their great pressure and threat that he is no friend of Caesar, he had to order His crucifixion] would never repeat his mistake. He would insist on setting them free, or would probably leave them to the Sanhedrin to execute them, and bear the consequences of the people’s anger.

- ❖ “And they no more take them to Pilate, being ashamed and blushing at the thought of the former affair, lest they should also be taken to task for that”⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.

² Sermon III.7.

³ St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.

⁴ St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.

“Many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousands” (Acts 4.4).

On the day of the Pentecost, the firstfruits of the Church 3000 of those who came to Jerusalem, whether Jews or Proselytes, believed. Now “the number of the men came to be about five thousands”. Those were enlightened by the word, to be counted as children of Abraham, of the prophets, and worthy of becoming truly the children of the covenant.

Laying hands on the two apostles by the order of the official religious leaderships and putting them in custody did not hinder those thousands from believing, as every tribulation through which the Church goes was counted as throwing seeds in the soil to bring on plenty of fruits.

Here is a living portrait and a splendid example of the growth of the Church amid tribulations. It is practically proved that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. Apparently, the number of disciples was very few, with no material capabilities, temporal knowledge, or authority, and it was assumed that a complete crushing of that movement was an easy task. However, the affliction gave the Church an exalted growth and an un-opposable spread; affliction can never devastate the evangelic truth, or shackle the word, but is rather a good atmosphere for the divine work.

- ❖ “By the death of martyrs religion has been defended, faith increased, the Church strengthened; the dead have conquered, the persecutors have been overcome. ... The death itself of the martyrs is the prize of their life. And again, by the death of those at variance hatred is put an end to”¹.

(St. Ambrose)

Some believe that the figure 5000 here includes the 120 mentioned in Acts 1.15, and the 3000 who believed on the day of the Pentecost (Acts 2.41). The 5000 assembled in the porch of Solomon (Acts 3.11), on the occasion of the healing of the lame.

- ❖ “This again is of God's ordering. For those who now believe were more numerous than the former. Therefore it was that in their presence they bound the Apostles, to make them also more fearful. But the reverse took place. And they examine them not before the people, but privately, that the hearers may not profit by their boldness”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

2- THE TWO APOSTLES BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

“And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and Scribes, were gathered together in Jerusalem” (Acts 4.5).

The Sanhedrin assembled [We dealt with it in our commentary on the gospel according to John] few weeks after their last session in which they issued their verdict to crucify Jesus. Although they issued their verdict and delivered Him to death, His name was greatly glorified, and the number of

¹ on the Decease of his Brother Satyrus. Book 2.45.

² St. John Chrysostom. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.

believers in Him reached in few days several thousands, who became serious witnesses that the Crucified Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In their previous session, they felt that the existence of Jesus constituted a serious threat to their position, and to the source of their income. But now, with the spread of preaching through His resurrection and ascension, it is demonstrated that those who crucified Him are murderers and shedders of innocent blood.

The session was undoubtedly urgent, as it was held on the very next day, although it was not as urgent as that one held in the evening to judge the Lord Christ.

The Sanhedrin assembled in Jerusalem, That city where every one anticipated to enjoy salvation, being the city of God, ended up being an opponent to the evangelic truth, about which the prophet said, "How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice, Righteous lodged in it, but now murderers" (Isa. 1.21). And the Lord Christ Himself lamented it, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23.37).

The court of justice included the rulers and elders, those with authority; they came to issue an order to the apostles to stop their preaching. As for the educated scribes, they were thought to be capable of confronting those illiterate apostles by reason and proofs.

"... as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. And when they set them in the midst, they asked, 'By what power, or by what name have you done this'" (Acts 4.7, 8).

The Sanhedrin used to assemble in the form of a circle, with the defendants in their midst (Luke 2.46), thus realizing the words of the Scriptures: "They surrounded me like bees" (Ps. 118.12).

They started by asking the two apostles, "By what power, or by what name have you done this?" They could not deny the miracle that was done, as thousands have witnessed it. As they could not conceal it, they, as usual, intended to turn the truth into vanity, by referring that healing to Beelzebub the ruler of the demons, as they had previously done with the Lord, or referring it to a certain magic power, or that, through terrifying the apostles, they could oblige them to refer the work to one of the prophets of the Old Testament.

They spoke to them mockingly, as the Greek text implies that, if they are neither priests, Levites, prophets nor rulers, "By what power have they done this?", From where did they get that power? And by what name they dared to do it?

They knew for sure that it was in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and by His authority and power that they did what they did; but their intention was to terrify them by accusing them of working under an illegal name, a crime against God, against the law, and against Moses.

They addressed to them the same question addressed to their Lord, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave You this authority" (Matt. 21.23)?

The name of Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest, came first because of his dignity, having been the high priest before his son-in-law occupied that position. In our commentary on the gospel according to St. John, we saw how he entertained a flaring hatred toward the Person of Jesus Christ.

We know nothing about John and Alexander, Yet, mentioning them by name means that they were of high stature, and the Sanhedrin assumed that their presence would probably impress the apostles.

Jerusalem: It is obvious from this that the Sanhedrin assembled each time in a different city, during the 40 years that preceded the devastation of Jerusalem.

“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders of Israel ...’” (Acts 4.8).

The Lord’s promise to His disciples was realized: “Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer, for I will give you mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist” (Luke 21.14, 15). He also promised them that the Holy Spirit would grant them the word when they are opposed.

Was Peter not already filled by the Holy Spirit, when it came down on him on the day of the Pentecost, together with the other disciples? So why is it said, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit ...”? Being filled with the Holy Spirit bears the meaning of an enjoyment of a new inspiration, and a proclamation of a special support during a critical situation. With every situation, the Spirit of God moves inside man to grant him strength, knowledge, wisdom, and divine counsel.

With dignity and respect, St. Peter spoke to the Sanhedrin, counting this as a chance to testify to the truth, according to his principle, “Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 pet. 3.15).

St. Peter previously denied His Lord in that same city, before the same Sanhedrin, and in the presence of those same people. That is why the apostle found his chance to bear a truthful testimony to his Christ, whom he has previously denied.

Every believer, who tastes the sweetness of life with Jesus Christ in truth, will keep on testifying to Him, wishing that all humanity would experience what he enjoys.

When you discover something of benefit to you, you wish to tell others about it. ... Apply this human behavior to the spiritual level: When you go to encounter with God in His house, do not go alone.

❖ When you move forward, draw other to go with you; Have a wish to have company on the way to God.

(Pope Gregory the Great)

❖ One loving heart kindles another heart with fire.

❖ What do I wish? What do I want? Why do I speak? Why should I live, if not for this cause: To live all of us together with Christ? ... I do not want to be saved without you.

❖ The necessity of love looks for the practice of the apostolic work.

(St. Augustine)

❖ Save yourself in the salvation of others.

(St. Jerome)

❖ If you are truly Christians, no one would have remained in atheism.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“If we this day are judged for a good deed done to the helpless man, by what means he has been made well ...” (Acts 4.9)

Bravely, by the Holy Spirit, St. Peter proclaims his testimony, not just before the Sanhedrin, but also before the whole people of Israel that what took place was by the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and in His name. The apostle insisted that he would never stop testifying to Jesus Christ before the whole people of Israel; and he accused them of being murderers of Him who came to heal the paralysis of the people and their ailments, who came to cure and to grant strength and movement to work in the life of the people. If they intend to judge them for their good deed, the way they judged the Just, and murdered Him, So let it be, but their mission is to proclaim to all the one named Jesus, and His exalted divine power, offered to every believer.

The apostle showed indirectly that he did nothing wrong, but he was being judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, something that neither the Sanhedrin, nor the religious leaderships could do. Therefore, there was no crime done, but a unique and a great deed.

Besides, no one could deny that act of healing, witnessed by all. The object of accusation is: “By what power was he healed?” The crime that chased and is still chasing the Church is that of the “Name”; that, in the name of Jesus, salvation is done, and all good deeds and divine graces are realized.

“Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole” (Acts 4.10).

St. Peter’s speech confirmed that the Lord Christ had realized His true promise to us: “When they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13.11).

How amazing! Peter who previously denied his Lord before a maidservant, and persisted on his denial, stands now before the Sanhedrin, strongly testifying to the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the

Crucified and Raised from the dead, and proclaiming that whom they killed is the Living One, the conqueror of death, who reigns, and no one can oppose Him.

With the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, he daringly proclaimed the vanity of their verdict. They killed the Just, yet the verdict of God the Almighty Father whom they could not oppose was to raise Him from the dead. Heaven invalidated their verdict, and exposed their corruption, as murderers filled with envy and jealousy.

The testimony to this is clear, and needs no further proof, “By Him this man stands here before you, whole” (Acts 4.10).

St. Peter had a chance to avoid a direct answer to their question, if he chose to do so, but he found it a rare chance to stand before the Sanhedrin to testify to the Lord Christ, and to His work of salvation. It was as well a chance to correct what he did during the trial of the Lord Christ, when he denied Him three times. He was no longer that man, afraid and terrified before a maidservant, but he was then the honest witness before people of authority. He truly experienced how he became ‘Safa’, with a heart like a rock through the living faith, and wished that all who are around him would experience the work of the Holy Spirit, to bear the rock of faith, that would never shake before the currents of the world, as much violent as they could be.

His testimony was not to gain personal dignity, but it was given out of true love for God and mankind.

By saying “In the name of Jesus Christ”: thus combining the two names together, he challenged the Sanhedrin, who refused to admit that Jesus is Christ, the Messiah, about whom the men of God of the Old Testament prophesied, and whom all generations yearn to encounter.

The titles “Of Nazareth” or “the Crucified” were no more objects of shame and disgrace, but of honor, glory, and power.

“This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone” (Acts 4.11).

He again clarified to them that what they have done was previously prophesied by the Psalmist who said, “The stone which the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps. 118.22, 23).

The Lord Christ Himself had previously referred that in Him that prophecy is realized (Mark 12.11), beside that of Isaiah, “Therefore, thus says the Lord: Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, A tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation, Whoever believes will not act hastily” (Isa. 28.16).

He is a rejected stone; yet its rejection reveals His identity. He is the “Cornerstone”, who brings the Jews with the Gentiles, as two walls that connect together in the new temple of the Lord, the Church of the New Testament.

St. Paul says, “Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2.20-21).

Here, the Galilean fisherman is correcting the concepts of the Jewish scholars who assumed that the rejected stone is David, the prophet and king, based on what came in the Targum, commenting on psalm 118.22: “The kid among the sons of Jesse, who was found worthy to sit as a king, was rejected by the builders”.

- ❖ “He reminds them also of a saying which was enough to frighten them. For it had been said, “Whoever falls on this stone will be broken, but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (Matt. 21.44). “There is no salvation in any other” (Acts 4.12), Peter says. What wounds, you think, must these words inflict on them! In this way he subdued their threatening”¹.
- ❖ It is obvious to everyone that he is referring to Christ, who, in the gospels, said those words, “What then is this that is written: ‘The stone which the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone’” (Matt. 21.44; Luke 20.17)? ... He was referring to the Jewish law scholars: the scribes and the Pharisees, who rejected Him, “You are a Samaritan and have a demon” (John 8.48), and also, “He could not be from God, He deceives the multitudes”. The One who was rejected proved to be the chief cornerstone.

Not every stone can be a cornerstone, but it is the one that can join together two walls from two sides. The inspired author meant that the Person who was rejected and despised by the Jews is not only to be in the building, but to join together the two walls.

What two walls?

Those who believed among the Jews and among the Gentiles, and as St. Paul also says, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two” (Eph. 2.20).

Now, this phrase is a serious accusation against the Jews, who did not count Him a stone for their construction, and cast out as unacceptable the One who is capable of holding the whole building together. If you wish to know the identity of these two walls you have to listen to Christ Himself, who says, “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold, them also I must bring. ...there will be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10.16).

This also previously happened symbolically, as Abraham was a father to two groups: the circumcised and the uncircumcised².

¹ St. John Chrysostom. *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 10.*

² on Ps. 118.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. Ambrose clarifies how the Lord Christ is called the great mountain and at the same time called a stone:

- ❖ If we count the Deity of the Lord Christ as the great mountain, which is true, “Do I not fill heaven and earth? Says the Lord” (Jer. 23.24). His incarnation would certainly be ‘the small hill’ (Ps. 42.6). The Lord Christ is both of them: A great mountain and a lesser mountain. He is truly great, “Great is our Lord, and mighty in power” (Ps. 147.5); and He is lesser, as it is written: “For You have made Him a little lower than the angels” (Ps. 8.5). That is why Isaiah says, “He has no form or comeliness: (Isa. 53.2 LXX). Although He is Great, He came to be less. And being less, He became great, and being great, He became less, as “Being in the form of God, He made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2.6, 7). And being less, He became great, as Daniel says, “The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan. 2.35), And in case you wish to know the identity of that stone, you should know that He is “the stone that was rejected by the builders, that became the chief cornerstone” (Compare Ps. 118.22; Isa. 28.16; Matt. 21.42; Luke 20. 17; Acts 4.11; 1 Pet. 2.6-7). It was He Himself, though He appeared to be small, who was great. Isaiah approved this fact, when he said, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9.5 LXX).

Christ is every thing for you:

He is a stone to construct you, and a mountain for you to go up.

Therefore climb the mountain, you who seek the heavenly matters.

For this reason, He bent the heavens, to bring you closer to Himself.

And for this reason, He ascended to the top of the mountain to lift you up.

(St. Ambrose)

“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12).

The illiterate Galilean stood to call on men of high religious knowledge and of authority, to repent and to enjoy salvation.

The apostle lifted them up from preoccupying themselves with the healing of the lame, to the healing of their souls, which are incapable of crossing over to heaven, or of being saved, to enjoy the glory, prepared for believers. He, who healed the lame, is the Physician of souls and bodies, by whose name alone, man enjoys salvation. There is no way of comparing Him with the names they used to know and to be proud of like Abraham, the father of the patriarchs, or Moses, to whom the law was delivered, or any other prophet, as no one of them is capable of saving the souls from corruption, and granting them glory; only that name of the One they rejected, despised, and killed can.

The apostle presented to them the essence of faith: that salvation is not to be realized by the literality of the law, but by faith in the name of the Lord Christ, in the name of Him, who alone can save, wipe out sins, grant righteousness, turn the pains of affliction into the joy of resurrection, lift the hearts up to heaven, for the believer to taste the advance payment of eternity, destroy the locks of the abyss, and open before us the bosom of the heavenly Father, to enjoy unity with Him.

- ❖ The Christian faith is like a mustard seed that appears at first sight to be insignificant and weak. Its true strength and outer activity do not appear, except when various temptations start to attack it. Then, its fiery faith in the Lord starts to breathe, and a kind of divine love starts to provoke, not to be flared alone, but to flare every thing around¹.

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ Time will come, when I see what I used to believe in, but could not see.
- ❖ In eternity, I will see what I believe in here. And what I wish for here, I shall get there.
- ❖ So great is faith, yet, there is no use in it, if it lacks love.
- ❖ Faith should precede comprehension, for comprehension to be a part of faith.
- ❖ We can touch Him, who sits in heaven, by our faith and not by our hands.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ The power of virtue is in faith, and in the recognition that God can keep us from the present death. And at the same time we do not fear death or submit to it, where faith is justified more zealously².
- ❖ Maturity of faith, O beloved brethren, steadfastly supports our inside. After every violent attack, virtue abides as a huge rock, in a brave opposition³.

(Martyr Cyprian)

“No other name”: The apostle does not mean to disregard the name of God the Father, but the Father delivered His only-begotten Son, to grant salvation through the name of His Son. Whoever calls the name of the only-begotten Son is calling the Holy trinity, as there is no separation between the three Persons, but a unity of work.

“Given among men”: That name, or the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, is given to us for free, or according to the apostle: “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” (2 Cor. 9.15).

¹ *Sermon 1.*

² *Ibid 4:353.*

³ *Ad Cornelium Epist. 3. Lib 1 PLEASE 3:798.*

- ❖ Listen to the Savior saying to us, “I have renewed you, you, who was born in the world with labor to death. I have set you free, healed, and saved you. I shall grant you the life with no end, the everlasting, the one exalted over nature. I shall let you see the face of the good Father.
- ❖ I provoke you to salvation, for this is what Christ wishes for.
- ❖ How generous is He, who grants us the greatest of gifts – His whole life¹!
- ❖ Who is He? He is the Word of Truth, the Word of non-corruption, who renews man, by bringing him back to the truth. He is the (goad) that provokes to salvation, He is the One who destroys perdition, and drives away death. He builds the temple of God in men, and makes them His dwelling place.
 - The sick are in need of a Savior.
 - The lost need a guide.
 - The blind are in need of someone to lead them to light.
 - The thirsty need the living fountain, from which, if someone drinks, one will never thirst.
 - The dead need life.
 - The sheep are in need of a shepherd.
 - And the children need a teacher.
 - All humanity is in need of Jesus²!

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

- ❖ Let Christ be everything in your life. Whoever forsakes everything for the sake of Christ will definitely find the one thing that has everything, to cry out, “My portion is the Lord”³.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ Isaac was born as a symbol of Christ, as the nations are not to be blessed in Isaac, but in Christ. The apostle Peter says, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”⁴.

(Ambrosiaster)

3- CONFUSION IN THE SANHEDRIN

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4.13).

¹ *Paedagogus* 1:9.

² *Paed.* 2:9.

³ *Ep Ad. Pammachium* PL 22:1206.

⁴ *Comm. On Paul’s Epistles (Rom. 4:11).*

The speech of the two apostles, Peter and John, was convincing. They spoke openly with confidence, and like someone with authority, although, in the sight of the Jewish leaderships, they were uneducated, as they were not trained in the schools of the Rabbis.

They were common people, with no prominent position, nor of those with talents. Despite all that, they could reveal new concepts of the prophecies, with a deep theological logic, and a debate that a professional lawyer cannot bring up. Their words were the work of the Holy Spirit Himself, the Owner of the word, and who, alone, can proclaim the truth.

After investigation, they discovered that the secret of their power, and of the hallow surrounding them, was that “they had been with Jesus”, who reflected His splendor on them.

They realized that those were the apostles of the Lord Christ, who followed Him, who were attached to Him, and believed in Him. They probably reached that conviction depending on the following facts:

1- They bore the power of doing signs, and in particular that of the healing of the lame in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

2- They courageously and fearlessly testified and spoke out about Him.

3- They bore His Spirit in proclaiming the divine truth.

4- They comprehended the secrets of the Old Testament, with a new concept.

5- Despite their temporal illiteracy, they could challenge the wise (1 Cor. 1.27), and even the members of the Sanhedrin, who considered themselves as the guardians of the faith and truth. They were like their Lord who taught as One having authority (Mark 1.22), although He never studied in the schools of the Rabbis (John 7. 15).

❖ “The two unlearned men beat down with their rhetoric the chief priests. For it was not they that spoke, but the grace of the Spirit.”¹

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ “But so far is this true and spiritual knowledge removed from that worldly erudition, which is defiled by the stains of carnal sins, that we know that it has sometimes flourished most grandly in some who were without eloquence and almost illiterate. And this is very clearly shown by the case of the Apostles and many holy men, who did not spread themselves out with an empty show of leaves, but were bowed down by the weight of the true fruits of spiritual knowledge: of whom it is written in the Acts of the Apostles: “When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4.13).”²

(Abbot Nesteros)

¹ *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 10.*

² *St. John Cassian: Conferences, 14:16.*

“And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it” (Acts 4.14).

The lame who was healed is surely an indisputable proof for the truth called for by the apostles. The miracle was both public and obvious; and the lame man was very well known to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The rulers were incapable of denying the certain fact of his healing, or disputing the speech of the apostles that was logical, according to the Scriptures, and to the prophecies in their hands.

Here, **St. John Chrysostom** commends the courage of the man who was healed:

- ❖ “Great was the boldness of the man; that even in the judgment-hall he has not left them. For had they said that the fact was not so, there was he to refute them.”¹

“But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, ‘What shall we do to these men? For indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it’ (Acts 4.15-16).

The session was adjourned, as the members of the Sanhedrin were shamefully unable to issue a verdict against the two apostles. They did not break the law, and all the people knew of the miracle that was done through them. It was thus impossible to deny the resurrection of Christ which they preached.

The council of the Sanhedrin turned into a meeting for conspiracy, and not for conducting justice. But, how did the Evangelist St. Luke know what they “conferred among themselves”, when the two apostles were driven out? It was most probably Saul of Tarsus, who, having been at that time a Pharisee with close connection to Gamaliel, was full of zeal for the traditions of his ancestors, and counted by the chief priests as their strong tool in their opposition to the name of Jesus. He must have been among them, and could have had an important role in encouraging them to do what they did. Saul, after accepting the faith, must have provided St. Luke with the information pertaining to what took place inside the council of the Sanhedrin, during that episode or other ones.

They commanded the two apostles to go out of the council, not to discuss the soundness or vanity of their faith, but to conspire against the Church in its early stage. They did not realize that the head of the Church is present everywhere to defend her, and to confront the plots of her enemies. They were not aware that they were realizing the prophecies: “The rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed” (Ps. 2.2).

- ❖ ““Yet, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (rom. 8.37). For what is indeed wonderful is this, not that we are conquerors only, but that we are so by the very things meant as plots against us. And we are not merely conquerors, but we are "more than conquerors," that is, are so with ease, without toil and labor. ... See the Jews then with these among them, and at a loss quite, and saying, “What shall we do to these men?” (Acts 4.16). For it is

¹ *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 10.*

marvelous indeed, that though they had hold of them and had got them liable to their courts, and imprisoned them and beat them, they were yet at a loss and in perplexity, as they got overcome by the very things whereby they expected to conquer. And neither kings nor people, nor ranks of demons, nor the devil himself, had power to get the better of them, but were all overcome at a very great disadvantage, finding that all they planned against them became for them. And therefore he says, "We are more than conquerors." For this was a new rule of victory for men to prevail by their adversaries, and in no instance to be overcome, but to go forth to these struggles as if they themselves had the issue in their own hands. ... For they did not merely conquer, but in a wondrous way, and so that one might learn that those who plotted against them had a war not against men, but against that invincible Might."¹

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name. And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4.17-18).

The members of the Sanhedrin were in an awkward position: if they put the apostles to death, they fear the people who saw by themselves that unique miracle; and if they set them free with no punishment, that could be counted as a consent that the name of the crucified Jesus does miracles through His disciples. Finally, they chose to threaten the apostles to speak or teach no more in that name.

The rulers were confused, from a trial to a threat, and finally to a mere command. Because of their intense hatred, they could not even utter the name Jesus, but recommended them “to speak no more in this name”. They bore the same spirit of king Saul, who, in his intense hatred to David, often referred to him as the son of Jesse (1 Sam. 20.72, 30, 31, 22.8, 13).

There is no greater service rendered to the kingdom of the Devil than stopping the ministry of the faithful men of God, on the assumption that it is possible to put the light under a basket, which is impossible.

❖ Whenever they intended to hinder their preaching, the work became stronger by their hands².

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Romans, Hom. 15.

² Homilies on Acts, Hom. 10.

4- THREATENING THE TWO APOSTLES

“But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge’ (Acts 4.19).

Those two uneducated persons could mute more than seventy of the most educated people of authority. The members of the Sanhedrin who assumed that they were appointed by God Himself, and that they were the defenders of the divine truth, were then asked by the two apostles: ‘We have been commanded by God to preach, and been commanded by you to keep quiet. Which command shall we obey: The divine command or the human one?’ They thus put the Sanhedrin in a dilemma, as it would no longer be considered as representing God’s thought, caring for the divine commandment and executing the will of God and the prophesies.

The two apostles asked the members of the Sanhedrin to judge by themselves: Should the apostles listen to them more than to God? Should they stop testifying to the truth that they themselves saw, heard, and experienced? Could they hide the shining of the resurrection from the people? “Necessity is laid upon them... to preach the gospel” (Jer. 20.9; Acts 18.5; 1 Cor. 9.16).

“For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4.20).

Testifying to the Lord Christ is a right and even a commitment on the part of the person who sees God in his life, and hears His divine voice inside him. No human voice, whatever its authority is, can stand against the divine voice – the word of the gospel, living and working in the believer’s life.

- ❖ The servant sent by the Lord is committed to do what he is commanded to do, even if it is against his own will, because if he does not, he will be subject to punishment. Moses preached to Pharaoh, although he did not want to (Exod. 4.10, 5.1), and Jonah to the people of Nineveh (Jon. 1.1-3.4)¹.
(Ambrosiaster)

- ❖ “For who, I would ask, were the frightened? Those who said, "That it spread no further among people," or these who said, “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard”? And these had a delight, a freedom of speech, a joy surpassing all; those a despondency, a shame, a fear; for they feared the people. But these were not afraid of those; on the contrary, while these spoke what they would, those did not what they would. Which were in chains and dangers? Was it not these last?”²

(St. John Chrysostom)

“So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. For the man was over forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing had been performed” (Acts 4.21-22).

¹ *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles (1 Cor. 9.16).*

² *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 10.*

The Sanhedrin had to terminate their session, when all people glorified God for healing the lame in such an exalted way, as it was impossible for someone who was born lame, and remained as such for forty years, to be healed.

5- A PRAYER FOR THE SAKE OF PREACHING

“And being let go, they went to their own companions, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them” (Acts 4.23).

Once they were set free, they went to the Church that was most probably assembled to pray for their sake, so that God would give them a living word of testimony amid the affliction. They went there, to partake, with all, the joy for the work of God, and to offer to Him a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

They submitted a report on the work of people and that of God with them: As to the people, they did their best to hinder the work of God and to oppose the truth; Whereas, God turned all those things into the edification of the Church.

They submitted that report, for all to share in praising God, and for all to be encouraged to preach. As, according to the apostle Paul, “And most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Phil. 1.14).

❖ “Not for their own glory did they tell the tale-how should such be their motive?-but what they displayed was the proofs therein exhibited of the grace of Christ. All that their adversaries had said, this they told; their own part, it is likely, they omitted: this made the hearers all the more courageous.”¹

(St. John Chrysostom)

“So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, ‘Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them’” (Acts 4.24).

The two apostles told about their first experience on the road of suffering. Although they came out as conquerors, they were under threats of using secret ways to get rid of them without trial, to avoid any reaction of the people.

That experience brought them to a life of collective conquest with one accord, with confidence in the power of God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

As the case and the accusation were against the “name of Jesus”, they raised their prayer to God the Father, on the ground that it is the case of the only-begotten Son, whom He has sent, to save the world.

¹ *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 11.*

One of the fruits of affliction is keeping the spirit of unity, not on a level of gathering together, but on a level of the Spirit, by love and collective prayers, as “they raised their voice to God with one accord”.

The Greek word translated here as “Lord” (Despota) means (a Ruler), or someone who controls the affairs of others with authority and power. In time of affliction, believers feel that all their affairs, big and small, are not running haphazardly, but are controlled by the King of kings with His wisdom and exalted might; and that their life is not in the hands of men, whatever their authority may be.

❖ “These again flee to the true Succor, to the Alliance invincible, and again, "with one accord they lifted up their voice to God, and said," (24) and with great earnestness, for it is no prayer made at random.”¹

❖ “Let us apply ourselves to Prayer. It is a mighty weapon if it be offered with earnestness, if without vainglory, if with a sincere mind. It has turned back wars, it has benefited an entire nation though undeserving. “I heard their moaning” He says, “and came down to save them”. It is itself a saving medicine, and has power to prevent sins, and to heal misdeeds.”²

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ Let us assemble together as a congregation, to offer a united prayer. Let us wrestle with God in our pleadings, as that pleases Him.

(The scholar Tertullian)

“...who by the mouth of your servant David, have said, ‘Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things’ (Acts 4.25).

In their prayer, they uttered words that are not theirs; they quoted the language of the Holy Spirit, choosing the second psalm that bears a collective vision of the case of the cross, and of how the devil set an alliance between the Jews, the Romans, and the rulers, against the Lord and His anointed.

St. Isaac Syrus, the man of prayers and silence, presents his practical experience in the life of conquest over the devil and all the hosts of darkness, and that by practicing a prayer woven from psalms, the Lord’s Prayer, and spontaneous prayer, to be aimed as one arrow, or three arrows, to stab the devil.

❖ The service of the psalms, the Lord’s prayer, and the spontaneous prayer recited by man to seek God’s mercy, help, and salvation, These three are like three arrows by which we stab and kill the demons³.

(St. Isaac the Syrian)

¹ *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 11.*

² *Homilies on Hebrews, Hom. 27.9.*

³ *Vol. 1 Hymn 5.*

The prophet David called Jesus “Your Servant”, In Greek, (paidasou), translated as (servant), as it came in the praises of the suffering servant in the prophet Isaiah, And also as “Son”, as the Father called Him during His Baptism and Transfiguration (matt. 3.17; Luke 3.22).

“The kings of the earth took a stand, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against His Christ” (Acts 4.26).

It is as though they were thanking God, who preceded to proclaim on the tongue of the prophet David, the opposition of the Gentiles and the peoples with their kings and rulers to the Lord Christ and His Kingdom. As though any strife, whatever its source may be, as long as it is for the sake of Christ, is a confirmation that we are on the right way, and every unity of the forces of evil against the Church reveals their helplessness to destroy her. Although God granted them so many gifts, among which are making them kings, rulers, and men of authority, they turned these gifts into tools to oppose their Grantor.

- ❖ “It is to sue God, as one may say upon His own covenants, that they thus produce this prophecy: and at the same time to comfort themselves with the thought, that in vain are all the imaginations of their foes. This then is what they say: Bring those words into accomplishment, and show that they “imagine vain things.-For of a truth,””¹

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together” (Acts 4.27).

- ❖ ”That anointing did not exalt the blessed and incorruptible Begotten Who abides in the nature of God, but it established the mystery of His body, and sanctified the manhood which He assumed.”²

(St. Hilary of Poitiers)

The name ‘Pilate’ is often preceded by the title ‘Pontius’, which is a wrong translation, as his real name is ‘Pilate Pontus’. He is not from a city called Pontus or Pont, to be referred to it. The theologians in the Council of Churches of the Middle East agreed to correct this mistake in translations.

“To do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word” (Acts 4.28-29).

The Church assembled at the time of the apostles did not pray to God to lift up affliction, and to destroy and bring down their enemies but asked Him to turn every affliction to strength to speak the word with boldness, for the sake of His heavenly kingdom.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 11.*

² *on the Trinity, 11.18.*

“Rage” (Acts 4.25): Whereas the Christian faith presents: a reconciliation between men and God, through the blood of His only-begotten Son; a reconciliation between man and his brother, love even for his enemies; and an inner reconciliation between the soul and the flesh, through the work of the Holy Spirit of God, - The nations, on the other hand, are violently raged, for they cannot stand the divine light. The world uses every violent means to oppose the Church, who bears the nature of her Groom, who “will not cry out, nor raise His voice” (Isa. 42.2).

“Plot” (Acts 4.25): the human mind with all its energies has concentrated on one goal, which is to destroy the kingdom of light, and to reject the Crucified Messiah.

“Vain things” (Acts 4.25): The Greek word ‘Kena’ is exactly translated in Hebrew as ‘reeyq’, meaning (void). The nations became like an empty vessel that refused to get filled by the source of fulfillment – Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This void also bears helplessness, as every opposition on their part ends up to nothing. They scatter their energies in opposing the Truth, to hear, together with Saul OF Tarsus, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 9.5).

By saying, “Look on their threats” (Acts 4.29), they refer to God’s care pertaining the opposition of the wicked people against His children. It does not pass on easily; it preoccupies God’s mind. This reminds us of the righteous king Hezekiah’s prayer to God: “Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear, Open Your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennachrib, who has sent to reproach the living God” (Isa. 37.17), And of the words of the Psalmist: “But You have seen it, for You observe trouble and grief, to repay it by Your hand. The helpless commits himself to You” (Ps. 10.14).

❖ Someone may say that Christ has once said to His apostles, “Love Your enemies” (Luke 6.27), How could they now cry out against them, without breaking that divine commandment? The answer is, “Should we rather, pray for them to get more bold and strong, to attack more violently those who glorify His works, to stop them from teaching, and to oppose the glory of Him, to whom we pray? Would not this be counted as foolishness? If the opposition is directed by someone against us personally, it would be counted instantaneously as glory to us, if we forgive him. We should indeed bear mutual love, following the role model of the saintly fathers, even if we are struck, insulted, and suffered every kind of violence. We should then not blame the apostles, who were more exalted above rage and hatred. ... This will bring glory to the saints, and pleasure to God.

The prayer uttered by the saintly apostles was not without benefit, but was for the sake of the success of the divine message, and the weakening of the persecutors. The apostles say, “Now Lord, look on their threats”, I.E. make their opposition against us vain, and grant Your servants to speak Your word with boldness” (Acts 4.29).”¹

(St. Cyril the Great)

¹ *Comm. On Luke, Sermon 119.*

- ❖ “Wherefore in persecutions let no one think what danger the devil is bringing in, but let him indeed consider what help God affords; nor let human mischief overpower the mind, but let divine protection strengthen the faith; since every one, according to the Lord's promises and the deservings of his faith, receives so much from God's help as he thinks that he receives. Nor is there anything which the Almighty is not able to grant, unless the failing faith.”¹

(Martyr Cyprian)

- ❖ “And observe, they do not say, "Crush them, cast them down;" but what? “Grant to Your servants that with all boldness, they may speak Your word” (Acts 4.29). Let us also learn thus to pray. And yet how full of wrath one would be, when fallen among men intent upon killing him, and making threats to that effect? How full of animosity? But not so these saints.”²

(St. John Chrysostom)

“... by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4.30).

Their prayer does not stop at seeking to be granted bold words to testify to the truth, but to be granted signs and wonders in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet they did not ask for this to keep their temporal life safe, or to gain any temporal dignity.

Their prayer pertaining to the threats shows that they did not care for their temporal life or comfort, as they have put their life, delivered for the sake of testifying to the truth, But what preoccupied them is to be granted the wisdom and strength of the Spirit to speak with boldness the word of God, and to be supported by signs and wonders to the account of the Holy Jesus.

They sought to be granted signs and wonders, when they saw how the people glorified the name of Jesus, how many came to believe in Him, and how one miracle could shock and mute the chiefs of the Sanhedrin.

“And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4.31).

In his commentary on the words of the Lord Christ (Luke 17.6) concerning faith, **St. Cyril the Great** says that if the power of faith shakes what is steadfast ... we can say that no steadfast object would not be shaken by faith, when there is a need for its shaking. That is why the place was shaken, according to the Book of Acts³.

Why was the place shaken? That was a proclamation of God's presence, according to the words of the Psalm: “The earth shook, the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God” (Ps. 68.8), And, “You will be punished by the Lord of hosts, with thunder and earthquake and great noise, With storm

¹ *De Exhortation Martyrum PL 4:664 ff.*

² *Homilies on Acts, Hom. 11.*

³ *Comm. On St. Luke, Hom. 113-116.*

and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire” (Isa. 29.6). It is also a proclamation of God’s response to the prayer of the Church for the sake of ministry, and for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, to grant the apostles supernatural powers. The place would shake, and the time would come to an end, where the Spirit of Truth dwells. By the dwelling of the eternal Spirit of Truth, the weakness of nature is revealed, and man would not be connected with time or place, but only with the eternal.

How great and powerful is prayer! It opens men’s hearts to their Creator to get filled by His divine power that shakes the place, but keeps their hearts steadfast. It transforms the affliction, the bitterness, and the threats, into a powerful prayer to grant the possibilities of the Holy Spirit to the preaching and the testimony.

❖ Whoever understands the mystical saying of the blessed Paul, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood ... but against spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Eph. 6.12) will also understand the parable said by the Lord that ended by His saying, “Men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18.1).

(St. Mark the Anchorite)

The goal of this renewed filling is uttering the words of God with boldness.

6- The LIFE OF FELLOWSHIP

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul, neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common” (Acts 4.32).

The Evangelist St. Luke presents a magnificent portrait of the features of the Church in the days of the apostles, in particular, the deep love, and the true unity, on the level of the Spirit and the heart, as well as on that of work.

When they were filled with the Holy Spirit, it was not only the place where they assembled to pray that was shaken, but the whole world was shaken as well, in the sight of the apostles, who did not allow it to infiltrate to their hearts. As the precious pearl was apparent before their eyes, they did not have to force themselves to sell what they already had to acquire it.

Thousands of various nationalities and different tongues assembled together in one temple to present one worship. Even those dwelling in Jerusalem were affiliated to different groups, sometimes with opposing thoughts. They used to feel strangers to one another. Then, all of them assembled as members in the one body of Christ, led by the one Holy Spirit, through the bonds of love.

The Spirit granted them such love and unity, that nobody counted his possessions as his own, but every thing in his hands was for his brothers. Feeling of individual property in the life of believers ceased to exist; and Unity was realized in the heart and soul.

What is wonderful is that this feeling was not realized through divine commands, ecclesiastical laws, or apostolic commandments, but was naturally realized through being filled by the Holy Spirit to

become members in the holy body of Christ, who delivered Himself for others, and “made Himself of no reputation” for the sake of all.

- ❖ “For in the Church of Jerusalem, as it were burning brands were set on fire by the Holy Spirit, when they had all one soul, and one heart to God-ward. When Stephen was stoned, that pile suffered persecution: the brands were dispersed, and the world was set on fire.”¹

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Being in such conformity, the Christians produce some kind of music, a harmonious sound that brings pleasure to God, thus realizing the Scripture that says, “They are of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4.32)².

(Fr. Caesarius, Bishop of Arles)

- ❖ Now, tell me, did their love produce their poverty, or their poverty produced love? I believe that love produced poverty, then poverty forcibly drew the ropes of love³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ This love that is from God cannot be separated from the person of God, as God and love are one. And as love in its essence is inseparable from its source, it will not only possess the humans who can live each one by his own; but it will also transfer several hearts and souls into one heart and one soul. How foolish it is to say that this love which binds separate minds in an inseparable love could be separated from the human creatures who express it. That is why the apostle Paul says, “For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ” (Col. 2.5). In the Book of acts, it came that the multitude of believers had one heart and one soul, ... something that would not be realized except by the Spirit of faith and love⁴.

(Abbot Fulgentius, bishop of Ruspe)

- ❖ “Therefore, “Oh, magnify the Lord with me, And let us exalt His name together” (Ps. 34.3). For one thing is necessary, that celestial Oneness, the Oneness in which the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit are One. See how the praise of Unity is commended to us. ... The whole Trinity is one God; because one thing is necessary. To this one thing nothing brings us, except being many we have one heart.”⁵

(St. Augustine)

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons*, 66.6.

² *Sermon 163.3*.

³ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 11*.

⁴ *Fulgentius of Ruspe: Letter to Victor 9: 5-6*.

Abbot Fulgentius (467- 532 BC) delivered many sermons; and he was much affected by St. Augustine.

⁵ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons*, 53.4.

❖ “The whole Church, I say, was then such as now are those few who can be found with difficulty in coenobia. But when at the death of the Apostles the multitude of believers began to wax cold, and especially that multitude which had come to the faith of Christ from diverse foreign nations, from whom the Apostles out of consideration for the infancy of their faith and their ingrained heathen habits, required nothing more than that they should" abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood," (Acts 15.29). and so that liberty which was conceded to the Gentiles because of the weakness of their newly-born faith, had by degrees begun to mar the perfection of that Church which existed at Jerusalem, and the fervor of that early faith cooled down owing to the daily increasing number both of natives and foreigners, and not only those who had accepted the faith of Christ, but even those who were the leaders of the Church relaxed somewhat of that strictness. For some fancying that what they saw permitted to the Gentiles because of their weakness, was also allowable for themselves, thought that they would suffer no loss if they followed the faith and confession of Christ keeping their property and possessions.”¹

(Abbot Piamun)

❖ “Then how can any seeds of discussion arise from him who serves not his own but his brother's will, and becomes a follower of his Lord and Master, who speaking in the character of man which He had taken, said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6.38).

But how can he arouse any incitement to contention, who has determined to trust not so much to his own judgment as to his brother's decision, on his own intelligence and meaning, in accordance with his will either approving or disapproving his discoveries, and fulfilling in the humility of a pious heart these words from the Gospel: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love of one another” (John 13.35)?

For by this, as by a special mark, Christ willed that the flock of His sheep should be known in this world, and be separated from all others by this stamp, so to speak. But on what grounds will he endure either to admit the rancor of vexation in himself or for it to remain in another, if his firm decision is that there cannot be any good ground for anger, as it is dangerous and wrong, and that when his brother is angry with him he cannot pray, in just the same way as when he himself is angry with his brother, as he ever keeps in an humble heart these words of our Lord and Savior: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5.23, 24).²

(Abbot Joseph)

¹ *St. John Cassian: Conferences, 18.5.*

² *St. John Cassian: Conferences, 16.6.*

St. Ambrose believes that the basis of unity within the holy congregation is the unity of the individual, and the harmony between his constituents, through the work of the Holy Spirit, so that his soul becomes like an “Only dove” (Songs 6.9), and enjoys the inner peace between his soul and his body, for the two to become one (Eph. 2.14). Thus, he would become like Him who says, “... that they may be one, just as we are one, I in them, and You in Me, that they may be made perfect in one (unity)” (John 17, 22, 23). Such a soul is an “only dove”, true and spiritual, that is not troubled by the lusts of the flesh, even though “outside were conflicts, and inside were fears” (2 Cor. 7.5) ¹.

- ❖ “And the Lord has bidden us with His own voice, saying, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15.12), and again, “If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven” (matt. 18.19). But if two of one mind can do so much, what might be effected if the unanimity prevailed among all?” ²

(Martyr Cyprian)

The Martyr Cyprian believes that God gives gifts to every one of us, and we, as children of God, walking by the heavenly law, follow His lead, and share what we possess with all³.

Presenting a magnificent description of the monastic life of fellowship (cenobitic monasticism) in the Egyptian desert, St. John Cassian demonstrates the importance of the fellowship according to the model of the early Church, as it came in the Book of Acts. And he adds to it that some people have got out of the cities, to lead an amazing anchorite life, preoccupying themselves with studying the holy books, praying, and doing manual works, day and night with a burning zeal, to the extent that they often forgot all about food, for two or three days, only to be reminded of it by the bangs of hunger⁴.

“And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4.33).

The other feature of the Church was that the apostles enjoyed a great power, which is the ability of their listeners to receive their words. They could speak as though with authority, having carried the Grantor of authority in them, who granted them a great grace in the sight of those whom they encounter. Even their opponents could feel the grace of God, and the shining of His divine light on their life. Everyone saw that in their depths. They bore the reflection of the splendor of God’s glory and beauty, He, who is “more beautiful than humans”.

The apostles came out of the temptation of the prison and the threats, with a doubled power. The Church having offered a fervent prayer with one soul, all were filled with the Holy Spirit; all got a great power to testify; and all enjoyed a great divine grace.

¹ Cf. *Isaac, or the Soul*, 7.59.

² *Epistles*, 7.3.

³ Cf. *Treatise 8 on Works and Alms*, 2.5.

⁴ *De institutis caeoborum*, 2.5.

Here, the Evangelist St. Luke was almost showing the inability of the language to describe the condition of the early Church that bore the power of God, and enjoyed His grace, to set forth on the road of testifying to the resurrection of the Lord from the dead, with a great strength and success, together with a persistent growth of the kingdom of God.

- ❖ “I give you the authority to tread on serpents and scorpions”. This is not a promise of a mere man, who cannot grant others such a glorified and amazing authority, “to tread upon all the power of the enemy”. This is rather the work of God alone, the One higher above all, and crowned by exalted dignities. ... He does not leave the disciples with any excuse to surrender to cowardice, but He rather asks of them to be strong in heart and of courage, for such should be the ministers of the divine word, not cowards, or overcome by slothfulness, but to “preach with great power”, as stated by the Holy Book (Acts 4.33) ¹.

(St. Cyril the Great)

“Nor was there one among them who lacked, for all who were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold” (Acts 4.34).

After speaking of the features of love, church unity, testifying with the spirit of power, and revealing the splendor of Christ who dwells in them, the Evangelist moved on to two practical features that are rather double-faced one: Generosity in giving, especially to the needy, and being dead to the world and to all its riches and dignities.

- ❖ “Their feeling was just as if they were under the paternal roof, all for awhile sharing alike. It is not to be said, that though indeed they maintained the rest, yet they did it with the feeling that the means whereof they maintained them were still their own. No, the admirable circumstance is this, that they first alienated their property, and so maintained the rest, on purpose that the maintenance might not come as of their own private means, but as of the common property.” ²

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Those who, by faith, acquired inside them Him who makes every thing new, receiving from Him a new message of the gospel, become above the riches and love of wealth. Their minds become stronger, to disregard the temporal things, but thirst for the eternal.

They treasure the poverty by choice, and have become fond of the love of the brothers. And as it is mentioned in the Book of Acts, many of the owners of land and houses sold them, laid the money at the apostles’ feet, and they distributed to each as anyone had need³.

(St. Cyril the Great)

¹ *Comm. On St. Luke, Hom. 64.*

² *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 11.*

³ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 123.*

St. John Chrysostom portrays that magnificent heavenly scene, here on earth, believing that the 3000 who first believe, together with the 5000 who followed their lead, all of them did the same thing in an exalted way, No one of them complained of poverty. What glory can there be, more than what those people had? ¹

Indeed, love and unity make out of the Church a glorified heaven, as the true practical fellowship originating from love is a testimony to the exalted grace of God.

- ❖ “Have you not heard the Apostles say, that they who first received the word sold both "houses and lands" (Acts 4. 34), that they might support the brethren? But you plunder both houses and lands, that you may adorn a horse or wood-work, or skins, or walls, or a pavement. And what is worse is, that it is not men only, but women too are afflicted with this madness, and urge their husbands to this empty sort of pains, by forcing them to lay out their money upon anything rather than the necessary things.”²

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And laid them at the apostles’ feet, and they distributed to each as anyone had need” (Acts 4.35).

The church came out of the affliction, not to suffer material troubles, but to magnificently practice the fraternal love, and to reveal that money in the Church of the New Testament was not deposited in a special treasury, or in bank accounts, but was laid at the apostles’ feet.

What all the economical and social systems of the world have failed to realize, to fulfill the needs of the poor and the needy, had been naturally realized, when the congregation enjoyed the filling by the Holy Spirit; and the wealth were laid at the apostles’ feet, for everyone to take his need, with a spirit of honesty and submission.

- ❖ It was a symbolic act indicating that it is fitting for people to tread with their feet on greed, As God yearns to grant to the souls of His believers what is greater than material riches. In the Proverbs, it is written: “The ransom of a man’s life is his riches” (Prov. 13.8 LXX).

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ “Moreover also Solomon, established in the Holy Spirit, testifies and teaches what is the priestly authority and power, saying, “Fear God with all your soul, and pay respect to His priests” (Wis. 7.29, 31). ... Moreover, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, our King, and Judge, and God, even to the very day of His passion observed the honor to priests and high priests, although they observed neither the fear of God nor the acknowledgment of Christ. For when He had cleansed the leper, He said to him, “Show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded” (Matt. 8.4). With that

¹ Cf. *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 11.*

² *Homilies on Romans. Hom. 11.*

humility which taught us also to be humble, He still called him a priest whom He knew to be sacrilegious”¹ .

(Martyr Cyprian)

“And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4.36-37).

There is no doubt that hundreds and even thousands of persons sold their possessions, and laid the money at the apostles’ feet, So why did the book pay so much attention to what Barnabas, of the tribe of Levi, did?

1- Being a Levite, he had no right to buy land in Israel, So that land must have been in Cyprus, as he was Cyprian by nationality.

2- It seems that it was a large piece of land that was sold for a great price, to become a living example of him, who was set free of every love for possessing.

¹ Epistles, 64:2.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 4

GLORIFIED PASSIONS

- ❖ The forces of darkness plotted against You.
They condemned You to death, but they could not prevent Your resurrection.
The same forces plotted against Your apostles,
And will keep plotting against Your Church along the generations.
- ❖ They put the two apostles in custody.
Yet thousands of people believed in You.
With every affliction, Your Church grows.
And with every persecution of Your people, the power of Your holy name becomes more apparent.
- ❖ The Sanhedrin that condemned You to death,
Threatened to murder Your apostles.
- ❖ Peter who was once afraid of a maidservant,
Judged the members of the great Sanhedrin.
He accused them of opposing God, as they crucified Jesus, but God the Father raised Him from the dead.
He accused them of ignorance, since they rejected the Cornerstone.
He accused them of failure because there is no salvation except by Jesus.
He accused them of lack of wisdom when they sought obedience to themselves more than to God.
- ❖ Amidst sufferings, you were glorified in your church.
Many signs and miracles took place;
And her strong prayers shook the place.
- ❖ In the midst of sufferings, Your Church became a steadfast heaven.
And the believers were transformed as though into angels.
All became with one heart and one soul. ... What a heavenly feature!
All turned into witnesses to Your resurrection.
Death has no more authority or power.
The world has no more authority over them, nor do the material things have attraction.
They shared everything among themselves.
They brought their riches at the feet of Your apostles, as there was no more any other place for them.
They presented their wealth as a trust that they have received from You.
And joyfully, they presented them for the sake of all.

CHAPTER 5

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

The Evangelist St. Luke has presented a joyful portrait of the Church with one heart, one soul, and a living fellowship in worship and abundant giving. Now he is presenting a painful portrait of a family that sought its own glory with the spirit of deceit. Having been the first of its kind in the Church, the reaction of the Church to that event was very firm, by which the Holy Spirit intended to give a clear message to anyone who may try to abuse the fraternal love. Yet, the chapter joyfully ended, as joy always overshadows the life of the persecuted Church.

St. John Chrysostom believes that what happened to Ananias and Sapphira is of greater significance than the miracle of healing the lame, as it reveals that the Holy Spirit is aware of what is hidden inside the heart, and because what happened brought fear to all¹.

We can say that those two miracles are complimentary: The first one reveals the exalted love of God, and His compassion toward man, and that God has not even sought from the lame to believe before enjoying the divine love; whereas, the second reveals the importance of commitment and faithfulness in the fear of God, especially by those who accepted the faith, and enjoyed the divine blessings, as the divine love goes hand in hand with the fear of God, And the fear of God is not separated from the divine love.

1- Ananias and Sapphira	1 – 11
2- The persistent growth of the Church	12 – 16
3- Arresting the apostles	17 – 23
4- The charge of the Name	24 – 32
5- Gamaliel's attitude	33 – 40
6- The word of God is unrestrained	41 – 42

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.*

1-ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

In the previous chapter, the Evangelist St. Luke spoke about the Church as a whole, kindled with the spirit of true love. And among the congregation, there was the like of Barnabas of Cyprus, who sold his land and brought its whole price at the apostles' feet. He was most probably a very rich man, and the price of the land was so high that St. Luke mentioned it as a living example of what the believers did at that time. Yet, at the same time, among the wheat there were also tares; and among those faithful in their love to God and men, there were hypocrites like Ananias and Sapphira, who presented a superficially beautiful portrait, while they carried a deceitful heart full of lies and love of dignity and worldly wealth. St. Luke had to reveal this portrait, to spare us being troubled when we find in every age magnificent samples of love beside bitter examples of hypocrisy.

“A certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession” (Acts 5.1).

‘Ananias’ is a Hebrew name, meaning (Jehovah is compassionate), or (who gives with abundance). While ‘Sapphira’ is an Aramaic word, meaning (beautiful). Yet, both names were unsuitable, as Ananias did not follow the example of God the all-compassionate, and Sapphira did not care for her inner beauty.

- ❖ “Once upon a time a rich young man boasted that he had fulfilled all the requirements of the law, but the Lord said to him (as we read in the gospel): "One thing you lack, Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, ... and come, take up the cross and follow Me" (Mark 10.22). ... “Go your way” the Lord says, “and sell”, not a part of your substance but “whatever you have and give to the poor”, not to your friends or kinsfolk or relatives, not to your wife or to your children.

I will even go farther and say: keep back nothing for yourself because you fear to be some day poor, lest by so doing you share the condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira; but give everything to the poor and “make friends for yourself by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home” (Luke 16.9). Obey the Master's injunction "follow me," and take the Lord of the world for your possession; that you may be able to sing with the prophet, "The Lord is my portion" (Ps. 16.5), and like a true Levite may possess no earthly inheritance (num. 8.20-24). I cannot but advise you thus if you wish to be perfect, if you desire to attain the pinnacle of the apostles' glory, if you wish to take up your cross and to follow Christ”¹.

(St. Jerome)

“And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet” (Acts 5.2).

St. Luke, as he presents the shining and glorified face of the Church at its beginning, he also honestly demonstrates the attitude of the Church concerning those who receive its membership with

¹ Letter 68 to Julian, a wealthy nobleman, 4. (His wife and two daughters had then recently died)

hearts neither pure nor honest. He makes a point of what Barnabas of Cyprus did, when he brought the proceeds of selling his vast land at the apostles' feet, in order to provoke everyone, not to consider his wealth or even his life as too much for the Church. Then, he presents the deed of Ananias and Sapphira, who bore the image of piety, in mere formalities, with no true inner feeling.

In every age, there are in the Church, those who deliver even their life. And there are, as well, those who are attached to the form rather than to the spirit, for the sake of their love of the world, and their connection to material things.

At the beginning of the exodus of the children of Israel to the Promised Land, there was Achan son of Carmi, who stole some of the accursed things, hid what he stole and lied. And because there were accursed things among Israel, they were defeated before their enemies (Josh. 7). All Israel stoned him and his household to remove that sin. And now in the new promised land, at the beginning of the Church of the New Testament, there are Ananias and his wife Sapphira, whose hearts Satan filled with deceit to lie to the Holy Spirit, and kept part of the price of the land for themselves, while they could have kept all of it if they so chose.

- ❖ “Fraud is idolatry, or else they are worthy of imitation who, in the Acts of the Apostles, sold their inheritance, and because they kept back part of the price, perished by an instant doom. Consider well, my brother; nothing is yours to keep. “He who” the Lord says, “does not forsake all what he has cannot be my disciple”. Why are you such a half-hearted Christian?”¹.

(St. Jerome)

“Peter said, ‘Ananias, Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?’” (Acts 5.3).

Ananias expected to hear words of commendation from the apostles and those around them, if not through their looks or body gestures. Yet he was shocked to hear an accusation against his person, beside a verdict to be put promptly into effect. He was not given a chance to defend himself, as the verdict was not issued by man, but by the Holy Spirit who searches the hearts.

St. Peter could have talked to him alone, and could have asked him and his wife to confess that they lied, and accordingly Ananias and Sapphira could have repented and brought the matter to an end by any possible means. But the Holy Spirit knew that their hearts were full of evil, and that event just came to fill up a cup of evil with which they for so long lived, and there was no more chance to repent.

He did not say to him, “Satan has tempted you”, or even, “has inspired evil unto you”, but he said, “***has filled your heart***”, which means that Ananias had opened his heart to the devil, and to his thoughts, once and again, and left him to enter and possess completely, leaving no more place for the Holy Spirit.

¹ Letter 14 to Heliodorus the monk, 5.

“**Satan**” means an (adversary), and in Hebrew (walking about back and forth). St. Peter says about him, “He walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 pet. 5.8). And when God asked him, “Where have you come from?” He answered, ‘From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it’” (Job 1.7).

- ❖ You should know that we become bodies for them (the demons), when our souls accept their dark and evil thoughts, and when they become apparent through our bodies in which they dwell¹.
- ❖ The demons secretly work, yet we make them apparent through our deeds².

(St. Anthony the Great)

- ❖ As Satan keeps on roaming through the earth to destroy souls, God, in His love, seeks these souls to keep them from perdition, as “the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth” (Zech. 4.10), and the Lord of glory came to “go about doing good” (Acts 10.38).
- ❖ Satan plotted not to draw us away from the blessings that we have, but to draw us even to a much steeper rocky pitfall, But God’s providence did not fail to care for humanity. He showed to Satan how foolish he is in his attempts. He demonstrated to man how great is God’s care for him, as through His death, man was granted eternal life. Satan drew man out of paradise, but God led him to heaven; and Benefit became far greater than loss³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. Peter did not rebuke Ananias just because he did not deliver the whole proceeds of the land that he sold, but he rebuked him for his deceit. He gave a part of the price pretending that it was the whole proceeds, with the intention to draw further from the public fund what was for his living and that of his household, beside the commendation of the congregation for his false generosity.

Ananias and Sapphira probably thought that they were shrewder than the rest of the congregation, in keeping part of the proceeds as a security against the probability of difficult times. They did not trust in the word of God and in His promise to take care of them. Their hearts were divided between the ministry to God and the care for temporal things.

They assumed that they could deceive the apostles and the whole Church, leading them to thinking that they are pious, and have offered all what they had, and did not know that they did that against the Holy Spirit, the Leader of the Church, before whom nothing is hidden.

After enjoying the Holy Spirit, Ananias opened his heart to Satan to fill and to possess, thus opposing the Holy Spirit.

¹ Ep. 6.

² Ep. 6.

³ *Baptismal Instructions*. 2.7.

- ❖ The old prophets differ from the new ones, in that the old ones prophesied about the salvation of Israel, the call to the Gentiles, and the incarnation of Christ; whereas, the new prophets prophesy about certain issues, or certain people, like when St. Peter did concerning Ananias as an example¹.
(Severian of Gabalah)

“While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God” (Acts 5.4).

Ananias should have learnt from the case of Gehazi, who assumed that he could deceive his master the prophet ‘Elisha’, hastened after Naaman the Aramite to ask for silver and clothing, then lied to his master. Thus, he lost his discipleship, and the possibility of prophetic work, and heard the rebuke of his master, “Was not my spirit with you” (2 Kings 5.26)? And on the level of the people, the Lord says on the tongue of the prophet Jeremiah, “The house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to Me’, declares the Lord. They have lied about the Lord, They said, ‘He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine” (Jer. 5.11-12).

Ananias had no material commitment, like a mortgage on his house, or children to take care of. He could have kept even the whole price of the land, as there was no obligation on him to give, and “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9.7). When St. Paul made a plea to Philemon to forgive and release Onesimus, his run-away slave, he did not want him to do that by obligation, but voluntarily, with complete freedom of will (Phil. 14). God does not seek the gift but the heart. He does not like to dwell in a heart divided between God’s possession and that of Satan. He has no pleasure in twisted ways or in half solutions, as the prophet Elijah says, “If the Lord is God, follow Him, but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 Kings 18.21).

The apostle Paul clarified that every sin is actually directed to the Holy One who is without sin, as the Psalmist says, “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps. 51.4).

- ❖ Did Peter grow angry only so far as to desire that Ananias and his wife should be slain? Certainly not. He wished that others, through knowing their example, should not perish”².
- ❖ “For this he perished as guilty of fraud. He might have offered nothing and have acted so without committing a fraud. But as deceit entered into his action, he gained no favor for his liberality, but paid the penalty for his artifice”³.

(St. Ambrose)

¹ Severian of Gabala: *Pouline Comm. From the Greek Church, on 1 Cor. 11.4.*

² *Duties of the Clergy. 1.30.*

³ *Duties of the Clergy. 3.11 (74).*

Ananias' sin was not in keeping a part of the price, but in his deceit and hypocrisy. He intended to appear as though he dedicated his life and his whole possessions to God, while he kept his love for money and the authority of the devil on him. His was the sin of false dedication, having lied to God, who searches the heart.

It was said about King Saul that “the Spirit of the Lord had departed from him; and an evil spirit from the Lord (allowed through Him) tormented him” (1 Sam. 16.14). So was Ananias, having gained the Holy Spirit, but not responding to Him, he allowed evil to enter into his heart to reign on it, and fell accordingly under the verdict.

Some believe that such a prompt verdict was because of Ananias' stature, having been, as Lightfoot believes one of the 120 who attended the day of the Pentecost, and had an active potential for testimony. But his heart was not straightforward, and did not respond to the Holy Spirit. Here appears the seriousness of the leader's position in the Church, when he gains the grace of the Holy Spirit, but does not walk by the Spirit of God.

When man sins, whatever his sin may be, the gates of hope remain open before him, and the Holy Spirit leads him eventually to it through repentance. Whereas he, who persistently and practically lies to the Holy Spirit, is giving his back to the Holy Spirit, who rebukes on sin; and repentance will find no more place in him. The sin of lying corrupts man and moves him from his sonhood to God, to that to Satan who is “a liar and the father of it” (John 8.44).

❖ “Ananias was poor, when after selling his land he brought the money to the apostles, and was not able with it to pay his debt, but involved himself the more. That widow was rich who cast her two small pieces into the treasury, of whom Christ said, “Truly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all” (Luke 21.3). For God requires not money but faith”¹.

(St. Ambrose)

❖ Everyone should watch against being taken over by lies, as a liar does not unify with God. A liar is an alien to God. The Holy Book says that the liar is a follower of Satan, who is “a liar and father of it” (John 14.6).

The devil is so called; whereas, the Lord says about Himself, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14.6).

Do not you see that by telling lies we alienate ourselves from God? That is why, if we truly wish to be saved, we are committed to love the truth with all our strength and zeal, and to watch against telling lies, lest we become separated from the truth and the life.

(Father Dorotheus)

¹ *Concerning Repentance*, 2:9 (82).

- ❖ Ananias promised to give God all his possessions, hoping to gain glory from the people. But, by keeping back a part of the proceeds, and telling lies to the apostle Peter, he only brought on himself God's wrath. He actually had no place in his heart for repentance¹.

(St. Basil the Great)

The hearts of the apostles were not preoccupied with the quantity of money brought at their feet, as they were absorbed with the love in the believers' hearts. That is why, with the spirit of power, the apostle intended to expose the mask of hypocrisy that Ananias wore to hide his love of the world. He was not preoccupied with the money but with the souls lest they perish, even if they offered huge amounts of money for the Church ministries, by any possible means.

The words "**kept back**" here came in the Greek text, the same as that translated as "betrayed" in the episode of Achan son of Carmi (Josh. 7.1).

- ❖ "The man who sells his goods because he despises them and means to renounce the world can have no desire to sell them dear. Count as money gained the sum that you must expend upon your outfit. There is an old saying that a miser lacks as much what he has as what he has not. The believer has a whole world of wealth; the unbeliever has not a single farthing. Let us always live "as having nothing and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6.10). Food and raiment, these are the Christian's wealth (1 Tim. 6.8). If your property is in your own power, sell it: if not, cast it from you"².

(St. Jerome)

St. Peter did not accuse him of deceiving him, but of intending to deceive the Holy Spirit. Here, it is obvious that the apostle's concept of the Holy Spirit is not that He is just a divine energy, but He is a divine Person, with whom we deal as a Being. He is God. A sin like lying is not directed against one of God's attributes; it is rather directed against the Person of God. The Holy Spirit is not just a divine attribute, but is God Himself.

The Holy Spirit is God who searches the hearts, and who knows what it contains of intentions to lie. According to the Holy Scripture, the Spirit searches even the depths of God (rev. 2.23). The apostle Peter calls Him "God" (Acts 5.4).

"Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things" (Acts 5.5).

The verdict did not come from the apostle Peter personally, but from God. And the apostle's role was just to proclaim it.

Ananias definitely did not breathe his last, as a result of a psychological shock, when his horrible sin was exposed before everyone, but it was allowed by God for the edification of the Church.

¹ Oliver Davies. *The Gateway to Paradise*, 3.

² Letter 53 to Polinus of Nola, 11.

“**Great fear**”: The issue of preaching concentrated on God’s exalted love for man and His appreciation of him. We said that as we speak of love we should not disregard the “fear of God” with all its various kinds. Fear is both important and necessary, tutoring the true believer as a child, to lift him up to love and to bring him over from the stage of spiritual childhood to spiritual maturity. Delivering him to love, the fear of God would never separate from him, but would grant him new and deep experience of fear, not based on fear of punishment, but on that of a son who loves his father, and would never intend to hurt his feelings, not even with one thought improper for his father.

- ❖ “Do you see how many evils spring from love of money?” And great fear, it is said, “came upon all those who heard these things”. That man was punished, and others profited thereby. Not without cause. And yet, signs had been wrought before: true, but there was not such a sense of fear. So true is that saying, "The Lord is known by executing judgments." (Ps. 9. 16). The same thing had occurred in the case of the Ark: Uzzah was punished and fear came upon the rest (2 Sam. 6. 7). But in that instance the king through fear removed from him the Ark; but here the disciples became more earnestly heedful”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Fear of God exhorts the soul to keep the commandments, and this in turn would establish a mansion for the soul.
- ❖ Therefore, let us fear God and establish mansions for ourselves, so as to have a shelter in winter, when the rain and thunder come. Those who have no mansion will face great dangers at the time of winter.
- ❖ St. John says, “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4.18). So why does the blessed prophet David say, “Fear God, O His saints”?

This reveals that there are two kinds of fear:

The first kind is primitive, while the second is perfect.

The first kind of fear concerns the beginners; whereas, the second kind concerns the perfect saints who have reached up to the stature of consummated love.

Whoever obeys God out of fear of punishment, his fear is primitive; whereas, he, who does the will of God to please Him, has reached the level of consummated fear, **by which he fears to lose the joy that he enjoys through existing with God. This is the consummated fear born from love that casts out the primitive fear.**

(Fr. Dorotheus)

“And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him” (Acts 5.6).

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.

The Greek word for ‘the young men’ came to refer to ministers who serve the congregation. It is also used to refer to the soldiers, as they are young men.

“Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened” (Acts 5.7).

Some may wonder why the young men hasten to wrap Ananias up, to carry him out, and to bury him, without caring to inform his wife.

- ❖ As Ananias brought the money over by himself, and without his wife, then those unexpected things happened, no one thought about telling his wife, and probably nobody knew that he was even married.
- ❖ It was the custom of the Persians, and probably the Jews at that time, to hasten to wrap the dead body up and to bury it, as long as there was no intention to mummify it.
- ❖ The situation was very exciting; and leaving the dead body in the midst of the crowd for sometime would probably cause chaos and disturbance.

By coming after three hours, Sapphira probably intended to get her share of temporal fellowship of glory, together with her husband, who already brought up their donation. This probably shows that she had been in a place far from Jerusalem, and she came directly to the assembly, unaware of what happened to her husband.

St. John Chrysostom believes that no one dared to inform the wife of what had happened, not even as she came in, because fear came upon them.

“And Peter answered her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?’ She said, ‘Yes, for so much’” (Acts 5.8).

Some believe that Ananias came at the time of a collective prayer, carrying deceit in his heart. His wife then came at the time of the following collective prayer. She had the chance to correct the mistake of her husband, yet, because she was with him into that conspiracy, she insisted on saying, “Yes, with so much”.

- ❖ “This circumstance the Evangelist relates with wonder even. ... And yet she might have perceived even from this that Peter knew the secret. For why, having questioned none other, does he question you? Was it not clear that he asked because he knew? But so great was her hardness, it would not let her attempt to evade the guilt; and with great confidence she replied; for she thought she was speaking only to a man. The aggravation of the sin was, that they committed it as with one soul, just as upon a settled compact between them”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.*

“Then Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out’” (Acts 5.9).

What happened was not just a quick thought that came to Ananias’ mind, then he put it into action. But it was a well contemplated plan that revealed what was in both his and his wife’s hearts. Both of them were together in it: thought, plan, and execution.

“to test the Spirit of the Lord”: they intended to deceive the Lord, as though He is not aware of what their hearts embraced of deceit, hypocrisy, love of dignity, and love of money. They did what they did to see if the Holy Spirit could discover and expose their crime.

As Sapphira came to where the apostles were, the young men had already finished their task, in wrapping her husband up, and carrying his dead body out to bury it outside the city walls. On their way back, they were very close to where the apostles were, and they were already “at the door”.

How wonderful for the husband and wife to agree together, but in the Lord, and not in evil. Adam and Eve agreed together in their rebellion against the Lord, and had their life destroyed.

“Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came and found her dead, and carried her out, buried her by her husband” (Acts 5.10).

Some may probably wonder why the punishment on Ananias and Sapphira was so swift?

1- The Church was beginning to set forth; and having been the first event, in its history, of treason to the Spirit of the lord, and unfaithfulness by those who gained the Holy Spirit, there had to be a fast and decisive punishment that demonstrates the seriousness of opposing the truth, taking the side of the devil, and opening the door to him to come in and reign instead of God. The apostles had presented several acts that revealed their love, as a shadow of the absolute love of God. Likewise, there had to be firm and strict stands, lest the believers lose their fear of God. Love without true fear would probably turn into slothfulness; and fear without love can turn as well into despair and destruction.

2- The Spirit had to proclaim the purity of that congregation, to become “A holy and blameless Church”, as it is improper for the Church of Christ to embrace such a transgression. Although God hates sin in all its forms, hypocrisy is the most serious of all, when it infiltrates into the Church, especially into ministers. The Lord Christ did not rebuke the adulterous and the tax collectors, Although He rejected their transgressions, yet He tried to draw them to him through compassion. Whereas He rebuked the hypocrites firmly, in more than one occasion (Job 8.13, 13.16, 15.34, 20.5; matt. 7.5, 23.1-38; Mark 12.15; Luke 11.44, 12.1; 1 Tim. 4.2). What God intended to confirm was that the Church of the New Testament should not bear what infiltrated into the Church of the Old Testament at that time: the Spirit of arrogance and hypocrisy that characterized many of its leaders. God cared for the inner purity of the Church, and whoever do not care for it must be disciplined, as the apostle says, “For this reason, many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor. 11.30).

3- Although the apostles were characterized by simplicity in appearance and speech, the Holy Spirit confirmed the authority given to them by Jesus Christ, to lead the Church by His Holy Spirit on the path of righteousness, in compassion and gentility toward the repentant souls, and with firmness and authority against any corruption that touches the inside. That was obvious in the apostle Paul's attitude concerning the young man who intended to have his father's wife, seeking to "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5.1-8). The apostle Paul used that same authority in his fast discipline of Elymas the Sorcerer, who opposed the word of God (Acts 13.8-11).

4- In the old Testament, there were many instances in which prompt punishment was carried out for the sake of the edification of the congregation, like in the episode of Achan son of Carmi (Josh. 7.1-24); In that of the man who was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath, breaking the commandment of God of keeping the day of the Lord (num. 15.32); And in what Phinehas the priest did to the Israeli man and the Midianite woman, when the Israelites attached themselves to the pagan women, and offered together with them sacrifices to their gods (num. 25).

St. John Chrysostom believes that when Ananias and Sapphira chose by their own will to sell their possessions and to deliver the whole price at the apostles' feet, they dedicated their wealth as a portion to the Lord, sanctified to His ministry. And when they kept a part of it, they violated the sanctities of the Lord, and put them to their personal use. Their sin is a violation against the sanctities of the Lord.

The saint believes that what Ananias and Sapphira did is similar to what that man in the old times did, when he was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath, breaking the holy day of the Lord, and was counted as a violator of the sanctities, that warranted his stoning.

❖ "If for gathering sticks a man is to be stoned (for defiling the Sabbath), much rather ought he for sacrilege; for this money has become sacred. He that has chosen to sell his goods and distribute them, and then withdraws them, is guilty of sacrilege. ... Sacrilege, beloved, is a most grievous crime, insulting, and full of contempt"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ "Let your praises come from the stomachs of the hungry and not from the rich banquets of the overfed. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how, while the blood of the Lord was still warm and believers were in the fervor of their first faith, they all sold their possessions and laid the price of them at the apostles' feet (to show that money ought to be trampled underfoot) and distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4.35).

But Ananias and Sapphira proved timid stewards, and what is more, deceitful ones; therefore they brought on themselves condemnation. For having made a vow they offered their money to God as

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.*

if it were their own and not His to whom they had vowed it; and keeping back for their own use a part of that which belonged to another, through fear of famine which true faith never fears, they drew down on themselves suddenly the avenging stroke, which was meant not in cruelty towards them but as a warning to others. In fact the apostle Peter by no means called down death upon them as Porphyry foolishly says. He merely announced God's judgment by the spirit of prophecy, that the doom of two persons might be a lesson to many.

From the time of your dedication to perpetual virginity your property is yours no longer; or rather is now first truly yours because it has come to be Christ's. Yet while your grandmother and mother are living you must deal with it according to their wishes. If, however, they die and rest in the sleep of the saints (and I know that they desire that you should survive them); when your years are riper, and your will steadier, and your resolution stronger, you will do with your money what seems best to you, or rather what the Lord shall command, knowing as you will that hereafter you will have nothing save that which you have here spent on good works.

Others may build churches, may adorn their walls when built with marbles, may procure massive columns, may deck the unconscious capitals with gold and precious ornaments, may cover church doors with silver and adorn the altars with gold and gems. I do not blame those who do these things; I do not repudiate them. Everyone must follow his own judgment. And it is better to spend one's money thus than to hoard it up and brood over it.

However your duty is of a different kind. It is yours to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit Him in the sick, to feed Him in the hungry, to shelter Him in the homeless, particularly such as are of the household of faith, to support communities of virgins, to take care of God's servants, of those who are poor in spirit, who serve the same Lord as you day and night, who while they are on earth live the angelic life and speak only of the praises of God. Having food and raiment they rejoice and count themselves rich. They seek for nothing more, contented if only they can persevere in their design. For as soon as they begin to seek more they are shown to be undeserving even of those things that are needful”¹.

(St. Jerome, in a letter to Demetrias)

“So great fear came upon all the Church and upon all who heard these things” (Acts 5.11).

St. Luke presents the impact of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira on the Church at that time:

- ❖ There was fear upon all the Church; and Love became mixed with true fear (11).
- ❖ Many signs were done, for the people to realize that God works more in the Church's life, when she is serious in keeping her life holy, cleansed from every corruption, both apparent and hidden.

¹ Letter 80 to Demetrias, 14.

- ❖ All were attached together in a spirit of Church worship, as wherever holiness and piety are, there is a true unity (12).
- ❖ “None of the rest dared join them” (13). By “the rest” he probably means those who, although they were ready to minister together with the apostles, they were not honest in dedicating their own life.
- ❖ The people discovered how God’s splendor was on the apostles (13).
- ❖ The punishment on Ananias and Sapphira did not cause repulsion from the Church, but an amazing appeal, as “multitudes of both men and women were increasingly added to the Lord” (14).
- ❖ The city of Jerusalem was shaken with the spirit of hope, “They brought the sick out in the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them” (15), and “also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed” (16).

This is the first time that the New Testament uses the term “**Church**”, referring to the congregation of believers.

Why did fear come upon all the Church and upon all who heard? It was fitting for the believers not to fear, as God is Fire that consumes the opponents, who persist on their opposition; whereas, the faithful will be kindled by a divine fire, both holy and full of light. Therefore, some believe that fear came upon the Church because what Ananias and Sapphira did began to infiltrate into the midst of the church. That is why the Apostle Paul warns that “Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6.10).

2-The PERSISTENT GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

“And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people, and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch” (Acts 5.12).

After what happened to Ananias and Sapphira as a fruit of their deceit against the Church, being a deceit against the Holy Spirit of The Lord, the leader of the procession of the holy Church, the Spirit granted support for His Church through many signs and wonders that were done through the hands of the apostles among the people, not for the sake of the believers, but for that of the non-believers. Thus, when the Church is purified of corruption, the Spirit of God works stronger, for the Holy Christ to transfigure in her, and to make her a witness to the holy truth before the world. His magnificent fruit is the unity of the Church that had one accord, despite the persistent increase in the number of believers, who used to assemble in a spacious place in “**Solomon’s Porch.**”

- ❖ “No longer in a house, but having occupied the very Temple, they there passed their time! No longer they guarded themselves against touching the unclean; nay, without scruple they handled the dead”¹.
- ❖ "No one bemoaned, nor mourned for them, but fear came upon all, and with the growth of faith, the number of signs and wonders multiplied”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly” (Acts 5.13).

Lightfoot believes that ‘the rest’ here refers to the rest of the 120, among whom was Ananias. Yet many scholars do not accept this interpretation. Some believe that “the rest” was a number of Christians and Jews who joined the apostles on the level of friendship and curiosity, or just amazement for what was going on. Those were overcome by fear lest their inner intentions eventually be revealed, the same way the Holy Spirit revealed the deceit hidden in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira. Other scholars believe that “the rest” refers to the rich people and those of authority, among whom was Ananias, to whom, what happened to Ananias was seen as a firm lesson to anyone who may think about deceiving the simple apostles. Those adopting this view justify it by the fact that St. Luke distinguishes between those “rest” and the people in the same verse. The “rest” are the rich and the great, while the common people, who, in the simplicity of heart, did not fear what happened, but esteemed the apostles highly. What happened to Ananias only terrified the rich and the great.

All were connected together in the spirit of worship; and the signs and wonders on the hands of the apostles gave more strength to the testimony. The religious leaders were in an embarrassing position, plotting against the apostles, but, at the same time they feared the multitudes, many of whom have publicly believed, beside many more on their way, but could not declare their faith for fear of the leaders.

“And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5.14).

The Christians were called ‘disciples’ or ‘believers’, as they were following the Lord Christ, as a Teacher and Lord, and because their life is set on believing in Him.

The chief priests and the priests lost much of their income, as many turned from offering animal and money sacrifices to the temple, to ministering the poor and the needy, bringing their donations at the apostles’ feet. Moreover, they had also lost much of their overwhelming temporal glory and authority.

“So that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them” (Acts 5.15).

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.*

² *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.*

The word ‘couch’ (klinoon) refers to soft luxurious beds used by the rich, which implies that many of those sick laid on beds in the streets along the way of the apostles were rich people. The term ‘beds’ on the other hand (krabatoon) refers to the cheap hard beds used by the poor (Mark 2.4, 9.11-12; John 5.8-12). The poor together with the rich felt the need for the work of God in the life of the apostles.

They brought the sick out into the streets, as probably the priests did not allow them in Solomon’s Porch; and the apostles had no time to go to their homes. They laid them on beds and couches, as they were unable to stand and even to sit waiting for any of the apostles to pass by.

This is a magnificent portrait of God’s work, which is not limited by a certain place. Wherever the children of God would be, the place is sanctified by the Spirit of God dwelling in them, to conduct the work of God, even in the streets.

“The shadow of Peter”: The Lord Christ promised His disciples that in His name they would do the signs that He did, and even greater than them (John 14.12). When the woman who had a flow of blood touched the hem of His garment, she was healed by a power that came out of Him (Matt. 9.20). But as far as Peter is concerned, the Lord Christ granted him that by his shadow, the sick people laid on beds and couches in the street were healed. Yet, what the Lord did was through His own power and authority, while what was achieved by Peter and the other apostles was in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Greater signs were indeed done to the account of the glory of Christ.

The Lord Christ is “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4.2), If by shining with His light on His apostles, their shadow bore the power of healing! How would be the Sun itself? That is why the prophet says, “To you who fear My name, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings” (Mal. 4.2).

If Peter’s mere shadow bore such sanctification, to proclaim the power of God by healing the sick, how much more would be expected from his body itself? Thus, the Lord Christ presents a holy view of the body, so as not to look at it as an item of darkness, as was thought by the Gnostics and their likes. All what God created in us is good, sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

❖ “This had not occurred in the history of Christ; but see here what He had told them actually coming to pass, that “The work that I do, you will do also, and greater” (John 14.12)”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits; and they were all healed” (Acts 5.16).

As the apostles were sanctified, the Spirit of God worked by them, even through their shadow, or the rags that they used to put on their bodies. As their hearts were filled with love, yearning to comfort all, the Spirit of God worked by them in every way to grant them the requests of their hearts.

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 12.

Since the apostles yearned to minister to all, the believers on their parts were in a condition of faith and belief that God was granting His grace and good through the Church, that they brought the sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, believing that God works even by the shadow of His apostle. The streets of Jerusalem turned into a general hospital, full of sick people, together with praise and thanksgiving to God for His grace on them.

3- Arresting THE APOSTLES

“Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation” (Acts 5.17).

While the Church, especially the apostles, was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4.8) to testify to the Lord Christ the Grantor of salvation to the world, the devil was standing on guard. He found in one of the hypocrite ministers – Ananias – a chance to provoke his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit the Grantor of repentance and the Leader of the procession of the Church. Then, he worked through the high priest and those who were with him (the sect of the Sadducees), whose hearts were full of envy. Having declared their enmity against the Lord Christ, His gospel, and His Church, they plotted to lay their hands on the apostles. They did not realize that they thus would kill themselves, as it is said, “Envy slays the fools”. They foolishly behaved, not as spiritual leaders may do.

The high priest and those who were with him could not stand to see how Solomon’s Porch was crowded with believers in Jesus Christ; and how the streets were filled with praise and thanksgivings, presented by the sick, who enjoyed healing. If they assumed that they have got rid of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifying Him, There He is resurrected, and the multitudes turned into faith in Him.

The Pharisees used to hate the Sadducees intensely, more so than they hated the new Christians. The apostle Paul used that attitude for his benefit when he was being judged in the temple (Acts 23).

The high priest and the Sadducees were filled with envy and rage against the apostles, when they saw the increase of those who joined the Christian faith, and noticed how they no more cared for the authority of the Sanhedrin.

“And laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison” (Acts 5.18).

The war of the devil inside and outside started very early since the setting forth of the Church. Earlier, the leaders just threatened the apostles John and Peter (Acts 4.21), but now they actually, and for the first time, put them in the common prison. The high priest and those who were around him did not care for what could happen if they did, counting it as nothing more than what they were actually in.

They arrested the apostles, to prevent people from contacting them. And by putting them in the common prison together with the common criminals, they hoped to bring disgrace upon them; and the people would no longer hold them in respect.

Most probably, the high priest refers to ‘Caiaphas’; and all those around him refers to those who shared with him his hatred of the Lord Christ and of the spreading of preaching the gospel. As for the Sadducees, at that time, they represented the majority of members in the Sanhedrin, and were therefore in a position to take decisions. Therefore, the high priest resorted to them, and not to the Pharisees, who had previously taken a serious role in opposing the Lord Christ and in His trial. The reason behind this strategy was that although the Pharisees entertained hatred towards the lord Christ, yet preaching His resurrection would destroy the teachings of the Sadducees who do not believe in resurrection from the dead. Therefore, the Pharisees were not zealous enough in opposing the apostles.

“But at night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said” (Acts 5.19).

The Greek expression refers to one of the angels, and not to a particular one.

Having filled the hearts of the high priest and those around him with evil jealousy, the enemy of good tightened them in order to reign and have control over them with his darkness, that they would oppose the Gospel. They thought that they could imprison the apostles and prevent them from meeting anyone, not realizing that the Lord is dwelling in them and the heavenly hosts desire to serve them. Before God, there is neither dark prison, secure gates, nor strong guards. Just as the grave could not imprison His body, nor the gates of Hades could be closed on His soul, all the prisons of the world could not confine his body, which is the Church.

The gates of the prison were closed, but those of heaven were opened before them. As it was not possible for the world to put the word of God in chains (2 Tim. 2.9), the Lord Christ sent His angel, opened the prison doors, brought them out, and commanded them to speak openly in the temple. Amid the darkness of the night, the doors of darkness were opened, as it was not possible for the children of the light to be kept in the darkness of the prison.

They were brought out to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Christ, not by any proofs other than their bodies, from which the shackles were loosed. They came out of the prison while the doors remained closed; the same way the Lord came out of the grave, while the big stone remained intact with its seals.

When the forces of darkness stood to fight them, the Father of light fought to their account, sending His angel to reveal their innocence before their opponents and before the people. The Lord could not stand with His hands tied, or forsake His witnesses, but would comfort and defend them, and carry them as though on His arms.

It was impossible for the mighty doors of the prison, the chains, or the armed guards, to stand before the heavenly angel of God.

“Go, Stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life” (Acts 5.20).

The appearance of the angel of the Lord, and bringing them out of the prison, had been for the sake of the future Jewish leaderships, to realize that they were vainly opposing the King of heaven; and

that any opposition on their part would certainly realize a glory to the gospel of Christ. At the same time, it came to motivate the apostles and those around them to work more and more to the account of the kingdom of God. Moreover, what happened confirmed to the people the truth of the gospel and the realization of its promises.

The divine command to the apostles was to speak openly **in the temple**, in their Father's house, which heaven yearns to keep safe, to radiate the divine love and the preaching of salvation to the whole world.

Heaven directed them to preach to the **people**, and not to the priests, or to the religious leaders, who love debate, while embracing a foolish opposition to the truth, together with arrogance and false pride. Heaven commanded them to preach to the people, as every single soul is precious in the sight of God, with no discrimination between leaders and common people.

Heaven instructed them to speak "**all the words of this life**": the eternal life. The word 'life' here embraces all the faith, which aims at the eternal life, to present the experience of their resurrection together with Christ, and their enjoyment of the new heavenly life, which was impossible for the high priest and those around him to taste, as long as the devil reigned with envy on their hearts. The subject of their preaching was neither boasting of signs and miracles and the ability of heaven to open up the doors of the prison, nor entering into foolish debates, but presenting the experience of the sweetness of life in Jesus Christ that they live anywhere, under any circumstances.

They did not come out of prison to escape to a safe place, but to set forth to the temple to praise God, and to testify to the truth. They came out, for their souls to sing: "Let my soul live, and it shall praise You, And let Your judgments help me" (Ps. 119.175). "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Your name, The righteous shall surround me, For You shall deal bountifully with me" (Ps. 142.7). "To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house" (Isa. 42.7).

"And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought" (Acts 5.21).

The high priest and those around him, assuming that they planned well, and that they completely thwarted this movement, called for a meeting of the Sanhedrin and the elders (about 116 judges), to proclaim their heroism and their zeal for the glory of Israel.

If the apostles escaped on their own from the prison, they would have gone to some place to hide, so as not to be arrested again. But going back to the temple to teach and preach has no other meaning but that their coming out of prison has been by a heavenly power that challenges the opposing forces, which do not fear prison or chains.

The apostles did not come out of the prison to preach in a secret place far from the temple, but they were commanded to go to the temple to preach publicly to the people. Heaven intended to give the

Jews a new chance to use the house of the Lord to testify to God and to His salvation work, after they had turned it to a house of merchandise and a den of robbers.

In the early morning, they hastened to the temple, without engaging in any discussion among themselves, as the command was issued from heaven to work to the account of the kingdom of God, and the testimony to the words of the eternal life. There was no time for debate, but every chance should be dedicated to the preaching work. In Solomon's Porch, they came to preach the salvation of every soul, and the work of God for the sake of mankind. They did not talk about themselves as heroes who endured prison, but about God the Lover of man.

“But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported” (Acts 5.22).

The high priest most probably started by delivering a fiery speech, showing his actions and strife to control the situation; and at the end of his speech, there came the officers and reported that the apostles were not in the prison. The high priest and those around him thought, in the climax of their greatness, that they have crushed that heresy, not realizing that He, who sits in heaven is laughing and holding them in derision (Ps. 2.4). They became intensely disgraced.

“Saying, ‘indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside’ (Acts 5.23).

Now, that was a new serious miracle; and the challenge between the followers of the Crucified and the crucifiers has reached a climax.

Wonderful are the works of God! How could the guards not see the angel open the securely shut doors? How could they not see the prisoners go out?

Finding the doors still shut and intact only means an intercession of heaven, as, it could not have been possible for the apostles' friends to get them out of the prison, without breaking the doors, bringing down the walls, or engaging into a battle with the guards. But nothing of the sort did happen. And if the guards were cooperating with them, and have taken a bribe, they would not remain standing outside the doors, while the inside was empty.

St. John Chrysostom believes that what happened here is similar to what happened at the tomb of the Lord Christ, where the seals were intact and the guards were vigilant; whereas, the tomb itself was empty, because Jesus has risen up. He also granted to his apostles to go out leaving the prison as an empty tomb, while the doors were shut and the guards standing outside.

That is the daily work of resurrection in the life of the Church. The world insists on burying her in a tomb, or shutting her up in a prison, but the seals remain intact, and the guards remain standing in guard outside, while the Church sets forth to testify to the One resurrected from the dead.

The testimony of the officers sent by the Sanhedrin that the doors were securely shut, certainly implies that a divine hand was involved, that challenges the laws of nature. There is no indication of

treason or a bribe, as the guards were found standing vigilantly outside. No one could have entered but the captain of the temple and his soldiers.

❖ “See how they fought against God! Say, was this of man's doing that happened to them? Who led them forth, when the doors were shut? How came they out, with the keepers standing before the door? Verily they must be mad or drunken to talk so. Here are men, whom neither prison, nor bonds, nor closed doors, had been able to keep in; and yet they expect to overpower them: such is their childish folly! Their officers come and confess what has taken place, as if on purpose to debar them from all show of reason”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

4-THE CHARGE OF THE NAME

“Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be” (Acts 5.24).

We can imagine the high priest, as the chairman of the assembly of the Sanhedrin, conducting the session in seriousness to try those illiterate and simple Galileans, who were disgracefully cast in the public prison. Surely this movement could not hold. But the situation soon changed, when the officers brought back a discouraging report, that they found the prison doors securely shut, the bolts intact, the guards vigilantly standing outside the prison, and all the other prisoners were accounted for, but the apostles were not there.

A great confusion must have happened, every member of the Sanhedrin offering his interpretation and thoughts: Are they sorcerers? Did they bribe the prison guards to let them go? But where did they go? Did they go to preach outside Jerusalem far from sight? Or are they really men of God, and what is done is opposing the Truth?

“Then one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people” (Acts 5.25).

The Sanhedrin fell in a serious state of confusion and suspicion. Is there some treason among those responsible for the prison? How did the prisoners get out? Have they dug through the walls? And in case this is an exalted heavenly work, what will be the situation of the Sanhedrin?

“Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned” (Acts 5.26).

There is no doubt that the story of their getting out by the hand of an angel of God started to spread; and the multitude gathered around them. The captain of the temple with his officers brought the apostles without violence, lest they should be stoned by the people. They did not fear their opposition to God and the truth, but feared the people.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 13.*

They brought them to the Sanhedrin without violence, neither out of respect for the temple and its holiness, nor out of obedience to the law, as they should not use violence before the charges against them are proved. Moreover, they did not fear heaven's wrath, that they may face what happened to the captain of fifty and his fifty men, who intended to violently bring the prophet Elijah to the king; and fire came down from heaven and consumed them (2 Kings 1.10). Then the same happened to another captain of fifty with his fifty men (2 Kings 1.12).

The apostles did not seize the chance to arouse the multitudes against the captain of the temple and his men, but they went in peace of heart with him, because they saw it as a splendid chance to testify anew before the Sanhedrin.

❖ "O the folly of the men! **"They feared,"** says he, **"the multitude."** Why, how had the multitude helped the Apostles? When they ought to have feared that God Who was continually delivering them like winged creatures out of their power, instead of that, **"they feared the multitude!"**¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council, and the high priest asked them" (Acts 5.27).

As the captain of the temple brought them with respect and dignity, caring for his life and his soldiers' lives, lest they should be stoned by the multitudes who gathered around the apostles, the high priest, as the chairman of the Sanhedrin, started to address the apostles on behalf of the council, presenting his accusations.

"Saying, 'Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood on us'" (Acts 5.28).

The high priest did not ask them about how they came out of prison. What preoccupied him the most was to put an end to the testimony to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

The chief priest accused the apostles of two charges:

1- The first is the rebellion against the orders of the authority, breaking the law, and preaching without permission from the Sanhedrin.

2- The second which is more important and more serious was that they were bringing the blood of the crucified Jesus on them. Their conscience seemed to suffer some feeling of guilt, as murderers who shed innocent blood.

The speech of the chief priest revealed what was in his heart and those of the other members of the Sanhedrin, that those illiterate people, who managed to draw Jerusalem to their teachings, had gained the position of leadership that surpassed that of the Sanhedrin itself. That is what we see in his saying, **"You have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine"**.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 13.*

“And intend to bring this man’s blood on us”: The teachings of the apostles and their preaching indirectly provoke the people to accuse the Sanhedrin of condemning Jesus to death on no sound legal ground, and that they shed innocent blood.

“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, ‘We ought to obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5.29).

St. Peter and the other apostles neither presented as an explanation for the spreading of their doctrine the miracles they have done – although no one could deny them – nor their enjoyment of the ability to speak with tongues as a divine gift. They also did not refer it to their wisdom or capabilities, but referred it to the fact that the work is from God. Being a heavenly teaching, it bears in itself an attraction to the souls. All what the apostles did was to obey the divine commandment, and to testify with courage to God’s plan of salvation. It is not their own work, but that of God.

The answer was precise and concise: ***“We ought to obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5.29).

- ❖ "High magnanimity! He shows them too that they are fighting against God"¹.
- ❖ "Let us imitate these, my beloved: let us be undaunted in all our dangers. There is nothing dreadful to him that fears God; but all that is dreadful is for others. For when a man is delivered from his passions, and regards all present things as a shadow, say, from whom shall he suffer anything dreadful? Whom shall he have to fear? Whom shall he need plead to? Let us flee to this Rock which cannot be shaken. ... What is more wonderful to say, the very things which are thought to cause discomfort, became matter of all joy and gladness. ... For it is impossible, impossible in words to express how great pleasure falls to their lot, who suffer for Christ's sake: for they rejoice in their sufferings, rather than in their good things"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Without the power of the Spirit, Peter got terrified before a maidservant; And with the Spirit, he confronted kings and rulers³.
- ❖ If the orders of the king or the ruler are good let us obey them, But if they are evil and against God let us respond with the words of the apostles: ***“We ought to obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5.29)⁴.

(St. Jerome)

“The God of our fathers, raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him, God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5.30-31).

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 13.*

² *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 13.*

³ *The Homilies of St. Jerome. Hom. 65.*

⁴ *Commentary on Titus. PL 26:626 CD.*

God the Father raised Him up by His right hand; and having occupied our position, he presented His salvation works in our name and to our account, that when he ascends, He would raise us up together with Him. God the Father raises Him up to the glory that is eternally His, hidden to our account, that when He gets it, we shall also get it in Him. Raising Him up also refers to the acceptance by the Father of His atonement intercession, of His sacrifice for our sake, and of our reconciliation with the Father. Being raised up, He granted His apostles His Holy Spirit (John 16.7-11, 15.26), to work in His name for the salvation of the world, that the believers may enjoy the forgiveness of sins and the fellowship of eternal glory.

Here, the apostle reveals the divinity of the Lord Christ, being on the right hand of God the Father. He reveals as well, the concept of repentance, that it is a divine gift, given by the Lord Christ to the new Israel, and that there is no salvation to man, unless he humbly confesses his sins to get forgiveness. Finally, there is no sin, as much offensive as it may be, that can stand in the way of forgiveness, because the Savior is capable in His salvation work.

The apostles, concisely, presented a living portrait of the Person of Jesus Christ, whom they preach, as being:

1- The Prince: Who got this position, not from people, but from God His Father, and who, in His love, “made Himself of no reputation”, to reign as a Prince on the hearts and the inner life of His believers.

2- The Savior: No man can experience the sweetness of His salvation, or discover the secret of His cross, as God’s power for salvation, unless he accepts Him first as the “Prince”. He who opens his heart to Him will discover His Princely status that is based upon His exalted divine love, and the free work of salvation. That is why the title “Prince” came before that of “Savior”.

3- The Giver of Repentance: Without Him, man cannot realize his sins to confess them, or turn his face to reconcile with God with the joy of heart. If he realizes his sins by the natural or the Mosaic Law, he would not be able to turn his heart from them, because he is the captive of its appeal. The Lord Christ alone, by His Holy Spirit, is capable of changing man’s heart and mind, and of directing his depths to God his Father, instead of the sin that has the authority over him.

4- The Forgiver of sins: As He, through His cross, tore up the bill we owe, for us to have the right to enjoy His righteousness in us.

“And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5.32).

The apostles proclaim their readiness to testify to the Person of the Lord Christ, raised from the dead, as a Prince, a Savior, a Giver of repentance, and a Forgiver of sins. They have experienced the power of His exalted grace, supported in this by the divine Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, given to those who obey God.

The conclusion of their speech confirmed that they would never hold their peace, lest they be counted as traitors to the truth, and deniers to the divine grace that works in them.

Thus, the apostles concentrated on the Person of the Lord Christ, and His work in them, who does not separate from the Person of the Holy Spirit, given by the Father to those who obey the truth.

It was not possible for the Sanhedrin to endure this speech that refers to the crucified Jesus these four titles: Prince, Savior, Giver of repentance, and Forgiver of sins; knowing exactly, through the prophecies, that these are the titles of the Messiah, whom the fathers and the prophets had yearned to see.

The apostle Peter and those who were with him presented a short but strong defense:

1- While the apostles were accused of rebelling against the orders of the highest religious authority, the Sanhedrin, they humbly but firmly refused to abide to them, as long as they contradicted with the divine commandment given to them. They counted the Sanhedrin as representative of the view of men that should not be obeyed on the expense of that of God Himself. The controversy is not between the Sanhedrin and the apostles, but is actually between them and the God of their fathers. They have condemned the Lord Christ to death, crucified on a tree; but the God of their fathers raised Him from the dead. The case is directed against God, claimed by the Sanhedrin to be the God of their fathers, that in His name, and to the account of His glory they assemble, while they actually opposed His will.

2- The charge was that they had filled Jerusalem with their doctrine, and here they were even presenting it to the Sanhedrin, as though they were saying, 'We have not yet consummated our preaching in all Jerusalem. We wish to give you as well, a taste of the evangelic truth.'

3- The Sanhedrin, while assuming the responsibility for the religious and the judiciary affairs of Israel, opposed the true 'Prince', "***Whom God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince***". Who is then the true Prince: the Sanhedrin, the Opponent of God's will, or He, whom God the Father has exalted to be Prince?

4- Accused of bringing (that) man's blood on the Sanhedrin, the apostles corrected such view. He is not an unknown man, but He is the Prince and the Savior, whom Israel was anticipating since its genesis. The apostles revealed to the

Sanhedrin the identity of the Crucified, whom they intended to get rid of, trying to justify what they did to Him. The Father has set Him a Savior, to grant Salvation. It is as though the apostles were debating with the Sanhedrin: 'The people in Solomon's Porch and in the streets have enjoyed salvation, have been healed, and cleansed of the unclean spirits. He sent His angel and freed us of your chains, and brought us out of prison. He is the Savior of Israel, who alone is capable of saving us from your hands. You have no authority over us except by and within the limits He allows.'

5- Even though the members of the Sanhedrin issued a wrong verdict against Jesus, and condemned Him to death, shedding innocent blood, He, on the cross has forgiven them that crime. But

it remains for them to believe in Him, as “He gives Israel the repentance and the forgiveness of sins”. Here, the apostles turned the elements of the defense to the benefit of the members of the Sanhedrin, by inviting them to believe in Him, to receive the forgiveness of sins through repentance.

6- You are accusing us of things that we have experienced, to which we testify, and which we cannot deny. How can we deny that you have crucified Him? How can we deny His resurrection from the dead?

7- The apostle was as if wanting to say, "If you are trying us because we testify to the truth, we do not testify on our own, but by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. Can you try and oppose Him? We have gained the Holy Spirit of God, having obeyed Him. Here He is testifying to the mission of the Lord Christ, confirming this by signs and wonders publicly done by us. The door is open before you to experience what we do, and to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit of God, if you accept His testimony."

St. John Chrysostom comments that the apostle did not say: “And so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given (us)”, But said, “*has given to those who obey Him*” (Acts 5.32). As he says, "therein alike showing their own unassuming: temper, and intimating the greatness of the gift, and showing the hearers that it was possible for them also to receive the Spirit"¹.

The apostles were not preoccupied by the troubles that may come over them, and the envy and intense hatred harbored by their opponents. But they were opening the door even before those opponents, to obey the truth, to receive the Holy Spirit, and to partake of what they themselves enjoy.

The apostles had no other mission but to testify to Jesus Christ, that He is the **Prince, the Savior, the Giver of Repentance, and the Forgiver of sins**. They have been assigned to this goal.

They are **witnesses to the cross**, together with **Christ’s resurrection and ascension**, to grant His believers the eternal life. They are as well **witnesses to the gift of the Holy Spirit**, sent by the Son, from the Father, to those who believed and obeyed.

5- GAMALIEL's Attitude

“When they heard this, they were furious and took counsel to kill them” (Acts 5.33).

When they heard St. Peter's defense, they had nothing to respond to it, but “they were furious and took counsel to kill them. They most probably resorted to the Pharisees for help, having been the learned scholars, not to respond to the apostle’s defense, but to plan with them to kill the apostles by stoning.

What aroused their anger in the apostle’s speech of defense were the following points:

1- Accusing the Sanhedrin of opposing God by their orders, and showing that the apostles were committed to obey God rather than men.

2- Accusing the members of the Sanhedrin of being killers, and shedders of innocent blood.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 13.*

3- The confession that the Crucified is the Prince, the Savior, and the Messiah anticipated by the generations.

4- That He is the Grantor of repentance to Israel, who need repentance, And that He is the Forgiver of sins.

5- That the apostles were witnesses to the salvation works of God.

6- That the Holy Spirit testifies and works in the obedient believers.

7- Finally, that the Sadducees became in danger, as the resurrection from the dead had then become confirmed to all, the teaching that they absolutely denied.

Although the speech was very concise, it was like a fatal arrow, accurately cast at the heart of the members of the Sanhedrin, who then had no choice but, either to believe in the Lord Christ, or to get rid of the apostles by killing them.

“Then one of the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while” (Acts 5.34).

The sect of the Sadducees was in a terrible mood against the apostles, as its members believed that this matter could not be settled except by killing them. Although they were the majority in the Sanhedrin, they needed to gain the Pharisees on their side. Josephus says that the Pharisees, in spite of not being the majority in the Sanhedrin, were more popular and had a strong influence among the people. That is why the Sadducees could not make a decision by the majority, unless it was approved by the Pharisees.

The Pharisee Gamaliel, the teacher of the law, and of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22.3) (And thought by some to be the son of Simon the elder, who carried the infant Jesus on his arms in the temple), probably convinced by the defense of St. Peter, felt that the position of the Sanhedrin was as though an opposition to God Himself. It was claimed that he believed in the Lord Christ, together with Nicodemus, on the hands of St. Peter and St. John, and that he remained a Christian in secret. Yet, certain scholars believe that he adopted that position, not out of conviction of what he heard, but on account of his liberal mind that did not believe in the use of violence in religion.

❖ ‘Pharisee’ is a title meaning ‘those who distinguish (or separate) themselves as dedicated to God’. They believed in resurrection, the existence of angels, and the sanctification of life. They followed a strict way of life, practicing an abstinence from sexual relationships during certain times, fasting two days a week, washing their plates, pots, and cups according to certain rites, and like the scribes, offering tithes and firstfruits, and reciting certain prayers at certain times during the day¹.

(St. John of Damascus)

¹ on Heresies. 15.

“And he said to them: ‘Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing’” (Acts 5.35-36).

About Theudas we know nothing more than what came here. He is certainly another Theudas than the one false prophet, mentioned in ‘Josephus’¹, who rose up in the days of Fadus, the ruler of Judea in the days of Emperor Claudius (45 or 46 AD), who drew many people to follow him to the River Jordan, claiming that he would make them cross it as the children of Israel did in the days of Joshua. Fadus attacked them, killed many, and took Theudas to Jerusalem where he beheaded him. As that incident happened, ten or fifteen years, after the talk of Gamaliel that came here, Lightfoot believes that Josephus was mistaken concerning its date, and that Theudas here is the same one mentioned by Gamaliel.

Some believe that both the Evangelist St. Luke and Josephus are right, having been two particular Historians. The name Theudas was a common name at that time; and it is not unusual to have two persons who carried the same name, leading a revolt one after the other. Moreover, it is not possible for a well respected scholar such as Gamaliel to refer to such incident before the Sanhedrin, if it was not sure and commonly known to all its members.

It seems that revolts were often in the region of Judea, as mentioned by Josephus². As to saying, “claiming to be somebody”, it means claiming to be the expected Messiah.

“After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed” (Acts 5.37).

Judas of Galilee persuaded the people to refrain from paying taxes to the Romans, who crushed him together with those who followed him. A zealous group, who inherited his teachings, tried to entrap the Lord Christ, by asking Him about paying those taxes (Mark 12.13-17). They revolted afterwards against the Romans, who, led by ‘Titus’ entered Jerusalem, burned the temple, and scattered the Jewish people.

“And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God” (Acts 5.38-39).

The prominent teacher of the law advised the members of the Sanhedrin to let the apostles alone, presenting to them two practical examples, namely, the appearance of Theudas and Judas of Galilee, who were followed by many, but because their cause was not according to God’s thought, they failed. Gamaliel proclaimed in a hidden way the state of bankruptcy of the members of the Sanhedrin

¹ *Antiq. 20.5.*

² *Antiq. 17.10.4, 8.*

concerning the knowledge of God, and their intense failure to discern between the things that are according to God's thought, and those according to men.

When Herod Archelaus, one of the sons of Herod the Great, was fired as a Governor of Judea (Matt. 2.1, 22), the nation became under a Roman ruler. At that time, Judas of Galilee called the Jews to refrain from paying the taxes to the Romans, arousing the religious and national feelings of the people to a violent revolt. He proclaimed that God alone is the King of Israel, and He alone has the right to reign on it.

Josephus mentioned him and called him 'the Galilean'¹, and in another incident he referred him to the city of Gamala².

Josephus mentioned that the Roman ruler was Cyrenius, a senator who came to Syria to rule that nation. He was also appointed to rule Judaea beside Syria. He confiscated the wealth of Archelaus. Both Judas of Galilee, and Judas Saddock, a zealous Pharisee, proclaimed that paying the taxes is an entrance into servitude, and called on the people to defend their freedom. That revolt led to several other revolts, until the time came, and Titus the Roman destroyed the city, the temple, and the whole nation.

Anyhow, Gamaliel did not give the members of the Sanhedrin a chance to reconsider their past decision concerning the delivery of the Lord Christ to crucifixion. He did not call on them to seek the truth. But it is obvious that Gamaliel put in his heart, and embraced in his mind the probability that that movement of the apostles was of God, although it was just a thought, of which he was not yet completely convinced.

St. John Chrysostom says that what Gamaliel said was already proclaimed by the Lord Christ: "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3.27). Those people, Theudas and his followers, because what they received was from themselves, and not from heaven, were found to fight against God, and were scattered and perished. But that was not the case with Christ.

Gamaliel presented a sound counsel, full of wisdom, which is:

1- It is unwise to oppose the popular movement, as this would provoke people to stubbornness and not to think prudently.

2- Temporarily disregarding the matter would most probably terminate it.

3. 3- Faith in Jesus Christ does not necessitate hasty opposition, without deep study to see whether the matter was of God or of men.

4- He asked them to trust in God, the Keeper of faith, and the care-taker of His people. If the matter is left in His hands, He will certainly proclaim the truth.

5- He feared that if the members of the Sanhedrin unintentionally fell into opposing God Himself, their zeal would be in vain.

¹ *Antiq. 17.10.5.*

² *Antiq. 18.1.1.*

- ❖ "He would dissuade them both by the consideration that the thing is impossible, and because it is not for their good"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (Acts 5.40).

The devil blinded the eyes of the Judges of Israel from reconsidering the case of the Crucified Jesus Christ. They most probably, within themselves, felt, together with Gamaliel, that they were fighting God, opposing the truth, and rejecting salvation.

Anyhow, the members of the Sanhedrin got convinced of acquitting the apostles, yet the zeal in their hearts led them to beating them and commanding them not to speak in the name of Jesus. They partially followed Gamaliel’s advise, for fear that they may lose their dignity and authority before the people.

6- THE WORD OF GOD IS UNRESTRAINED

“So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5.41).

The members of the Sanhedrin assumed that the apostles would never dare to appear again before the people, after undergoing the shame of being beaten, as that was considered a disgrace against the humanity of man. Yet, as far as the apostles were concerned, they counted it rather as dignity and glory, because it implies a fellowship in the passion and crucifixion of the Lord Christ. The blood flowing from their bodies led them to sing: “For Your sake we are killed all day long” (Rom. 8.36). To be beaten was an insignificant tax for the sake of testifying to the truth.

The unbearable pains of beating turned into joy and a feeling of dignity in Jesus Christ. That was not a human reaction. It was the work of the Holy Spirit in them that allows the believers to drink from the same cup, received by the Son from His Father.

The disciples came out to preach the spiritual joy in the Lord: “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation” (Rom. 12.12).

- ❖ If the road is narrow and difficult, how said He, “My yoke is easy and My burden is light?” It could be difficult because of the nature of the temptations, yet easy, because of the content of the travelers. What seems unbearable according to nature could become easy when we accept it with joy. Remember that the apostles, who were beaten, departed rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of the name of the Lord².

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 14.*

² *on Lazarus and the Rich Man. 3.*

Why are the ministers of God still being insulted?

- 1- Because Jesus Christ, the subject of their preaching, is Himself despised and rejected.
- 2- Because His commandments oppose the pleasures and abominations of the world.
- 3- Some believe that the call of our heavenly Lord Jesus Christ lifts the heart and thought up to heaven, so they live as strangers on earth, not leading a realistic practical life. Therefore, they fail in life.
- 4- 1- The spirit of faith, love, humility, meekness, and giving contradicts the spirit of the world that of self pride, love of authority, and revenge.
- 5- The Christian faith is a call to the serious life, especially in worship, bearing the cross, Metaniahs, and vigilance.

Why did the apostles rejoice?

- 1- Because they became like our Lord Jesus Christ, beaten and insulted for the sake of love (Col. 1.24), as they partook of Christ's sufferings (1 pet. 4.13).
- 2- Because they counted their tribulations as a living testimony that they became Christ's disciples and beloved followers, who partake of His passion.
- 3- Because in them, what the Lord has already promised was realized.
- 4- Because their suffering was easy, when compared to the glory to be proclaimed in us.
- 5- Because nothing can put man to shame and brings him into disgrace like sin.

“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5.42).

The Holy Spirit turned the tribulations into joy in the Lord, according to the words: “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8.10). They gained strength and courage to testify to the truth every day in the temple, as well as in the houses. Their life became a continuous journey to teach and preach Jesus as a Christ.

They cared for teaching, as the books of the New Testament were written by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and for establishing the matters of worship and church ordinances. Some writings that go back to the era of the apostles were discovered, like the Didascalia, (which I already translated and commented on.)

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 5

LET MY WHOLE HEART BE DEDICATED TO YOU

- ❖ My soul trembles inside me, lest I bear the spirit of Ananias and Sapphira.
They sold a possession to offer its whole proceeds to You.
Although You were in no need of their money,
You counted what they offered as Your sanctity.
As they violated the money, they violated the sanctities.
They dropped dead physically, as a proclamation of their internal death.
- ❖ Here I am dedicating my whole life to You,
My soul and body with all their energies.
My talents and my time, and all what I have, are yours,
Grant me to be faithful.
Keep me from violating Your sanctities.
Let even my food, drink, and my sleep be for Your glory.
Let me bear Your sweet fragrance in me,
That defilement would have no place in me.
Sanctify me completely, and dedicate my whole heart to you, O Holy One.
- ❖ Let Ananias and Sapphira die in my heart.
Let Your holy fear be nailed in my depths,
That I become Your witness before everyone.
- ❖ Let Your Holy Spirit transform me,
To sanctify my whole being;
And to become a tool of righteousness to the account of Your kingdom.
Let the wicked, who work to the account of the kingdom of darkness, be worked up.
Corruption would be scattered before righteousness.
And darkness does not exist when there is light.
- ❖ You send Your angels to guard me,
And break the locks of the prison and the abyss.
You raise me up every day, as though from the grave.
You grant me the spirit of strength, to consummate Your will.
You turn my tribulations into a source of joy and rejoicing;
So my life turns into a testimony to Your divine work.

CHAPTER 6

Choosing SEVEN DEACONS

The first five chapters presented a living portrait of the Church of the New Testament in her early days; how the Holy Spirit of God led her in Jerusalem amid the persistent tribulations and persecutions, to grow and spread incessantly. Now, as the number of the disciples were multiplying greatly, there appeared to be two groups of them: a group of Hebrew origin, with a special regard to the law, the temple, and the Jewish rites; and another group, the ‘Hellenists, who spoke the Greek language and tended to liberate themselves of the literacy of the law and of submitting to the Jewish rites. Yet, this did not mean neither separation in worship among the two groups, nor any dissension or schism, as they all were connected to each other, in one Spirit, although each group worshipped with its own language.

Together with the increase in number and the spreading of ministry, certain inner problems and commitments surfaced up, which were beyond the apostles to cover, as they were primarily preoccupied by the ministry of preaching the word. Hence, there was a need to ordain the first group of deacons to take over those new responsibilities. Some may probably ask why that was not done directly after the day of the Pentecost. The answer is that the number of believers was then small; and the apostles and the disciples could easily fulfill the material needs of the people, out of the offerings of the believers. But the great and rapid increase in the number of believers brought the Church into new commitments and responsibilities. It was not possible then for the apostles to take care of them on the expense of preaching the word and the testimony to the Lord Christ.

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| 1- The Hellenists murmuring against the Hebrews | 1-4. |
| 2- Choosing seven deacons | 5-8. |
| 3- The ministry of the Archdeacon | 9-10. |
| 4- St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin | 11-15. |

1- THE HELLENISTS MURMURING AGAINST THE HEBREWS

“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6.1).

By the word ‘disciples’, the Evangelist St. Luke means the believers, and not the twelve disciples and the seventy apostles.

Who were those Hellenists? Different views were presented to define that category: Were they the Hebrews who lived among the Gentiles for a long time, then came back, having forgotten their original language along the generations? Or were they of Gentile origin, who accepted the Jewish faith (the Proselytes), then believed later in the Lord Christ? Or were they Gentiles who accepted the

Christian faith directly without passing through Judaism? Most scholars believe that their majority to be of the first category, namely, Hebrews who lived for long generations in countries that speak the Greek language, and adopted that language as their own. Among them were probably Gentiles who directly accepted the Christian faith, or became Jews first, then later believed in the Lord Christ, like Nicolas' a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6.5).

This shows that the Church in Jerusalem embraced Christians of Hebrew origin, who spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic, beside other members who came from countries of Greek culture and spoke in Greek (And most probably they did not know the Aramaic). Each of those two categories had its own culture, thoughts, customs, characteristics, and behavior. The majority of the former category was nationally and religiously superior; they were businessmen and landlords. Whereas the later group were culturally superior; they spoke the Greek language; they were coming back from the Diaspora and were living as foreigners in Jerusalem.

As those responsible for serving the widows and the needy were Hebrews, there was some kind of discrimination in dealing with the families of both categories that led to such murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. As the apostles had no time for investigating those material allegations, there appeared the need for ordaining deacons.

The apostles and even those responsible for the ministry certainly had no such favoritism, but the Hebrews, inhabitants of Jerusalem, in their zeal for their poor brethren, probably demonstrated greater effort and care for them. Some scholars believe that it was some kind of inner jealousy from the Hellenists against the Jewish Christians, who harbored a feeling of superiority, even after accepting the Christian faith, because of their reference to the fathers and the prophets and their privilege to enter the temple to worship.

The distribution had obviously been a daily affair; and the ministry to the widows had occupied a special place since the beginning of the Church.

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables’” (Acts 6.2).

The apostles felt that it was not desirable to be preoccupied by material matters, even if those were for serving the widows and the poor. Their pleasure was in the spreading of the word and in praying.

Although scourges, trials, and prisons could not deprive them of being dedicated to the word of God and the testimony to the gospel of Christ, they feared that other responsibilities would do. As preaching was their main mission, they would not allow the administrative or material matters of the Church, despite their importance that they counted as serving tables, to draw their hearts or time away from that task.

❖ "Then it was that they provided for the ordination of deacons, that they themselves might not be drawn aside from the duty of preaching the word"¹.

(St. Augustine)

¹ in *Joan. tr.* 109.5.

Preaching and serving tables

Here, we have to clarify the relationship between the ministry of the word (and prayers) and serving the tables. The apostles, even though they feared that the later ministry might distract them from their main task, that does not mean that they did not care for the material needs of the people. The two apostles Peter and John cared for the lame man from his mother's womb and healed him in the name of Christ, as they did not carry with them any of the believers' money that was cast at their feet (Acts 3). The apostle Paul cared for collecting donations for the sake of the poor of Jerusalem from many churches, and he even delivered those donations to Jerusalem himself. On the other hand, we find the Archdeacon Stephen, one of the seven chosen for the service of the tables, preaching the word and debating in the Synagogues of the Jews (Acts 6.9, 10); and he kept doing that until he was stoned.

Not only the ministers, but the regular members of the congregation as well, as they were scattered because of persecution, "*went everywhere preaching the word*" (Acts 8.4).

In other words, the ministry of the word and of preaching is not separate from that of serving tables, as preaching bears man's love for God the Savior, as well as for the world, the subject of salvation. In the service of tables, as well, man bears love for his needy or suffering brother, together with a living testimony of love for his salvation and his eternal glory.

The heart of a believer – a priest or a member of the congregation – is spacious by love for testifying and preaching, in one way or another, as well as spacious by love toward his needy brethren.

In an article on **the mission of the Christian**, **St. John Chrysostom** addressed the congregation saying:

[What a huge loss, O brethren, that few care for issues pertaining to salvation! A great part of the body of the Church is motionless like a dead body. You may probably say, "**What have we to do with this?**" Actually, you are responsible if you do not advise them, keep them away from evil, and draw them strongly here, from their slothfulness. Is it fitting for man to be of benefit just for himself alone, and not for many others as well?

The Lord Christ made this clear, when He called us "salt" (Matt. 13.33), and "light" (Matt. 5.14), as these things are of benefit both for us and for others as well.

A lamp does not illuminate for its own sake, but for that of those sitting in the dark. You are a lamp, not to enjoy your light alone, but to bring back someone who lost his way. **What is the benefit of a Christian who does not benefit others, or who does not bring someone back to virtue?**

"Salt" likewise does not benefit itself, but keeps food from corruption. ... So God made you a spiritual salt, to mend the corrupt members, the slothful brethren, to strengthen them, to save them from slothfulness as well as from corruption, and to bind them to the rest of the body of the Church.

That is why the Lord also called us "leaven", because leaven does not benefit itself, but, despite its tiny size, it can leaven the whole dough whatever its size may be. So are you, even if you

are few in number, yet you are many in faith and zeal toward God. As the leaven is not as weak, as its tiny size may suggest, it has incredible strength and capabilities by nature. ... So are you, if you will, are capable to draw more people than you are, to make them as zealous as you are].

“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business” (Acts 6.3).

The apostles gave the whole congregation (the multitude of the disciples) the right to choose with no interference on their part, “men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”, then recommend them to the apostles to set or ordain them.

Conditions of ordainment

1- The whole “multitude of disciples” would choose (Acts 6.2): Some scholars believe that the multitude here means both men and women, as all of them are responsible for the affairs of the Church. Designating a certain category to choose would be a sign of some weakness in shepherding. The blame for the inability of the congregation to choose ministers on the level of priests, deacons, or bishops, falls upon the Overseers, rather than upon the congregation.

The “multitude of disciples” also means that the choice should be impartial to the Hebrews or to the Hellenists. It should be from the congregation as a whole with no discrimination. Here, the apostles confirm their intention to be above any suspicion of interference, either direct or indirect.

2- A number of seven: That the deacons should minister on earth all the days of life (The seven days of the week), until the Lord Christ comes on the eighth day, to set forth with His Church to eternity.

3- Of good reputation among the whole congregation, as they would be working among the families and widows. The testimony of the congregation to those nominated for priesthood is most probably more accurate even than that of the clergymen themselves, as some people are double-faced: one before the clergymen, with signs of piety, holiness, and a dedication of the heart to worship and ministry; and another among the congregation in situations like weddings and funerals, or in their daily material dealings. That is why the apostles presented this general principle, that the whole congregation should take over the choice of the ministers or the clergymen, whatever their clerical levels are.

4- Full of the Holy Spirit, to work through them, to transform the service of tables into a spiritual ministry, as it is fitting for all their works to be sanctified.

Being full of the Holy Spirit does not mean to have the ability to do miracles or to speak with tongues, as their ministry among the believers does not require such abilities; but it rather requires pious people who walk with the Spirit of God.

5- Full of wisdom, to act with wisdom, to avoid extravagance, yet, at the same time, they should not be tight-handed in giving.

“**Wisdom**” is a feature required for every Christian, to carry out both his spiritual and material affairs, and required for deacons to fulfill the needs of the families with reason, both in giving and in saving.

- ❖ Indeed, the congregation should undergo the choice and the testimony themselves, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, But, as far as deciding the number, and the ordainment process are concerned, this is the apostles' job. The choice is left to the congregation, to avoid partiality and preference, as God left it to Moses to choose the elders according to his discretion (Num. 11.16).

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ They were sought out from among the congregation. See how the author avoided the unnecessary details, saying directly that they ordained them by praying, that is the meaning of the (xeirotomia): ordainment or ‘laying the hands’.

Although Man’s hand is laid on the person nominated, the whole work is done by God, whose hand is the one that touches the ordained, if the conditions of his nomination are soundly followed.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The twelve apostles set an important condition for the congregation in choosing the seven deacons, which is that they should be “*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*”, to undergo the daily service of tables, the ministry to widows and the needy. Here, we go back to the time of the prophet Moses, who was commanded by the Lord to set the tabernacle, according to the pattern which was shown to him on the mountain (Exod. 25.40): it should be a shadow of the heavenly dwelling. For that task, God called the name of Bezaleel the son of Uri of the tribe of Judah, and filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge (Exod. 31.1-2).

What God did in the Old Testament was a symbol of what should be realized in the Church of the New Testament. The chosen deacons, as well as the priests, the bishops, and all the ministers, should receive the call from God personally and should bow before Him, to fill them with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, to set, **not only a tabernacle, but a heavenly temple, built not of gold, silver, bronze, but of the souls of believers**, as the apostle Peter says, “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2.5).

The work of the deacon, appointed for the service of tables in the Church, does not stop at fulfilling the material, psychological, and social needs of the poor and the needy, but to set out of them a heavenly temple for the Lord, to be dwelt by His Holy Spirit. His work should not stop at taking the money cast at the feet of the apostles, and handing it over to the needy, but should extend to taking from the riches of the grace of God that is in him and pouring it in the hearts, by the Spirit of God dwelling in him and by the Lord Christ Himself, the Wisdom of God.

If that is the work of the deacon, how would be that of the priest or the bishop? It would be fitting for him, as an angel of the Lord, who bears a fellowship in the divine nature, and who sits

together with the apostle Paul in the heavenly places, to lift the hearts of those ministered up to heaven itself, for the Church to become indeed "the dwelling place of the angels" as we sing in the midnight praises, 'hail to the church, the dwelling place of the angels'.

This is the essential work, not only of a spiritual leader in the Church, but of every member in Christ's body, to bear the heavenly features, in order to draw every soul to heaven itself.

The deacons ministered to the widows, and here, the world is full of widows, I.E. souls that lost their heavenly Groom, to become in a state of spiritual widowhood, that can only be ministered by him who is full of God's Holy Spirit, who alone is able to take away the state of widowhood, through the transfiguration of the Groom, the wisdom of God, through His dwelling in the soul and its union with Him on an eternal level.

“But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6.4).

The apostles intended to keep themselves from being distracted from their main goal, to dedicate their whole life to both worship (praying) and preaching together, whether on the personal or the collective (Church level). They put prayer first, as without it, no preaching could be done collectively.

❖ It is fitting for them, not only to give themselves up to the work, but to do that continually¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. John Chrysostom presents the role of the congregation, of the apostles, and above all, of God, in the ordination of the deacons.

❖ "They separated them from the multitude, and it is the people that draw them, not the Apostles that lead them. Observe how he avoids all that is superfluous: he does not tell in what way it was done, but that they were ordained (exeirotqhhsan) with prayer: for this is the meaning of xeirotonia, (i.e. "putting forth the hand,") or ordination: the hand of the man is laid upon (the person,) but the whole work is of God, and it is His hand which touches the head of the one ordained"².

❖ St. Peter says, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word", So the apostles appear to be praying at the beginning and at the end, **As it is fitting for them, not only to pray**, when the circumstances are suitable, or in designated times, but continually and at all times.

(St. John Chrysostom)

When man dedicates his life to the Lord Christ, he becomes wholly blessed; **his soul and all his body members, his heart, mind, and all his energies become sanctified**, working to the account

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 14.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 14.

of the kingdom of God. If that is, as far as every believer is concerned, how could it be for the apostles and disciples, who receive special talents for ministry? That is why, we should not marvel that the Lord has used the hands of the apostles to ordain the deacons.

❖ Now, **the eyes are blessed** (Luke 10.23-24). But I assume that, accordingly and logically, all the other body members of the saints are also blessed, as it is said, “Blessed is the **womb** that bore You, and the **breasts** which nursed You” (Luke 11.27).

And how even **the feet** are welcomed of those by whom the good news are brought (Isa. 52.7).

Blessed are **the hands** lifted up as evening sacrifice (Ps. 141.2), Whose lifting up meant victory for Israel, and defeat for Amalek (Exod. 17.11).

Blessed is **the heart** out of which flow rivers of living waters for an eternal life (John 7.38).

Blessed are **the knees that bow** to the name of Jesus (Phil. 2.10).

Blessed is **the tongue** that confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2.11).

Blessed is the mouth that ministers to the word of God (Acts 6.4).

And blessed is **the nose**, for whose sake it is said: “We run after You to smell Your fragrance”¹.

(Scholar Origen)

The Holy Spirit instructs man to keep his whole body – from head to feet – in harmony:

To keep **the eyes** to see with purity;

To keep **the ears** to hearken with peace, to listen to things pertaining to peace, without enjoyment of the evil talks about the others;

To keep **the tongue**, to utter only good, giving weight to every word, and not allowing anything unclean or defiled to mingle with his talks;

To keep **the hands** to move naturally, to be lifted up to pray, and to do mercy and give abundantly;

To keep **the stomach**, to have proper limits for eating and drinking, according to what is enough for sustaining the body, not allowing the lust or greed to have the upper hand;

And to keep **the feet** to walk with righteousness according to the will of God, to do good works.

Thus, **the whole body** would get used to do good, to submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit, and to change gradually, until it ultimately partake – to a certain extent – of the features of the spiritual body, that man acquires in the just resurrection².

(St. Anthony the Great)

¹ Fragment 165 on Luke 10.23-24.

² Ep. 1.

2- CHOOSING SEVEN DEACONS

“And the saying pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch” (Acts 6.5).

- ❖ What was the rank and the level of those seven? What was their official job that they received from the apostles? Were they deacons? But this title was not known at that time in the Church. Was their job somewhat related to that of the priests? Up till then, there were no bishops, but only apostles. In my opinion, it is obvious that they were neither deacons nor priests; but they were ordained and appointed for that particular ministry; that is, serving the needs of the Church. That ministry was given to them after the apostles offered special prayers to God to provide them with strength.
- ❖ They were not just spiritual men; but they were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, because their ministry required a high level of prudence to solve the complaints of the widows. As what would be the use of having an honest minister who does not steal, yet, at the same time, would scatter the money, or deal roughly with people, and is easily aroused to anger?

(St. John Chrysostom)

The Evangelist St. Luke presented a list of the deacons, starting with St. Stephen, who according to the Church tradition, was the Archdeacon, and the Protomartyr. St. Luke presented a living portrait, not of his service of tables, but of his fiery testimony to the gospel of Christ before the Synagogues and the Sanhedrin.

The name ‘**Stephen**’ is a Greek name meaning (A crown of flowers). He was probably a Jew with Greek culture. (We shall make an account him at the end of this chapter and in the next one).

The next on the list is ‘**Philip**’, a Greek name meaning (Who loves horses). He is not Philip, one of the twelve apostles (Matt. 10.3). Philip the deacon was called ‘the preacher’. He preached the gospel in Samaria with great success (Acts 8.1-8, 21.8). Through him, Simon the Sorcerer believed (Acts 8.9-25). He was commanded by the Holy Spirit to go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he met an Ethiopian eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, whom he preached and baptized (Acts 8.26-39). He was then caught away by the Spirit to Azotus, and passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea (Acts 8.39-40). After several years, he played host to St. Paul, on his way to Rome, and had four virgin daughters who prophesied (Acts 21.8-9). Finally, he was ordained a bishop over Tralis.

The last on the deacons’ list is ‘**Nicolas**’, a Greek name meaning (the conqueror of people).

Some, like **St. Irenaeus and St. Epiphanius**, believe that the **heresy of the Nicolaitans** (Rev. 2.6, 15m) refers to that deacon ‘Nicolas’:

1- **St. Irenaeus** says¹ "The Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. [The Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolas, one of the seven deacons. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practise adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols."

2- **St. Clement of Alexandria and St. Augustine** clear Nicolas of that heresy, and refer it to his followers. Some explain the reference of that heresy to him to a misinterpretation of his words: [he with a wife is as though without], by which he meant that he lives with his wife with the Spirit, both preoccupied the more with their salvation, their spiritual growth, and testimony to the gospel of salvation. But some of his followers misinterpreted his words with the assumption that he proclaimed that, who has a wife, let him desert her, to become as though without one, allowing her to become available to everyone.

3- **The scholar Tertullian and St. Jerome** believe that once he was chosen for diaconry, he refrained from any contact with his wife; yet, because of her great beauty, he got back to her. And when he was rebuked for that, he diverted into that heresy which allows adultery. A reaction to that came in the writings of the scholar Tertullian: 'Omnia indiscreta apud nos praeter uopores', which means (We share everything between us except our wives)².

❖ Nicolas, one of the seven Deacons, and one whose lechery knew no rest by night or day, indulged in his filthy dreams"³.

(**St. Jerome**)

4- Some others believe that he was extremely jealous because of his wife's great beauty. When he was blamed for his exaggerated fondness of her, with the intention of showing otherwise, he allowed anyone to have her, falling in such horrible heresy.

The responsibility of Nicolas' divergence does not fall upon the saintly apostles. In a message addressed to Deacon Sabinianus, enticing him to repent, and not to depend on the fact that he was ordained by a holy bishop, **St. Jerome** says,

❖ "Have mercy I beseech you upon your soul. Consider that God's judgment will one day overtake you. Remember by what a bishop you were ordained. The holy man was mistaken in his choice; but this he might well be. For even God repented that he had anointed Saul to be king. (1 Sam. 15.11). Even among the twelve apostles Judas was found a traitor. And Nicolas of Antioch-a deacon like yourself (Acts 6.5) disseminated the Nicolaitan heresy and all manner of uncleanness (Rev. 2.6, 15)"⁴.

¹ *St. Irenaeus. Against Heresies. 26.2. CF. Fr. Hippolytus in his answer against heresies.*

² *1 Apology, ch. 39.*

³ *Dialogue against Luciferiaus, 23.*

⁴ *Letter 147 to Sabinianus, 4.*

(St. Jerome)

It is to be noticed that the seven bear Greek names; and they were probably chosen to show some compassion toward the murmuring Hellenists. Not a single one of them was a Jew by birth.

Because the twelve apostles were all Hebrews, those seven were chosen from the Hellenists to show some kind of equality and balance, and that all are committed to work.

It is obvious that the work of the seven did not last long. Following Stephen's martyrdom, a great affliction came upon the Church; and the congregation were scattered outside Jerusalem preaching the word, while the apostles stayed in Jerusalem.

“Whom they set before the apostles, and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them” (Acts 6.6).

The apostles prayed for those chosen ones to get filled with the Holy Spirit, to become capable of doing the work allotted to them and be successful in it according to the thought of God, not according to that of men. After praying, they laid hands on them, the ordination was realized by praying and laying the hand.

Laying the hand, called ‘Semoukha’, probably means (the chosen) in Hebrew. In the rites of sacrifices, the sinner used to put his hand on the head of the sacrifice before being slain, so that his sins would be transferred to it. In the sacrament of confession, the priest puts his hand on the head of the sinner, to give him the blessing and the work of the Holy Spirit, through the hand of Christ Himself. When the apostle Paul encountered the father of Publius, who was sick with a fever and dysentery, “He prayed and laid his hands on him and healed him” (Acts 28.8).

St. John Chrysostom believes that laying the hand here is to let the glorified Head of the Church work in them and pour on them the gifts of the Holy Spirit to realize their mission.

❖ "For all the miracles which they did He wrought in them, ***“And the hand of the Lord was with them”*** (Acts 11.21)¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6.7).

What an amazing portrait of the exalted goodness of God, who turns the outer afflictions and the inner troubles, into a continuous growth and edification of the Church. The murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews neither break the mentality of the apostles nor made them preoccupied with trying to find a solution for that problem on the expense of their main mission which is praying and preaching the word of God, But provoked them to ordain the seven deacons that in turn has resulted in such a growth of the Church.

¹ Homilies on St. John. Hom. 74.2.

Such is the goodness of God, who works in our life, to turn the bitterness into sweetness.

From our side, as love and wisdom together with honesty and clear goal reign on our life, no troubles or obstacles can hinder our path, or harm us, but would rather turn into an enjoyment of marvelous good things, and getting in touch with exalted works of God.

We should not disregard the spiritual Church atmosphere that turned the murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, not into more stubbornness, but into a serious and wise spiritual behavior, when the Jewish Christians chose the deacons from among the Hellenists, to give them peace of mind. Yet, that was not on the expense of the ministry, as they chose men of exalted spiritual stature. So that problem, mentioned in this chapter, and the way of solving it, will always remain a living example of how to deal with the future problems in the Church, with the spirit of love, wisdom, and truth.

St. Luke intended, through that episode, to demonstrate that the ordination of those ministers has given the chance to the twelve apostles to carry out their preaching work and their prayers, without being preoccupied with the material and administrative affairs of the congregation. This gave the Church an increasing growth that even a great number of Jewish priests were drawn to the Christian faith, with a spirit of submission and obedience.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the apostles managed to get into the heart of the temple itself, through the hearts of the priests, to set in them the kingdom of Christ. The acceptance of the Christian faith by many priests reveals the power of the gospel and its ability to draw the souls, even of those opposing it and to submit them to the obedience of faith. The priests were so serious in getting salvation that they did not preoccupy themselves with their prominent position in the Jewish society, preferring their enjoyment of God's grace among the simple common Christian congregation to their enjoyment of temporal dignities.

❖ "In Jerusalem the multitude increased. Wonderful, where Christ was slain, there the preaching increased! ... But remark, under what circumstances the multitude increased: after these trials, then it was that the multitude increased, and not before. Mark also how great the mercy of God"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ "Him therefore let us also imitate. He received them (His crucifiers), and did not cast them out. So let us requite those our enemies, who have wrought us even numberless ills. Whatever good thing we may have, let us impart to them: let us not pass them by, in our acts of beneficence. For if we ought, by suffering ill, to sate their rage, much more, by doing them good. ... This is the dignity of Christ's disciples.

I beseech you, let us be imitators of Christ: in this regard it is possible to imitate Him: this makes a man like unto God: this is more than human.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 14.*

Let us hold fast to Mercy: she is the schoolmistress and teacher of that higher Wisdom"¹.

(**St. John Chrysostom**)

St. Clement of Alexandria warns the Clergymen -bishops, priests, or deacons- against leaning upon their ordination and their priesthood status, as a source of justifying themselves.

- ❖ "Such a one is in reality a presbyter of the Church, and a true minister (deacon) of the will of God, if he do and teach what is the Lord's; not as being ordained by men, nor regarded righteous because a presbyter, but enrolled in the presbyterate because righteous. And although here upon earth he be not honored with the chief seat, he will sit down on the four-and-twenty thrones, judging the people, as John says in the Apocalypse"².

(**St. Clement of Alexandria**)

We should not forget here that the spreading of the word and the great increase of the number of believers was not based upon making signs and wonders, but rather upon the enjoyment of the Church of the spirit of love, wisdom, and mutual respect, not only between the Hebrews and the Hellenists, but also between the apostles and the people as a whole, as there is no range for the work of God's grace in the life of the believer, or in that of the Church, like the range of mutual love, shared by all the members.

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people"
(**Acts 6.8**).

He was "full of faith": full of confidence in the truthful promises of God. Being full of faith, he was also full of power, as faith is our enjoyment of God's power working in us. By faith we give our life or make ourselves "of no reputation", for Christ to dwell in us.

Having found comfort in Stephen, the Holy Spirit used him in every way to draw souls to faith. Although that great among the deacons was chosen to serve tables, his main role in this ministry was the salvation of souls. The Spirit granted him faith and power to do great wonders and signs, to draw souls to the heavenly table. As we shall see, St. Philip, the deacon and preacher, shared that same Spirit with St. Stephen, having likewise been preoccupied with the salvation of many.

St. John Chrysostom believes that St. Stephen concentrated on the ministry of the word, giving some of his fellow deacons the responsibility of serving the widows and the needy, based on the differences of gifts³.

- ❖ "See how even among the seven one was preeminent, and won the first prize. For though the ordination was common to him and them, yet he drew upon himself greater grace. And observe, how he wrought no (signs and wonders) before this time, but only when he became publicly known;

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 14.*

² *Stromata 6.13.*

³ *Hom. On Romans. Hom. 2.*

to show that grace alone is not sufficient, but there must be ordination also; so that there was a further access of the Spirit"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

3- THE MINISTRY OF THE ARCHDEACON

“Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyanians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen” (Acts 6.9).

We should not marvel that the revolt against Stephen started with the Hellenist Jews, or those with Greek culture, who then provoked the Sanhedrin against him. As Stephen has been before a member of one of those Synagogues, and now became, not only a believer, but also a leader, working to the account of the Church of Christ, his ex-fellow members could not bear that. It is also probable that Stephen, with his Greek culture, happened to encounter with some members of those Synagogues, on account of his culture, friendship, and his old membership, something that incited the members of those Synagogues, to gather together and to join forces to debate with the saint.

A Synagogue here in Hebrew is ‘beth-keneseth’, I.E., the house of the church, or the house of assembly, and in Aramaic ‘kenichta’, or the church, being the place of assembly for local worship that was confined to reading, interpreting, and teaching the Torath, but not to offering sacrifices. This became a nucleus for the Church of the New Testament that inherited even its very name.

There are various views of the word ‘Freedmen’, the most important of which are:

1- A Latin word that probably means someone who gained freedom from servitude. Many believe that they were slaves of Roman origin, then were set free, and became proselytes in the Jewish religion and had their own Synagogue in Jerusalem. Tacitus² mentions that in Rome, there were as many as 4000 of those Jewish Roman slaves, who were freed, and sent as one batch to Sardinia.

2- They were Jews by birth, captivated by the Romans, then set free, that is why they were called Freedmen. This undoubtedly applies to most of the Jews. When Pompeii submitted Judea, he sent great numbers of Jews to Rome³. When they got their freedom, they chose a location beyond the River Tiber to dwell there together. Many Jews as well were sent by Ptolomy I to Egypt, where they settled down.

3- Some believe that they were so named after a specific location, basing their view on the fact that the other Synagogues mentioned in the same phrase were referred to names of certain cities, like Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, etc. In one of the writings of the fathers, it came: Victor, Bishop of the Catholic Church of Libertina’, a city, not far from old Cartage, in North Africa.

Those Synagogues started to appear since the Babylonian captivity, so as not to deprive the people of reading, listening to, interpreting, and teaching the Torath. The number of those Synagogues,

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.*

² *Ann, lib. 2.2.85.*

³ *Philo. In Legat at Caium.*

in Jerusalem alone, according to the Talmud, reached 480, prior to the destruction of the temple and the evacuation of Jerusalem. Those Synagogues were named after the cities of origin, where people worshipped in their own languages.

The **Synagogue of the Freedmen** was one of the most important and **great of those Synagogues**, where worship was conducted in Latin. That of the Cyrenians, on the other hand, embraced those who came from Cyrene in Libya.

Some believe that St. Stephen had been a member of the **Alexandrian Synagogue**. Such view is based on the wisdom by which he was known, just like Apollos the Alexandrian Jew. **Josephus**¹ says that Alexander the Great, himself, allotted a quarter in Alexandria for the Jews and gave them the same privileges he gave to the Greeks. On the other hand, Philo confirms that out of five quarters of Alexandria, two were allotted to the Jews, which indicates that the number of Jews in Egypt was not less than one million at that time.

Cilicia was a province in Asia Minor on the sea coast, north of Cyprus. Its capital was Tarsus. Saul was a member of the **Synagogue of those who came from Cilicia**, as he came from Tarsus the capital of Cilicia. He probably was the chief disputant of Stephen (See Acts 7.58).

The word '*dispute*' here does not refer to an angry debate, but to search for the truth. A subject of that dispute was: Is Jesus the anticipated Messiah? But that amiable atmosphere might have taken a violent trend among the Synagogues' members, when Stephen got the upper hand in them.

Stephen incited all those synagogues with his views, full of power, and wisdom, by which he intended for them to be enlightened by the Spirit and to realize the truth of faith in the Lord Christ.

“And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke” (Acts 6.10).

His talk was so full of grace and wisdom by the Holy Spirit, that they were not able to oppose. When he asked, they had no answer; and when they ask, they find in his answer a Spirit of truth that could not be opposed. Despite their rejection of the faith, they felt weakness and defeat. They assumed that, by joining forces together, by their capabilities, talents, and knowledge, they would be able to overcome him, but they did not realize that they were not disputing with Stephen personally, but with the Spirit of God in him. The two sides of disputants were far from equal.

The word "*Spirit*" here refers to the power, to the energy, or to the zeal of Stephen.

Having been a Jew who was raised outside Judea, and with Greek education and culture, he was a Philosopher full of wisdom. His wisdom was sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit that made him convincing and full of grace, together with peace of Spirit, and an ability of doing signs and wonders. That is why those Synagogues "were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke".

4- STEPHEN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

¹ *Antiq. 12.7, 2; Against Apion 2.4.*

“Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God’ (Acts 6.11).

They realized the danger of Stephen’s preaching on the law, having been preparing the listeners to be liberated from its literality, to practice it spiritually. This, according to them, constituted a blasphemy against the law.

As to their charge against him of blasphemy against God, this was based upon his preaching the Person of the crucified Jesus, as the Word of God, the One and equal to God the Father. This according to them is blasphemy.

“And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council” (Acts 6.12).

Whenever the Jews felt unable to resist the truth, they used to induce false witnesses to claim that a certain person speaks blasphemous words against Moses, the law, the temple, or against God, in order to cut him off from the people of God (Num. 15.30), and to have him stoned.

The Lord Christ Himself was accused of blasphemy, and now here is Stephen, to be followed later by the apostle Paul (Acts 1.27-28).

Why were they particularly stirred up against Stephen more than against the rest of the apostles?

1- Some think that they did not care much for the apostles, having been a bunch of illiterate Galileans. They thought themselves of a much higher level, to dispute with them, while Stephen was an educated person.

2- Others assume that they were intimidated by the apostles, especially after what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, and the episode of their getting out of prison by the angel of the Lord.

3- Still others believe that the apostles, who spread the word of God in a simple way, chose Stephen, as an educated man to enter into debates against the opponents. He was qualified for this task, especially that some of them claim that he was taught at the feet of Gamaliel, like Saul of Tarsus, and was accordingly capable of disputing with them on the same level.

4- As the apostles used to speak about Moses, the law, and the temple, with due respect, shared with the Jews their worship in the temple, and partook of their feasts, yet without offering bloody sacrifices, they “had favor with all the people” (Acts 2.47). But there was now a need for the appearance of Stephen in Jerusalem, to proclaim, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the setting forth of the Church of the New Testament, from the deadly letter and the narrow Jewish concepts gradually to the freedom of the children of God, that the door of faith would be opened before the Gentiles, to be no more committed to the literacy of the law. And as Peter the apostle of the circumcision said in the first Council of Jerusalem, “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15.10)?

The apostle Peter was probably wrestling between his commitment to the yoke of the law, to gain the Jews to faith, and his wish to set himself free from it to gain the Gentiles. According to the apostle Paul: “ when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed, for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles, but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2.11-13).

“They also set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law’” (Acts 6.13).

There was no way to have Stephen stoned, except by stirring up the people, by claiming that he threatened the destruction of the temple, the highest symbol of the whole nation and its glory, that expressed the legacy of the people since their exodus from Egypt. It was one of the wonders of the world, and, in their sight, the holiest place in the whole world that represented heaven itself.

Stephen’s speech actually was a testimony to the glory of God and His work in the life of Abraham, the father of fathers, and of the prophet Moses. In it as well, was reverence to the temple that David, the king and prophet, yearned to build, but was built by his son Solomon. Despite all that, and because they felt the danger of Stephen’s presence, they set up false witnesses, in order to get rid of him.

Those literal people had neither realized the truth, nor come in touch with the power of the Spirit, to see that what Stephen preached was actually the goal of Moses and the law; that what is set inside the soul is the temple of the Holy Spirit; that the cross has consummated the temporary goal of the animal sacrifices; that Baptism is the circumcision of the Spirit and the heart, and not that of the flesh; and that the presence of the Lord Christ in the middle of His Church is the incessant feast.

“For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6.14).

The charges were very serious, as, because it included a true part, and another false, it made the defense difficult. The same charge was addressed to the Lord Christ during His trial, to which he gave no answer (Mark 14.56-60), not because he was unable to, but because the charge was false, as He did not say that He would destroy the temple, but said, “You destroy”. He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it, and not to destroy the temple, but, as they destroy it by condemning Him to death (I.E., destroying the temple of His body), He would raise it up by His divine power.

Although He has indeed proclaimed the destruction of the temple, He did not say that He would be the One to destroy it, but, through rejecting faith in Him, their house would be destroyed.

- ❖ "Here we have a great multitude. And observe the difference in the form of accusation: for since Gamaliel had stopped them from finding fault on the former plea, they bring in another charge"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel” (Acts 6.15).

Having concentrated on the Person of Christ, disregarding the opposition of the wicked, the Lord’s splendor reflected upon Stephen, and his face became as the face of an angel. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, the skin of his face shone that the children of Israel feared to come near him (Exod. 34.29-30; 2 Cor. 3.7, 13). The believer, serious in his spiritual life, as he enjoys grace over grace and bears the fruit of the Spirit, of love, joy, peace, etc, his features bear a living portrait of the peace of the Spirit in him, to sing together with the apostle, “He made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2.6).

Stephen testified by his behavior, as well as by his words, and ultimately by the shining of the Lord’s glory on him, as St. Paul says, “We all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image” (2 Cor. 3.18).

All those present, including the chief priest and those around him, saw that magnificent scene, yet, as the eyes of their hearts were sealed against beholding the truth, and the love of vain glory and wealth corrupted their insight, the shining face of Stephen became a witness against them.

St. Jerome believes that the splendor of Stephen’s face is a kind of an advance payment of the eternal glory, in which a believer grows here and enjoys glory after glory (2 Cor. 3.18).

- ❖ "For this refers to the glory which is then to be revealed (1 Pet. 5.1) to His saints; just as also in another place we read the words "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3.18), of which glory the saints have even in this world received an earnest and a small portion. At their head stands Moses, whose face shone exceedingly, and was bright with the brightness of the sun. (Exod. 34.20; 2 Cor. 3.7), Next to him comes Elijah, who was caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire, (2 Kings 2.11), and did not feel the effects of the flame. Stephen, too, when he was being stoned, had the face of an angel visible to all (Acts 6.15) "².

(St. Jerome)

He has been charged by blasphemy against the law and the customs delivered by Moses, whom they honored, whose face also shone, as it came in (Exod. 34.35), as a sign of the grace of God dwelling upon him. Yet God Himself who granted Moses that grace has granted it also to Stephen, whose face shone as the face of an angel. If it was true that he blasphemed against Moses, God would never have granted him that same gift.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.*

² *Letter LI. From Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, in Cyprus, to John, Bishop of Jerusalem.*

❖ "For there are, yes, there are faces full-fraught with spiritual grace, lovely to them that love, awful to haters and enemies"¹.

❖ As that man was falsely charged, his features defended him before all people².

(**St. John Chrysostom**)

In his speech about the resurrected body, the **scholar Tertullian** says³ that The change of something does not mean its perdition, as for example Moses' face which shone (Exod. 34.29, 35), yet remained as it was, despite its splendor that made everyone unable to look at it. So also the appearance of Stephen as that of an angel, although it was the same it used to be, yet that did not save Stephen of being stoned.

St. Stephen with his heavenly features presented an evangelic thought to Saul, having preached to him in truth that faith in the Lord Christ is a true invitation to enjoy the royal heavenly life. This lesson became a main line in the life of St. Paul, to be felt beyond his writings.

❖ I wish you always set your minds on these things (Col. 3.1), as this would set us free from the earth and bring us up to heaven⁴. (**St. John Chrysostom**)

❖ There would be no entrance into that land (the land of the light of light and the world of eternity) to him who does not experience it from now.

He would not get into it, he who does not tread through it here, as the eye of his insight would suffer a cloud that interferes with his enjoyment of that light. Once the sun of this world sets before his eyes, he would forsake his inheritance, and depart to encounter the great sun, the light of the exalted worlds⁵.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.*

³ *on the Resurrection of the Flesh, 55.*

⁴ *Baptismal Instructions, 7.14.*

⁵ *The Spiritual Elder. Ep. 3.1. CF. the Epitaphs of Fr. Selim Dekash, the Jesuit. Elshrouq Printing House: Beirut, and the book of the Spiritual Elder: the Coptic Printing House, 1952 (taken from a manuscript found in Elmoharaq Monastery).*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 6

SANCTIFY, O LORD, THE TABLE MINISTRY

- ❖ How amazing You are in Your love!
You, who satisfy the souls and bodies.
Not wishing to let the multitudes go hungry,
You stretched Your hand, to let Your disciples offer an abundance of food.
All were satisfied, and an abundance of leftovers remained.
- ❖ Now, Your disciples bear Your Spirit;
And Your Church cares for the needs of Your children.
The apostles, to concentrate on praying and preaching the word,
Chose deacons for the table ministry.
Grant Your priests the spirit of exalted fatherhood.
Together with preaching the word, they also preach practical love.
And together with their yearning to save,
They also yearn to edify everyone, spiritually, physically, and socially.
- ❖ Also grant our people the spirit of testimony to Your gospel.
Together with their love to fulfill the needs of the poor,
They would not stop praying and striving for the salvation of the world,
For every believer to testify to Your joyful gospel,
And yearn to the edification of the whole world by Your Holy Spirit.
- ❖ How amazing! The table ministers are full of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom.
The Archdeacon never stopped testifying to You.
With courage he entered the Synagogues to debate with them with love.
With courage he faced the forces of darkness.
The features of his face muted the tongues of those who charged him.
His face shone with an amazing splendor.
All saw his face as the face of an angel.
- ❖ How amazing! He offered spiritual food to the hungry.
To the non-believers, he offered the word of truth.
And to the men of darkness, he offered a heavenly light.
- ❖ Let me become like Your deacons, full of Spirit and wisdom,
To acquire You, O Wisdom of God,
Not to suffer the bitterness of inner widowhood,

But always enjoy an incessant heavenly spiritual wedding,
To consummate my joy, as many are drawn to You,
Not one single widow,
As all unite to you.
You alone, work in and by me,
For the sake of the enjoyment of humanity of the eternal wedding.

CHAPTER 7

ST. STEPHEN'S ADDRESS

St. Stephen's address was neither to defend himself, nor the Christian faith, but he found it a convenient opportunity to stand before the chief priest and some rulers and Jewish leaders, to present to them a true Scriptural invitation to enjoy the living faith. He addressed them from the Scripture, as though the Holy Book was open before him. He uttered by the Holy Spirit, to give new concepts for the Scriptures that concern the people of God. Having been a Hellenist Jew, he quoted gospel verses from the Septuagint Version, in a first class preaching address.

St. Stephen set the living spiritual Theological foundation for the people of the Church later on. What preoccupied the defender was not to defend the Lord Christ and His Church, because the Lord is capable of defending Himself and His Church, But he bears a spacious heart to reveal the evangelic truth to the oppressors, to make them, together with him, convinced by the glorified work of salvation.

St. Stephen presented a magnificent parade of the Old Testament as a whole, to demonstrate that the faith in the Lord Christ is the goal of the law, the prophets, and all the books of the Old Testament.

The saint did not address them as an accused defending himself, but as though he was in a position of strength, to let those present reconsider themselves, their concepts, the hardness of their hearts, and their uncircumcised ears, in order not to appear as opponents to the Holy Spirit like their fathers (Acts 7.51).

He invited them to lift themselves up together with him, as though to heaven, to see by a spiritual eye, the law, the prophets, the temple, and all the rites of worship, to see in Jesus Christ, the origin of history, and the source of salvation, so as not to fill up the measure of their fathers, the opponents of the divine truth.

If this speech is addressed to the Jewish leaderships, full of hatred toward Jesus the Lord of glory and His Church, it is also indirectly addressed to the believers of Jewish origin, who were still unable to set themselves free of the literality of the law and the Jewish rites. It was a speech that he gave during the last moments of his life on earth, to correct the path of the Church of the circumcised, not to be preoccupied by the letter of the law, and not to be attached to the temple of Jerusalem.

1- The Lord of glory appearing to Abraham in a heathen land

1 – 10

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| 2- Jacob, father of the tribes, going down to Egypt | 11 19 |
| 3- Moses brought up in Pharaoh's palace. | 20 – 29 |
| 4- The burning bush and the holy ground | 30 – 36 |
| 5- Their fathers' opposition to Moses | 37 – 43 |
| 6- The tabernacle of witness in the wilderness | 44 – 45 |

- 7- God does not dwell in temples made with hands 46 – 50
- 8- Their fathers persecuted the prophets, and did not keep the law
51 – 53
- 9- The open heaven 54 – 56
- 10- The martyrdom of Stephen 57-60.

1- THE LORD OF GLORY APPEARING TO ABRAHAM IN A HEATHEN LAND

“Then the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’” (Acts 7.1).

The high priest demonstrated some kind of justice, in giving the chance to Stephen to defend himself against the accusations directed to him. He probably expected the saint to use that chance to reconsider his thoughts to avoid death by stoning.

Caiaphas the high priest, in his authority as the head of the Sanhedrin, asked the accused about the charges directed against him, concerning the destruction of the temple, and the opposition to the law. He probably wished to catch out of his mouth a word that would justify the previous verdict by the Sanhedrin against Jesus, condemning Him to death. He probably wished for something to keep the people from protesting against the crucifixion of Jesus and the stoning of Stephen.

The question of the chief priest meant: “Having heard the charges directed against you, Are you guilty or not?” St. Stephen responded by a prolonged defense, characterized by the following:

- 1- His answer concentrated directly on the points of accusation in a clearly defined way.
- 2- His defense revealed his deep knowledge of the Scriptures and the Jewish tradition.
- 3- What he believed in and preached was but a living and a spiritual extension of the path of the fathers, and the history of salvation that goes according to God’s plan, as proclaimed by the fathers and the prophets.

4- Intending to answer their accusations, he paraded their history from the beginning, revealing God’s exalted compassion in His relationship with His people, and how the people reacted to that divine love with persistent denial and murmur along the generations. Having consummated the cup of their evil, they brought themselves down under the fruit of the rebellion, and deprived themselves of God’s mercies.

5- Going through the Holy Books, he clarified that God’s Church or God’s people did not start with the Hebrews or the land of Canaan, but He had faithful believers in other regions before the building of the temple. It is therefore not strange to seek for Himself a people in the world as a whole.

“And he said, ‘Men and brethren and fathers, listen: the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran’” (Acts 7.2).

Despite the intense hatred they had shown, Stephen showed them great compassion, and addressed them with respect and reverence, yet with no hypocrisy. He spoke to them as one of their own, calling them ‘Brethren and fathers’.

Stephen's address came as a historical record, with a deep Theological concept that bears a testimony to the Lord Christ and His gospel, and not a defense of himself. He divided his defense into three stages:

The first stage: The time of the Patriarch [2 to 16].

The second stage: The time of Moses and the prophets [17 to 43].

The third stage: Between the tabernacle and the temple [44 to 50].

In this record, he demonstrated the following facts:

1- God blessed their fathers when they were not in Palestine or Canaan, in particular Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

2- The people of Israel were not bound, throughout history, to worshipping in the temple, until the time of Solomon.

3- Even after the temple was built, it did not keep Israel from rebelling against God.

It is as though Stephen intended to confirm that there is what is greater than the earthly Canaan, and the temple of Jerusalem; that is, the enjoyment of reconciliation with God, through the promised Messiah.

"Men and brethren and fathers": He addressed the elders of the congregation as brethren, and the priests and the chief priest as fathers.

"Listen": He speaks with the spirit of strength, proclaiming the word of God, to which they should listen.

"The God of glory": so he called God, to confirm that he is no blasphemer as they claimed.

He started by the call to Abraham to get out of Ur the land of the Chaldeans, to be dedicated to God, qualified to gain the divine promises and to become a father of men of the Old Testament. **"When he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran"**: as God wishes to encounter the believers wherever they are. He did not appear to Abraham in Jerusalem, in the tabernacle, or in the temple, but in Mesopotamia, in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 15.7, 11.31-32; Neh. 9.7).

Here he calls God **"The God of glory"**. If Moses' face shone through the reflection of God's glory on it, The God of glory also shone on Abraham, the father of fathers, before the provision of the law, in a heathen land. He then shone with His glory on Moses the Recipient of the law, and then, it shone on Stephen in the era of grace. God is as He always is, yesterday, today, and forever, who desires to shine with His glory in all eras, and on all mankind. He does not limit Himself to a certain place or to a certain people.

❖ "Both the temple was not, and sacrifice was not, and yet a vision of God was vouchsafed to Abraham, and yet had he Persians for his ancestors, and was in a strange land. And he does well at the beginning of his speech to call Him, "the God of glory:" seeing that He has made them that are without honor to be glorious. "Because" (says he) "it was He that made them glorious, He will make us also." Observe how he leads them away from things of the body, from the place, in the first

instance, as the place was in question. "The God of glory," says he: implying again, that He needs not the glory which comes from us, which comes by the Temple: for Himself is the Fountain thereof. Think not, he would say, in this way to glorify Him"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

God's call to Abraham came when he was among the heathens in Ur of the Chaldeans before departing to the Promised Land. The divine call was to go first to Haran, to dwell for some time, and from there to go to Canaan or Palestine.

He did not say "He came to this land in which you now dwell", but said, "And from there, He moved him to this land", As though God set forth, carrying him on His arms, from Haran to the Promised Land. It was a divine gift and a divine promise executed by God Himself.

God, who carried Abraham to this land, because of his practical faith and obedience, is He, who expels now his children through their lack of faith and their rebellion. Stephen, as a son of Abraham, by faith enjoyed the heavenly Canaan, whereas the opponents of faith would be expelled from the earthly Canaan, as well as the heavenly one, even though they considered themselves children of Abraham.

"And said to him, 'Get out of your country and your relatives, and come to the land that I will show you'" (Acts 7.3).

Abraham presented the strongest example of faith (Heb. 11.8-9), a living portrait of the simplicity of trust in God. If Abraham, in faith, got out of his country, his relatives, and his father's house, to set forth to somewhere of which he knew nothing, It was fitting for the children of Abraham not to connect to a temporal thing in a literal way, as for instance the flesh reference to Abraham, the practice of Jewish customs, or being proud of the building of the temple.

Abraham got out to go to some land he knew nothing about its nature, nor the nature of its inhabitants, with no army or weapons to support him, other than "the divine promise".

St. Stephen used God's call to Abraham to obey Him, and to get out of his land, his relatives, and his father's house, as though to say to them, 'You are not like your father Abraham, as instead of obedience, ***"you resist the Holy Spirit"*** (Acts 7.51).

"Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell" (Acts 7.4).

If God has called Abraham, the father of believers, to get out from Ur of the Chaldeans "Mesopotamia" to Haran, then to Canaan, And Abraham was obedient to God's call, It is fitting for us not to hold fast to a certain land, but to submit ourselves to God, our leader, to move us wherever He will, and not according to our human mind.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.

It is fitting for us, as children of Abraham, to enter into a covenant with God, to soar up, together with Him, above the world and to live by faith in obedience to God, to enjoy the encounter with the God of glory.

The saint showed that Abraham did not move from Haran to the Promised Land, **before the death of his father** in Haran, as **though Abraham's movements were not according to those of his family, but according to God's plan concerning him personally**. It is as though Stephen was calling them as well to move, not according to what their fathers gained, I.E., their connection to Canaan, but according to God's plan for salvation in the whole world.

Abraham was an obedient tool in God's hand. He moved him *"to this land in which you dwell"*. He did not say, 'the land that you possessed or inherited. For having killed the Son of the Owner of the vine, the only true Heir, they became prone to expulsion from the vine, that it would be given to the believers of the New Testament, as the Lord Christ has already proclaimed.

"And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him" (Acts 7.5).

It is not counted as blasphemy, if the Lord Christ proclaimed the destruction of this location, to lead us to the heavenly Canaan, But it is a divine movement, as a consummation of His plan in moving Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran, then to Canaan, bringing his descendants under bondage in the land of Egypt, then calling them to go to Canaan. Now, the Savior commands us to get away from the literal connection to Canaan, to cross over to the heavenly Canaan.

Abraham lived a sojourner, as though he had no permanent place to dwell and settle down. He possessed nothing but a burial place, the price of which he insisted on paying, to bury in it his wife Sarah (Gen. 23) that he purchased by his own money and did not get through a promise from God, yet God gave him favor in the sight of the sons of Heth.

Because his descendants inherited the land, it was counted as his possession, as what the son gets, the loving father counts as though enjoyed by him personally.

Although he got the promise that his descendants would inherit it, when he was an old man, with a barren wife, he believed that promise, that was eventually completely realized.

Abraham's blessing was not that the land promised would be the inheritance of his descendants, but in the divine promise itself. Abraham did not get in the land of Canaan, even enough to set his foot on, but he was promised to possess it, and his descendants after him. Abraham got it by faith and gave it to his son Isaac, whom he offered a sacrifice to God. The inheritance was based upon faith, like that of Abraham, and by the giving obedience to God, like that of Isaac. It was a conditional inheritance: "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 1.19-20).

- ❖ "See how he raises their thoughts away from (their possession of) the land. For he (Abraham) came, having left both kindred and country. Wherefore then did He not give it to him? Truly it was a figure of another land"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would sojourn in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years” (Acts 7.6).

For Abraham’s descendants to enjoy the inheritance, they first had to endure sojourning, and experience bondage, in order to long for freedom, and know the value of the free inheritance.

Stephen reminds them of the sojourn of Abraham’s descendants four centuries in the land of Egypt, before their exodus to the wilderness, to head toward the Promised Land. He mentioned 400 years as an approximation to 430, as it came in (Gal. 3.17). God’s plan for salvation seems slow and not hastened, having left the descendants of Jacob 400 years in their sojourn in the land of Egypt, yet it was intact, secure, and sure.

The scholar Tertullian believes that the law delivered to Moses was God’s law that was there before Moses, and that it opens the gate of faith before the Gentiles, having prophesied it.

- ❖ "Whence we understand that God's law was anterior even to Moses, and was not first (given) in Horeb, nor in Sinai and in the desert, but was more ancient; (existing) first in paradise, subsequently reformed for the patriarchs, and so again for the Jews, at definite periods"².

(The Scholar Tertullian)

“And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge’, said God, ‘And after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place” (Acts 7.7).

God allowed for Abraham’s descendants to be brought into bondage to enjoy the inheritance. Pharaoh and his army, who exalted himself above God and His people, would fall under judgment and perdition; whereas, the people of God would come out to worship God.

- ❖ "He, the same that promised, He that gave the land, first permits the evils. So also now, though He has promised a Kingdom, yet He suffers us to be exercised in temptations. If here the freedom was not to be till after four hundred years, what wonder, with regard to the Kingdom? Yet he performed it, and lapse of time availed not to falsify His word"³.
- ❖ "That God is rich in ways and means to bring us up from hence. For this above all showed the riches of God's resources, that in its very reverses (apostrofh) the nation increased, while enslaved, while evil-entreated, and sought to be exterminated. And this is the greatness of the Promise. For had it

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 15.

² Answer to the Jews, 2.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

increased in its own land, it had not been so wonderful. And besides, it was not for a short time, either, that they were in the strange land: but for four hundred years. Hence we learn a (great lesson) of philosophic endurance (filosofian):-they did not treat them as masters use slaves, but as enemies and tyrants-and he foretold that they should be set in great liberty: for this is the meaning of that expression, "They shall come out and serve Me in this place" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision, and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs" (Acts 7.8).

If the Jews accused St. Stephen of blasphemy against God and Moses, and of the intention to change their customs, their father Abraham got the divine promise even before getting the commandment of circumcision, considered by the Jews to be the backbone of the Jewish customs. Abraham was justified by faith, even before he was circumcised. God gave Abraham no other commandment, except "the covenant of circumcision". Although we hear nothing about one for keeping the Sabbath, the statutes of purification, or about setting a special sanctuary for God "a tabernacle of meeting or a temple", Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were counted as God's beloved. Even after their departure, the name of God remained "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob".

Thus, St. Stephen intended to draw their hearts to the divine commandment or the divine covenant, which is the circumcision of the heart and the ears.

"And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him". (Acts 7.9).

St. Stephen tells them that what they embraced of evil jealousy and envy was not something new, but is as old as man himself. At the beginning of the creation of man, death came to Adam and Eve by the envy of the devil. With the beginning of setting the people of God, the patriarchs, the sons of Jacob delivered their brother Joseph through envy. When our Lord Jesus Christ came the rulers delivered Him to death through envy. And then, St. Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, the grandchildren of the Patriarchs, seeking his death through envy.

❖ Beloved brother, Your envy against what is good, and your jealousy against those who are better than you may probably seem to some as something of little or of no value, and not a big deal. Taking it lightly makes this dark and hidden harm difficult to avoid. Not realizing that it should be avoided by a prudent man makes it infiltrate secretly into the unaware mind, and make it distorted.

The Lord commanded us to be prudent, and to watch carefully, lest this enemy, always vigilant, would infiltrate into our hearts, ignite fires out of sparks, and make the little matters big. While we

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

carelessly breathe the soft and gentle breeze, storms and hurricanes blow, to corrupt faith, and to destroy salvation and life.

That is why, beloved brother, we should be careful, armed with strength, and prudently vigilant, to drive out the violent enemy that aims his arrows to every exposed and vulnerable part of our body, according to the warning of the apostle Peter: “Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5.8).

In all examples, harm would come to the envious, but God would be with the one whom he envies.

- ❖ If man looks carefully to the (arrows of envy), he would find out that there is nothing worse than being taken captive by envy. Whoever falls into the hidden traps of that evil enemy would go from envy to hatred, to unconsciously perish by his own sword.
- ❖ When the extremities are wounded by the sword, the harm would be limited, and the danger simple. Healing would be possible as long as the wound is visible, and the medication applied. A seen ulcer is easy to cure, while the wounds of the envious are invisible and incurable. They embrace pains deeply hidden inside the depths of the conscience.
- ❖ Since the beginning of creation, Satan was the first to bring perdition upon himself and others. He was broken by jealousy, envy, and hatred, he who, in his previous angelic greatness, was once accepted and beloved by God.

He did not shoot the others with the instinct of jealousy, before shooting himself with it; with captivity, before getting himself captivated; and with destruction, before being destroyed himself. Through enticing man with envy, he led him to loosing the grace of eternity granted to him, after he himself (Satan) had already lost his.

What a great evil, O beloved brethren! Envy has caused the angel to fall, and wiped out a great and splendid glory. By which he deceived others, he had been deceived.

(Martyr Cyprian)

“And delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house” (Acts 7.10).

While the patriarchs of the tribes sold their brother as a slave to get rid of him, God delivered him out of all his troubles, gave him grace and wisdom, and granted him glory in the land of Egypt. The (rulers’) opposition did not shake Joseph’s person, but turned out for his glory. It is as though Stephen was warning them against opposing him in the divine truth, as that would certainly end up to the glory to God, and that of His faithful servant.

- ❖ "And he shows, that the saints were not exempt from tribulation, but that in their very tribulations they obtained help. ... Just as these made Joseph the more glorious: just as the king did Moses, by ordering the children to be killed: since had he not ordered, this would not have been: just as also that

drives Moses into exile, that there he may have the Vision, having become worthy. Thus also him, who was sold for a slave, makes He to reign as king there, where he was thought to be a slave. Thus also does Christ in His death give proof of His power: thus also does He there reign as king where they sold Him"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

What Joseph enjoyed was but a free gift from God, having been granted favor in the sight of many, as well as the wisdom, to interpret the dreams of those in the prison and of Pharaoh (Gen. 41).

2- JACOB, FATHER OF THE TRIBES, GOING DOWN TO EGYPT

“Now a famine and great trouble came over the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance” (Acts 7.11).

Famine came over the land of Egypt and Canaan (Gen. 41.54), And Jacob, the eleven patriarchs and their families in Canaan were not saved by being in that location (Canaan), but were saved by God through Joseph, who was in Egypt.

“And when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first” (Acts 7.12).

Notice the wisdom of St. Stephen, as he calls the eleven sons of Jacob, “our fathers”, counting the patriarchs as fathers of the Christian believers. On the other hand, by reciting a history that the prophet Moses had included in his books of the law, he confirms his acceptance of these books, and his confidence in what Moses wrote with the inspiration of God.

“And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh” (Acts 7.13).

The second time, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers (Gen. 45.4), and introduced them to Pharaoh (Gen. 45.16).

“Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people” (Acts 7.14).

St. John Chrysostom believes that what the fathers of the tribes had done with their brother Joseph was a symbolic prophecy of what was realized concerning the Lord Christ by the Sanhedrin. Joseph bore for his brothers friendship and care; even after their envy and selling him as a slave, He did not forsake them, but introduced them to Pharaoh and helped them. What a marvelous portrait of pure love, presented by St. Stephen, as though he is proclaiming to his adversaries that despite what they did to the Lord Christ and His apostles after His ascension, the Lord and His Church stay on loving them, and presenting to them the better life.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

Although Joseph was not in the Promised Land, but in Egypt, God was with him, and delivered him out of all his troubles (Acts 7.10-11). He even turned those troubles into glory, making him governor over all Egypt, and over the house of Pharaoh. He delivered him from bondage, for the benefit of his brothers, and granted him freedom and glory of the highest level.

Stephen followed the Septuagint Version, when he quoted the number of people as 75, while it came in the Hebrew version as 70 (Gen. 46.26; Exod. 1.5; Deut. 10.22). Some believe that the number of Joseph's family who came to Egypt was 66 (Gen. 46.26), and when Joseph's family in Egypt (9 persons) were added to them, the number became 75.

- ❖ "let them learn that it is customary for Holy Scripture to imply the whole by the part. For He that said, "Every body will come before you" (Ps.) does not mean that the flesh will be presented before the Judge apart from the souls: and when we read in sacred History that Jacob went down into Egypt with seventy-five souls we understand the flesh also to be intended together with the souls. So, then, the Word, when He became flesh, took with the flesh the whole of human nature"¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

"And Jacob went down to Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers" (Acts 7.15).

Before the children of Israel came out of Egypt, setting forth to the land of Canaan, all the sons of Jacob were dead.

"And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem" (Acts 7.16).

Jacob was buried in the field of Machpelah by Joseph and his brothers. As to the bones of Joseph, they were carried by the Israelites to the land of Canaan, according to his will and were buried in Shechem (Gen. 50.25; Josh. 24.32). The Old Testament did not refer to carrying the bones of any father, other than those of Joseph, Yet the probability is there, that just as the descendants of Joseph carried the bones of their father, the descendants of the other fathers might have done the same.

The Historian **Josephus**² says that the descendants of Joseph's brothers, along the years, carried their bones and buried them in Hebron; whereas, those of Joseph were later on carried to the land of Canaan. Several Jewish authors adopted this view that the fathers of the tribes were buried in Hebron, while others believe that they were buried in Shechem. Anyhow, the Old Testament does not refer to anything against what St. Stephen said. As Shechem, in the days of St. Stephen was under the authority of the Samaritans, that might be the reason why many Jewish authors refer to the burial of their fathers' bones in Hebron, to deprive the Samaritans of their claim that they were in their hands. Anyway, the listeners to St. Stephen did not contradict his words.

¹ *against Eunomius, 2.13.*

² *Antiq. 2.8.2.*

Shechem was a town or village near Samaria, also called ‘Sychar’ (John 4.5), and Sychem. Now it is called Napolos or Naplous, ten miles away from Shiloh, and forty miles north of Jerusalem.

All that Abraham, the father of the patriarchs, or Jacob (Israel), the father of the tribes gained was a small plot of land as a burial place. Neither of them had his heart on the inheritance of that spacious and fertile land.

Who purchased the land in Shechem?

In (Gen. 33.19; Josh. 24.32), it came that Jacob, and not Abraham, was the one who purchased that land from the children of Hamor, the sons of Shechem. On the other hand, Abraham purchased the land in Machepelah from the sons of Heth (Gen. 23). Some believe that the word ‘Our father’ was misunderstood and replaced by ‘Abraham’, when it actually meant ‘Jacob’.

“But when the time of the promise drew near, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt” (Acts 7.17).

As the time of salvation drew near, God allowed for His people to grow in the midst of affliction in the land of Egypt. Those years were not wasted; and they were not an obstacle on the way of the realization of the divine promise. Affliction was rather the fitting atmosphere for the exodus, and the enjoyment of the divine promise. The realization of promises is always connected to the times of affliction. Here, St. Stephen proclaims his true Scripture insight, that the suffering of the Church of the New Testament caused by the Jews is actually the healthy atmosphere for her to grow and flourish, spiritually and in number.

The shepherds stayed in the land of Goshen east of the Nile Delta, with fertile pasture and numerous Nile tributaries, while the rest of the children of Israel spread all over Egypt, got mixed with all the centers of business, and acquired experience in every profession. They lived four centuries in the midst of the most advanced civilization of the world at that time that was probably superior to the civilization of the present day. They studied science, literature, wisdom, economics, medicine, astronomy, engineering, languages, etc.

They grew immensely, and multiplied, counted Egypt as their own home that when Pharaoh brought them into bondage, they were reluctant to leave Egypt under the leadership of Moses. And when they did leave, they tried several times to return; and in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, they carried him by force, and went back to Egypt.

St. Stephen spoke about the amazing work of God, who transformed, within a little time, a family of 75 individuals into such a great nation, with 600, 000 man of war. Thus, God realized His promise to Abraham.

“Till another king arose who did not know Joseph” (Acts 7.18).

Although the children of Israel greatly multiplied in number and strength, they did not think of leaving Egypt, where they settled down and felt well established. That is why God allowed for a new king to arise, who did not follow the lead of his ancestors, in dealing well with the Israelites. God

allowed for his appearance, to let the Israelites feel unsettled enough in Egypt, to leave it and go to the land that God promised to be inherited by the descendants of Abraham. Now, the time came to realize the divine promise.

Some believe that that Pharaoh was Ramses, the fifth king of the eighteenth Dynasty, and that it happened about the year 1559 BC. Whereas M. Champollion¹, believes that the name of that king was Mandonei, who reigned from 1585 to 1565 BC. And **G. Wilkinson**² believes that he was Amosis or Ames, the first king of the eighteenth Dynasty. Prof. Hackett, on the other hand, believes that our knowledge of the history of ancient Egypt is not accurate enough to reach a definite decision concerning that issue³.

“This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose (abandon) their babies, so that they might not live” (Acts 7.19).

God allowed for another king to arise (Ramses the second, in 1292-1225 BC), who persecuted the Hebrews, and deprived them of the pots of meat, and the luxuries of Egypt, which, according to him, they devoured. God was actually preparing for their salvation, and the enjoyment of the Promised Land. The exodus took place during the reign of Pharaoh Memoptah (1225-1215 BC).

Seeing the Hebrews' immense growth, the Egyptians added to their burdens, and here St. Stephen notices three things:

1- The mean attitude of the new king, who disregarded the valuable contributions of Joseph to the welfare of Egypt.

2- His devilish and violent policy, ***“He dealt treacherously with our people”***.

3- His merciless planning of having all the male babies killed.

In all this, St. Stephen's intention was to show them that their entrance into the Promised Land was not of their own making or that of their fathers, but was a free gift from God, God of the impossible, according to His grace, and not to their worthiness. He probably also intended to demonstrate to them that history repeats itself. As the plans of the Egyptians to destroy them failed miserably, and Israel ended up enjoying the freedom and the inheritance of the Promised Land; then, they were practicing what the Egyptians have previously done, and with the same spirit, assuming that they were capable of destroying the Church of Christ; Whereas God, God of the impossible, remains working among His believers, to grant them the eternal inheritance, the heavenly Canaan.

¹ *Essay on Hieroglyphic System.*

² *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, vol. 1. P, 42, 2nd edition.*

³ *Barnes Notes on Acts 7.18.*

3- Moses brought up in Pharaoh's palace

“At that time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God, and he was brought up in his father’s house for three months” (Acts 7.20).

As the persecution reached its climax, Moses was born. He, who was himself, in danger of getting killed while an infant, was sent by God to be a savior for his people. When the calamity seemed hopeless to solve, Moses was born amid that pitch darkness, sanctified while still in his mother’s womb, born with a shining face, and was very beautiful in the sight of God, and in the sight of Pharaoh’s daughter.

St. John Chrysostom comments on how helpless man can be, Moses’ parents, kept him for three months, then helplessly cast him in the river.

- ❖ "But when man's help was despaired of, and they cast him forth, then did God's benefit shine forth conspicuous"¹.
- ❖ "This is the wonder, that he who is to be their champion, is born, neither after nor before, these things, but in the very midst of the storm"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But when he was set out, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away, and brought him up as her own son” (Acts 7.21).

Pharaoh’s plan was such a success, that the compassionate Israeli mothers were casting their babies to death by their own hands.

God blessed him while in his mother’s womb with a great beauty, blessed him while an infant with his parents’ care, then when they helplessly cast him into the river, he blessed him with the unexpected care in the house of Pharaoh, the bitter opponent of God and His people.

“He was well pleasing to God”, And according to the Greek version, he was *‘beautiful before God’*, or was *‘beautiful by God’*, a Hebrew expression, meaning that his face had a mystic divine touch that made his parents disobey the king’s command (Heb. 11.23). He was, according to the Historian Josephus, a divine looking child³.

Philo also described him: since his birth, Moses was more beautiful than other humans⁴. Therefore, when Pharaoh's daughter picked him from the water; she took him and brought him up as her own son.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.*

³ *Antiq. 2.9.7.*

⁴ *Vita Moys. 1.9.*

- ❖ "Not a word of Temple, not a word of Sacrifice, while all these Providences are taking place. And he was nourished in a barbarian house"¹.

(St. Chrysostom)

In his work 'The life of Moses', St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, presents Moses' personality, life, and works, as a symbol of the work of the Lord Christ in the human soul, and her enjoyment of His amazing salvation. St. Gregory sees in the well educated heathen barren daughter of Pharaoh a symbol of the temporal philosophies and philosophers who work hard, as though in labor, only to give birth to wind, and never to the knowledge of God. Although Moses was brought up as a son to the daughter of Pharaoh, he was nourished on the milk of his own mother, the milk of the Church By which the soul flourishes, grows, and enjoys the means to ascend to the highest².

"And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7.22).

The knowledge of the Egyptians used to concentrate on Astrology, Interpretation of dreams, Medicine, Mathematics, and religion. The old world used to draw from the flood of knowledge: wisdom, and philosophy of the Egyptians that went from Egypt to Phoenicia, then to Greece. Many Greek Philosophers came to Egypt for the sake of that knowledge³.

"Mighty in words": Although Moses admitted before God that he was slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exod. 4.10), to say that he was "mighty in words" means that he could connect with Pharaoh (through his brother Aaron) (Exod. 4.11-16).

"Mighty in words": this is not mentioned in the books of the Old Testament, but quoted by St. Stephen from the Jewish tradition, describing the extent of knowledge that Moses acquired during his life in Pharaoh's palace. Through that scientific knowledge, he probably became capable of having an active role in establishing the tabernacle of meeting with its elaborate designs. His knowledge was adorned by God's work in his life, to become "very humble, more so than all men who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12.3). God led him to the wilderness, to make him acquire the spirit of compassionate care in its environment. Through the wisdom of the Egyptians, he learned how to write, as well as how to keep the transcripts from damage. Several scholars believe that he set the basis of the Hebrew writing with all its grammar. Concerning him being "mighty in deeds", some refer to the fact that he had led a victorious Egyptian attack against Ethiopia, came back with captives, and became a legend in both peace and war.

Not forgetting the God of his fathers, Moses, in spite of becoming a great scholar, did not follow the lead of the Egyptian sorcerers, but realized that all their work was the product of satanic deceit.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

² Vita Moys. 12.

³ Barnes' on Acts 7.22; Rawlinson' Herodotus, vol. 2, p. 80-81; Herodotus, 2, p. 50-51.

“Mighty in words and mighty in deeds”: probably means that he became like a prime minister of Egypt, speaking with authority, and translated his words into effect.

In St. Stephen’s mind, what Moses enjoyed was through a divine plan that made him one with authority. The same thing happened to Stephen himself, who became one with authority through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in him.

- ❖ Although he was brought up in an atmosphere of royalty, with all its splendor and glory, and “was learned with all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7.22), when he reached the age of maturity and became great, “he chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God . . ., esteeming the reproach of Christ, greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11.25)¹.

(St. Makarius the Great)

- ❖ "Having reached the proper age, he was taught arithmetic, geometry, poetry, harmony, and besides, medicine and music, by those that excelled in these arts among the Egyptians; and besides, the philosophy which is conveyed by symbols, which they point out in the hieroglyphical inscriptions. The rest of the usual course of instruction, Greeks taught him in Egypt as a royal child, as Philo says in his life of Moses. He learned, besides, the literature of the Egyptians, and the knowledge of the heavenly bodies from the Chaldeans and the Egyptians; And Eupolemus, in his book *On the Kings in Judea*, says that "Moses was the first wise man, and the first that imparted grammar to the Jews, that the Phoenicians received it from the Jews, and the Greeks from the Phoenicians"².

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

- ❖ "Moses, learned as he was in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, did not approve of those things, but thought that kind of wisdom both harmful and foolish. Turning away there from, he sought God with all the desire of his heart, and thus saw, questioned, heard Him when He spoke"³.

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ "We must learn from God what we are to think of God; we have no source of knowledge but Himself. You may be as carefully trained as you will in secular philosophy; you may have lived a life of righteousness. All this will contribute to your mental satisfaction, but it will not help you to know God. Moses was adopted as the son of the queen, and instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians; he had, moreover, out of loyalty to his race avenged the wrong of the Hebrew by slaying the Egyptian and yet he knew not the God Who had blessed his fathers"⁴.

(St. Hilary of Poitiers)

¹ *Hom. 9.14.*

² *Stromata 1.23.*

³ *Duties of the Clergy, 1.26.*

⁴ *on the Trinity, 5.21.*

“But when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel” (Acts 7.23).

His age, when he thought of visiting his brethren, was not mentioned in the books of the Old Testament, but was quoted by St. Stephen from the Jewish tradition.

Moses growing up, mighty in words and deeds, thought that, by his own capabilities and talents, he could visit his brethren in their humility. He probably thought of leading a military campaign against the oppressors of his people, to confirm their rights by force. But did he assume that he could do that inside the land of Egypt, or would have to lead the people to the Promised Land?

Some believe that Pharaoh sought to kill Moses, not because he killed an Egyptian, as that in itself was of no importance to him, but this event came to confirm, in Pharaoh’s mind, and among those in the royal court, that Moses had begun to plan a secret movement to the account of the Hebrews against Egypt.

Moses lived in Pharaoh’s palace, as an Egyptian, and had no connection to his people, but his heart, thought, and all his depths were with them, moaning with their moaning, and longing to see them free.

“And seeing that one of them suffered wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian” (Acts 7.24).

The Egyptian probably was violently striking the Hebrew, and could have killed him.

St. Gregory of Nyssa sees in the heathen Egyptian a symbol of the corrupt teachings, and in the religious Jew, on the other hand, a symbol of the teachings of the fathers, with every sort of animosity between them. He says:

The war between the Egyptian and the Hebrew is like that between paganism and the true religion, between looseness and righteousness, between arrogance and humility, and between everything and its contrary. Moses, by his example, teaches us to stand up for virtue, as though for a relative of ours, and to kill the enemy of virtue (evil). Standing up for what is right is like death and destruction to paganism. Righteousness kills oppression, and humility slays haughtiness¹.

“For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand” (Acts 7.25).

Although this was not mentioned in the books of the Old Testament, what St. Stephen mentioned was something acceptable. When Moses stood for the Hebrew against the Egyptian, he assumed that what he did was inspired by God Himself, to save his people, and expected that the people would appreciate it, and would realize that although he was brought up in Pharaoh’s palace, he was a true Israelite.

¹ Vita Moys. 14, 15.

“And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another? But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us’ (Acts 7.26-27).

When Moses asked the oppressor to take into consideration that they were brethren, he, not only rejected the reconciliation, but threatened Moses as well. It is very difficult for the wrong and ignorant party to reconsider his position and to admit that he is wrong. This is what led God, Himself, to initiate love, and consummate salvation, by delivering His only-begotten Son, in the hope that sinners might probably come in touch with the divine love, as they, on their side, were not seeking reconciliation with God.

It is not strange for the oppressor to confront Moses, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” As this is only a natural reaction, to come from the heart and thought of an evil person, toward him who tries to provoke him toward reconciliation and peace.

“Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday” (Acts 7.28).

Who told him about what happened the day before? Most probably, the one rescued told his relatives; and instead of extending a word of gratitude or encouragement to the one who sought their salvation, Moses found opposition and threats.

May no one expect a word of commendation or encouragement from those he ministers, as one should work to the account of God’s kingdom, without expecting any temporal reward, big or small.

❖ "Then again he shows how ungrateful they were to their benefactor. For, just as in the former instance, they were saved by the injured Joseph, so here again they were saved by another injured person, I mean, Moses. In intention they did kill, as did the others in the former case. There, they sold out of their own into a strange land: here, they drive from one strange land into another strange land: in the former case, one in the act of bringing them food; in this, one in the act See the plotted-against eventually becoming the authors of salvation to those plotting against them: the people, plotting against itself, and itself plotted against by others; and for all this, saved! A famine, and it did not consume them: nor was this all: but they were saved by means of the very person, whom they had expected to be destroyed (by their means). A royal edict, and it did not consume them: nay then most did their number increase, when he was dead "who knew" them. Their own Savior they wished to kill, but for all that, they had not power to do it. Do you observe, that by the means whereby the devil tried to bring to naught the promise of God, by those very means it was advanced?"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a sojourner in the land of Midian, where he had two sons” (Acts 7.29).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

What Moses expected was not far from the truth; he expected the news to reach the hearing of Pharaoh, who would seek to kill him, and that was what actually happened. Moses fled to the land of Midian, a desert land north-west of Arabia. There he married Zipporah, the daughter of Reuel (Exod. 2.18) or Jethro (Exod. 3.1; Num. 10.29), the priest of Midian. Zipporah begat from him two sons: Gershom and Eliezar (Exod. 18.3, 4).

St. Stephen concentrates on the subject of sojourning, which he mentioned when he spoke about Abraham, whose descendants were said to be sojourners. And here, because Moses sojourned in the land of Midian, he called his son ‘Gershom’, saying, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land” (Exod. 2.21, 22).

Feeling of sojourning accompanied Moses all the days of his life: He was born in Egypt, away from his home land of Canaan; he was brought up in Pharaoh’s house, away from his parents; he fled to Midian to live as a sojourner for forty years; and he finally, he set forth to the wilderness, where together with his people, they sojourned for forty years. After all that, he was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land.

4- THE BURNING BUSH AND THE HOLY LAND

“And when forty years had passed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai” (Acts 7.30).

Then, the story of Exodus began, when Moses was in his weakest condition, as a sojourner, a fugitive from the face of Pharaoh; here, heaven proclaimed its intention for salvation, Jehovah appeared in a flame of fire in a bush, came down to sanctify the earth, and to lead His people to Canaan. It is the episode of the divine incarnation, when the Virgin Mary conceived in her womb the fire of Deity, and when the Lord Christ led humanity to the heavenly Canaan, liberating it from the bondage of the devil.

Here, and for the second time, Stephen clarifies that the appearance of God to His believers is not bound to Jerusalem, As He appeared to Abraham in Mezopotamia, He appeared to Moses on the Mount of Sinai. The land became holy by the dwelling of God, not in the temple of Solomon, or in the holy of holies, but on the Mount of Sinai. ... Thus, Stephen provokes his listeners against bigotry to the Promised Land, to the city of Jerusalem, and to the temple, as God wishes to make the whole world holy.

❖ Having lived forty years in Egypt, Moses set forth to the wilderness of Midian, where he spent another forty years, shepherding the flocks of Jethro. Whereas John the Baptist came to the wilderness as an infant, He, about whom was said: “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11.11), and about whom the prophet says, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face” (Mal. 3.1; Matt. 11.10), has been worthy of a greater education¹.

(Scholar Origen)

¹ *Homilies on Luke. Hom. 10.7.*

- ❖ Moses forsook the royal dignity by his own choice, as though it was like some dust he was wiping out from his feet (Heb. 11.24-26). He separated himself from human society for forty years, lived an isolated life, concentrating his sight on “seeing Him who is invisible” (Heb. 11.27), to get enlightened by an unutterable light, and to liberate the lower reaches of his soul from the dead garment made of skin¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

St. Gregory of Nyssa sees in the setting forth by Moses to the wilderness, where he lived for forty years, as a shepherd of sheep, a symbol of the setting forth by the soul to a life of silence, to shepherd her inner intentions as a flock, the way Moses did:

- ❖ The same way, we can lead a life of loneliness, to fall no more into the traps of enemies, or to exist among them, but to live among those who are like us in intentions and thoughts, to shepherd all the movements of our souls, like sheep, and to nurture them by the will of the pure mind².

“When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight, and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him” (Acts 7.31).

Moses marveled at the amazing sight that bore a living portrait of the incarnation of the Word of God, when humanity was not consumed by the fire of the unapproachable Deity.

That sight also represents the Church of God, in both the Old and the new testaments. As Israel in the Old Testament has been in the midst of the fire of persecution in Egypt, and was not consumed, for God sent to them Moses, the symbol of the Lord Christ, as a Savior; So also the Church of the New Testament shall remain in the midst of tribulations, which is incapable of consuming her.

That sight also refers to St. Mary, who, bearing the Word of God, the consuming fire in her womb, was not consumed, having been sanctified by His Holy Spirit, and prepared for the dwelling of the Word in her, and for receiving a body from her.

The prophet did not see the divine Essence, but saw the bush burning with fire, a symbol of the divine incarnation, yet he heard the voice of God, and recognized it.

“Saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’, and Moses trembled and dared not look” (Acts 7.32).

God addressed Moses, “*I am the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*”, as though He took Moses’ memory back to the divine promise to those fathers beloved to Him. Moses trembled, not daring to lift up his eyes to look at the scene.

It is as though God was proclaiming to Moses, “As I am the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the Grantor of the promises, and the covenants to

¹ on the Inscriptions of the Psalms, 1.7.52.

² Vits Moys. 18.

them, I am the God who sets His promise with you. The death of those fathers did not invalidate that covenant, as although they were dead, I am alive, and can restore them to life. ... In My sight, they are not dead but living.”

The ground became holy, qualified to worship God on it, and not to tread on it with the sandals. Moses enjoyed worshipping by Spirit and truth, not by the literacy and formalities of worship.

Moses trembled and did not dare to look at the scene, as he realized that the Speaker was the Lord, the Grantor of the promises to his fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses enjoyed the voice of the Lord, and realized that through it, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would realize His promises.

St. Stephen was accused of blaspheming against God and Moses (Acts 6.11), because the Jews almost worshipped Moses like God, with all respect and reverence to the prophet Moses. He reveals here that he was only human, unable to look even to the burning bush, and trembled when he heard the divine voice. He submitted to sufferings, especially to fear, when the glory of God was transfigured, and his splendor was revealed before him.

St. Gregory of Nyssa sees in the burning bush the shining of the divine light upon us, through the incarnation of the Word, who became flesh, to cast His light upon mankind. He also says:

So as not to assume that that light did not come from some matter, it did not shine from one of the stars, but from an earthly bush; and its splendor surpassed all the heavenly stars. From this we also learn the secret of the divine light that shone from the Virgin St. Mary upon the human life, through giving birth to the Son of God. The same way the burning bush was not consumed by the fire, her virginity was kept intact by giving birth¹.

“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground’ (Acts 7.33).

Taking off the footwear bears a symbolic meaning that we have already explained in our commentary on the book of Exodus (3), and on the book of Deuteronomy (25.7-10). **The scholar Origen** sees in it a reference to forsaking the dead temporal things, as the footwear are mostly made of slain animal skins, and a reference to forsaking the love of showing off, in that the animal skin is also used to make drums that produce high sound with little real work.

Also it came in the law that if someone refused to marry the widow of his brother, to raise up a name for his deceased brother, his sandals would be taken off, and his house would be called in Israel, "the house of him whose sandals are removed" (Deut. 25.5-10).

It is as though when Moses removed his sandals, he proclaimed that he was not the Church's groom, The same way the bishop, the priest, or the deacon, when they take off their footwear before entering the holy Altar, they likewise proclaim that Christ alone is the Church's Groom.

¹ *Vita Moys.* 20,21.

- ❖ Although the word “temple” was not mentioned, the place became holy through the presence and work of the Lord, more so than the holy of holies, as it was never mentioned in any other place, that God so appeared, or was ever said that Moses so trembled.

Look how God, by His compassion, as well as by His chastening and His signs, intended to draw them near to Him, but they stayed where they were. They should learn that God is omnipresent. Let us hasten to Him in our tribulations.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ The Light teaches us what we should do when we stand within the rays of the true light, as it is not possible for the feet wearing sandals made of animal skin to ascend to such heights. Where the light of the truth is to be seen, the earthly and dead animal skin has to be removed from the soul, by which our nature was initially clothed when we became naked, because of our rebellion against the divine will. When we do this, the knowledge of truth will fruit and proclaim itself¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“I have certainly seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their groaning, and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt” (Acts 7.34).

The Jews cherish and highly esteem the prophet Moses, as the great leader who saved their fathers from the bondage of Pharaoh, to set forth with them through the wilderness, to inherit the Promised Land. Now, the secret behind Moses’ strength, and his love and care for his people was revealed, to be of God Himself, who came down to His people, when He saw their oppression, and heard their groaning. As for Moses, he was actually sent as a tool in God’s hand: ***“Now come, I will send you to Egypt”*** (Acts 7.34), and supported him with successive conquests and success to realize his mission.

St. Stephen presents a summary of what the prophet Moses stated in detail in (Exod. 3.7-10). God sent him to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, not by his personal strength and capabilities, but by the work of God in him. When God saw the oppression the people suffered, and heard their groaning that went up to heaven, He sent Moses to set forth with His people to the wilderness, to wander for forty years, until the generation that bore the idols of Egypt in their hearts were all dead, and a new generation born in the wilderness was found worthy of entering the Promised Land.

Whereas man may forget God and disregard Him, God will never forget man wherever he may be. He came down to listen to their groaning and to save them, according to His promises to their fathers.

- ❖ ”Therefore also from the beginning He said to Adam: “In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread” (Gen. 3.19). Also (it was) in order that having come out of much suffering into rest, they might give thanks to God. For affliction is a great good. For hear the Prophet saying, “It is good for me that I

¹ Vita Moys. 22.

have been afflicted” (Ps. 119.71). But if to great and wonderful men affliction be a great (good), much more to us”¹.

- ❖ "Let us apply ourselves to Prayer. It is a mighty weapon if it be offered with earnestness, if without vainglory, if with a sincere mind. It has turned back wars, it has benefited an entire nation though undeserving. "I heard their groaning" He says "and have come down to deliver them” (Acts 7.34). It is itself a saving medicine, and has power to prevent sins, and to heal misdeeds”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush” (Acts 7.35).

St. Stephen was accused of blasphemy against Moses. Now he proclaimed that Moses was blessed by God when He sent him, while the persistent and serious opposition came from their fathers, who rejected him as their ruler and judge. In the hardness of hearts and stiffness of necks, they murmured against him all the time, and even plotted to kill him more than once. St. Stephen did not blaspheme against Moses, but revered him and admired his forbearance of their opposition, without thinking of forsaking them.

When Moses introduced himself to his people, and stretched his hand to begin working for them, they hastened to reject him as a ruler and a judge. But once God proclaimed His fiery presence, He granted Moses the mission of leadership and salvation, being a symbol of the true Savior – the King of kings. The Jewish people had been stiff-necked and rebellious since the time of Moses, so what they did in the time of the apostles was not something new to their nature. Moses came as a symbol of the Lord Christ, who would be rejected by the builders, to become the Corner Stone (Acts 4.21).

What their fathers did to the prophet Moses, the rulers did to Jesus Christ. As their fathers denied the burning Bush, and rejected Moses’ leadership and his work as a judge and a redeemer from the bondage of Pharaoh, their descendants rejected the cross, shining with light, denied the incarnation of the divine Word, and did not recognize Jesus as a King and a Redeemer to their souls. They are opponents, and sons of opponents.

- ❖ "So habitual a thing was it for Jews to wrong (their benefactors) when in the act of receiving benefits!”³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

² Homilies on Hebrews. Hom. 27.9.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 16.

“He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years” (Acts 7.36).

God came down to save His people, when they were in Egypt, then cared for them while crossing the Red Sea and wandering in the wilderness. They did not have to go first to Jerusalem, to build the temple, before He would dwell among them, and work in them.

Divine signs and wonders went along with them: In Egypt He sent ten strikes, to save them with a strong hand and a mighty arm (Exod. 4-12). He divided the Red Sea, for His people to cross safely, while Pharaoh and all his men perished in it (Exod. 14-15).

In the wilderness, and for forty years, He granted them Manna from heaven, to eat, and water from the rock to drink (Exod. 16, 17).

Moses did not resort to his old military experience, but God granted him signs and wonders, to terrify the heart of Pharaoh and the hearts of the Egyptians (Exod. 3.19-21). And these weapons remained in Moses’ hand, to lead the people cross the Red Sea, and to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

5- THEIR FATHERS’ opposition to MOSES

“This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The Lord, your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear’” (Acts 7.37).

So St. Stephen reached to what he intends to say, that Moses who was rejected by their fathers is the leader called by God, and supported by signs and wonders. And what happened to Moses happened to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who came to His own, and His own rejected Him.

Having proved that he never blasphemed Moses, but he rather criticized those who rejected his leadership, He clarified to them that as Moses himself, whom they cherished and trusted, had prophesied the coming of Christ (Deut. 18.15, 18), they were committed to hear and to obey, by accepting the One prophesied by him. The Lord Christ Himself had previously proclaimed that if they believed in Moses, they were committed to believe in Him (John 5.46). (We have already dealt with this prophecy in our commentary on the book of Deuteronomy).

❖ Moses called the Son of God ‘an angel’, and also called Him ‘a man’. He appeared to him in the wilderness, and not in a temple. Notice that with all those wonders, the words ‘temple’ or ‘sacrifice’ have not been mentioned, neither in the episode of the burning bush, nor in the wilderness.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ "but let that "like me" be reserved awhile to be examined in its proper place But when does this Prophet that is expected come? Recur, he says, to what has been written by me: examine carefully Jacob's prophecy addressed to Judah: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen. 49.8, 10). He gave, therefore, as a sign of Christ's advent the cessation of the Jewish rule. If they are not

now under the Romans, the Christ is not yet come: if they still have a prince of the race of Judah and of David he is not yet come that was expected. ... But He that comes as the expectation of the Gentiles, what further sign then does He have? He says next, "Binding His donkey to the vine" (Gen. 49.11). You see that foal which was clearly announced by Zechariah"¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

- ❖ Beside being the Lord of the prophets, who sanctifies them and realizes the prophecies, He is also a Prophet. ... He is like Moses, according to the flesh, yet not according to the greatness².

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "Like, namely, as to the form of the flesh, but not in the eminence of His majesty. Accordingly we find the Lord Jesus called a Prophet"³.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "Moses says, speaking of Christ, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren, Him you shall hear" (Acts 7.37). Therefore they who do not obey Him, transgress the Law"⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us" (Acts 7.38).

St. Stephen refers here to the ecclesiastical meeting that Moses held, by God's command, with all the people and the heads of the tribes, in Horeb, when the Lord appeared to them and gave them the law. Moses received the law, while the people declined to listen to God's voice (Deut. 18.15-16). It was an ecclesiastical meeting realized on Mount Horeb, a Church with no pillars, roof, courts, or alters, a living Church through God's dwelling among His people, a unique Church in the wilderness.

St. Stephen intended to draw the hearts of his listeners to the essence of the Church set upon the presence of God. The goal of the ecclesiastical meeting is the enjoyment of the living words of God.

The people in the wilderness enjoyed the living words of God, or the Mosaic laws, received by Moses through the ministry of angels (Acts 7.53; Heb. 2.2). They enjoyed those exalted blessings in the wilderness, outside the Promised Land, and without temples.

"Whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt" (Acts 7.39).

¹ *Catechetical Lectures.*

² *in Joan. tr. 24.7.*

³ *St. Augustine. On the Gospel of St. John. Tract. 15.23.*

⁴ *Commentary on Galat. 2.*

He did not say “Your fathers”, but “Our fathers”, who, rebelled against God and Moses, rejected the divine leadership, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. “They said to one another, ‘Let us select a leader and return to Egypt’. ...And all the congregation said to stone them (Moses and Aaron) with stones” (Num. 14.4, 10).

That was the decision taken by our fathers in the days of Moses. The decision of the Sanhedrin, against Jesus, came conforming to that of their fathers. The fathers could not stone Moses and Aaron, while the members of the Sanhedrin practically realized what was in their hearts, by crucifying the Lord Christ.

❖ "Wherefore, if we are anxious to attain true perfection, we ought to look to it that as we have outwardly with the body made light of parents, home, the riches and pleasures of the world, we may also inwardly with the heart forsake all these things and never be drawn back by any desires to those things which we have forsaken, as those who were led up by Moses, though they did not literally go back, are yet said to have returned in heart to Egypt; viz., by forsaking God who had led them forth with such mighty signs, and by worshipping the idols of Egypt of which they had thought scorn, as Scripture says, “In their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us” (Acts 7.39). for we should fall into like condemnation with those who, while dwelling in the wilderness, after they had tasted manna from heaven, lusted after the filthy food of sins, and of mean baseness, and should seem together with them to murmur in the same way (Exod. 16.3; Num. 11.5, 18).

A form of speech, which, although it referred primarily to that people, we yet see fulfilled today in our own case and mode of life: for everyone who after renouncing this world turns back to his old desires, and reverts to his former likings asserts in heart and act the very same thing that they did”¹.

(Abbot Paphnutius)

They regretted their exodus from Egypt, and longed for the Egyptian food, even if it was just the smell of pots. Their depths, as well, were connected to the Egyptian worship, like worshipping the calf Ibis, and their behavior was connected to the Egyptian customs and ethics.

“Saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us, as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands” (Acts 7.40-41).

Despite all those blessings, delivered from God by Moses’ hands, their fathers rejected Him and His prophet. They longed to turn back to Egypt. They asked Aaron to make them a golden image of the calf Ibis the idol of the Egyptians (Exod. 32.16, 18), justifying their action by saying that Moses disappeared, and they did not know what had become of him.

¹ *Conferences of John Cassian, 3.7.*

As in the days of Moses, the people made for themselves a golden calf to worship, and to offer sacrifices to it; in the days of the Lord Christ, they sought Caesar as their king, rejecting the spiritual kingdom of Christ.

He was as though rebuking them: Who is now blaspheming against God and Moses? Is it I, who accepted the One about whom Moses prophesied, of whom he was himself a symbol? Or are they your fathers who rejected Moses' leadership, regretted their exodus from Egypt, longed for the Egyptian food that they used to offer to the slaves (the smell of pots), worshipped the calf, broke the law, and opposed the living words of God?

“Then God turned and gave them up to worship the hosts of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?’” (Acts 7.42).

St. Stephen quoted this prophecy from the book of Amos (5.25), to reveal to them their diversion, through the words of the prophets themselves.

They chose to turn their back to God, and wished to go back to Egypt, to the life of bondage, So God granted them their wish. He turned His back to them, and delivered them to the lust of their hearts.

“Yes, you took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon” (Acts 7.43).

Worshipping the stars of heaven was connected to the worship of the two gods Moloch and Remphan.

Moloch: quoted from both the Hebrew and the Arabic, meaning (king), the king of the Ammonites, to whom they used to offer human sacrifices. Moses, in several occasions, warned the people against offering their children sacrifices to the god Moloch, or passing them through fire (Lev. 18.21, 20.2-5).

The Israelites did worship Moloch after they entered the Promised Land. Solomon built a temple for him on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11.7). And Manasseh passed his son through the fire in reverence to this idol (2 Kings 21.3, 6). That idol was made of brass, with his hands stretched as though seeking to embrace the child offered as a sacrifice. They used to make a fire beneath the statue until it becomes completely red hot, then put the child on the red hot arms, amid the beats of drums and violent dancing, until it is utterly consumed. Some believe that those rites were done in reverence to the star Saturn, god of agriculture for the Romans, to the sun, and to the star Mercury (the messenger of gods, and god of commerce, eloquence, shrewdness, and robbery for the Romans), or to the star Venus, goddess of love and beauty for the Romans, etc.

“And the star of your god Remphan”: it is quoted by St. Stephen from the Septuagint Version. The word ‘Remphan’ in the Coptic language refer to the star Saturn.

Having reached the climax of rebellion, preferring the worship of idols to that of the living God, God gave them the wish of their hearts, bringing them up to captivity in Babylon, a great center of idol worship (Amos 5.25-27).

6- THE TABERNACLE OF WITNESS IN THE WILDERNESS

After parading that painful history that revealed the persistence of their fathers on rebellion against God, albeit the existence of a faithful few, sanctified to the Lord, who were not bound to the deadly letter, but to the practical living faith, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the other prophets, He started to talk about the tabernacle and the temple.

That tendency to worship idols, infiltrating to the Hebrews along all their history, reached a climax during the Babylonian captivity. They used to follow the lead of their neighbors surrounding them, in worshipping the stars of heaven (Deut. 4.19, 17.3; 2 Kings 2.13, 5, 23.4, 5; Jer. 8.2, 19.13; Zeph. 1.5).

"Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen" (Acts 7.44).

The pagans used to take their idols with them wherever they went, putting the small statue in a little temple or a little tent. To keep His people from idol worship, God showed Moses a heavenly pattern, to make according to it the tabernacle of Meeting (a tent) that includes the Ark of the Covenant. The tabernacle was carried by the people across the wilderness, to be set up wherever they dwelt, as a sign of God's presence (Exod. 25.9, 40, 26.30, 27.8).

"Which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David" (Acts 7.45).

The fathers brought the tabernacle of meeting with them to the Promised Land, under the leadership of Joshua son of Nun, that, after driving out the pagan nations, the land of Canaan would be cleaned of every trace of pagan worship, to leave the tabernacle of meeting alone, as a sign of the divine presence, of their unity with God, and their acceptance of Him as a King, who satisfies their depths, and controls their life.

The secret of the importance of the tabernacle of meeting was that it was made by Moses according to the pattern he had seen; I.E. it carried the shadow of the heavenly places. When Moses saw what was made without human hands, he presented a shadow of it on earth, for the believers to experience the shadow of heavenly places.

Although St. Stephen talked to the rulers assembled about the tabernacle of meeting, to draw their hearts up to the heavenly thought, they persisted on setting the tent of Moloch in their hearts.

7- GOD DOES NOT DWELL IN TEMPLES MADE BY HUMAN HANDS

“Who found favor before God, and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob” (Acts 7.46).

David found favor before God, who poured on him His blessings, and granted him conquest over his enemies. David’s reaction was that his heart yearned to build a permanent temple, to embrace the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the divine presence (2 Sam. 7.1; 1 Chron. 22.7).

“But Solomon built Him a house” (Acts 7.47).

- ❖ "They thought Solomon was great: (as he built the temple) but that he was not better than his father, nay not even equal to him, is manifest. ... Nay, not even these (buildings) are worthy of God, forasmuch as they are made, seeing they are creatures, the works of His hand"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“However the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says” (Acts 7.48).

St. Stephen annulled the accusation made against him, that he spoke against the temple, as he revealed that, although it was the wish of the righteous king David to build it, yet it was built through a divine command. At the same time, he confirms that God does not limit Himself by that temple, made with hands, as He is in no need of it, having His throne in heaven. Although St. Stephen holds great regard for the temple of Jerusalem, what preoccupies the heart of God is to have all nations receive the living faith, and not to limit the worship to Jerusalem or the temple of Solomon.

❖ (On the occasion of the dedication of a church):

All of us brethren, before being baptized, have been temples for the devil, Then Baptism made us worthy of becoming temples for Christ. If we contemplate carefully on the salvation of our souls, we shall realize that we are the temples of the living God. God does not only dwell in buildings made with human hands, out of stone and wood, but He, before everything else, dwells in the soul, created in the image of God, and shaped by the hands of God Himself. That is why the blessed apostle Paul says, “The temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Cor. 3.17).

- ❖ These temples are made out of stones and wood, for assembling the living temples (the souls) in it, in order to become together the temple of God. An individual Christian is a temple of God, and the several Christians are temples of God. How beautiful is the one temple formed by these individual temples! As several members form one body, so also several temples form one temple.

Now these temples of Christ, the souls of faithful Christians, are scattered all over the world, but on the Day of Judgment, they gather together, and form one temple in an eternal life.

Let us rejoice that we became worthy of being God’s temple, Yet, let us fear lest we defile God’s temple by evil deeds. Let us fear what the apostle says, “If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him” (1 Cor. 3.17).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 17.

God, who easily could create heaven and earth by the power of his word, planned to dwell in you. Therefore, you should act in a way that would not offend such Dweller.

May God not find in you, in His temple, anything defiled, dark, or haughty, as once He gets uncomfortable there, He will promptly depart, and once He departs, the devil will approach. How miserable would be the soul, when this happens! Such a soul would be deprived of light, filled with darkness, deprived of sweetness, and filled with bitterness. In short, life would be devastated, and paradise would be lost¹.

(Caesarius, Bishop of Arles)

“Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? Says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things” (Acts 7.49, 50).

If God allowed for making the tabernacle of meeting, then for building the temple, yet His rest is not in a particular place, but in His presence among His people. He carries His people up to what is above the letter, and the matter, to enjoy the Spirit and the heaven.

8- THEIR FATHERS PERSECUTED THE PROPHETS AND DID NOT KEEP THE LAW

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7.51).

The temple, as a building, was not bringing pleasure to God, and those worshipping in it were not righteous in His sight, having been literal and without spirit. St. Stephen describes them as stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, because they resist the Holy Spirit, and persecute the Holy One, following the lead of their rebellious fathers.

Responding to their accusation of speaking blasphemy against the Law of Moses, St. Stephen says that it was not him who committed this sin, but the Jews who did not believe in what the Law had provided them, those who, since the days of Moses, were resisting the word of God. Responding to their accusation of blasphemy against God by disregarding the temple, he said that the history of Israel itself confirms that the temple is nothing but a temporary institution, not essential for the true worship of God.

“You stiff-necked”: Those people were so called by God several times in the days of Moses (Exod. 32.9, 33.3, 5, 34.9; Deut. 9.6, 13). It describes the Jewish people in their rebellion against God, and their rejection of commitment to the divine commandment. It is a symbolic expression referring to oxen that resist, and refuse to submit to the yokes put on their necks.

“And uncircumcised in heart and ears”: Circumcision was the sign that designated the Jew who submitted to the authority of the law, for the sake of enjoying the divine promise. It was a reference to inner purity, and to the rejection of every defilement and abomination. Uncircumcision of the heart refers to the rejection of man to internal submission to the law, and not caring for the enjoyment of the

¹ Sermon 229.1-2.

divine promises. God wanted them to be circumcised in heart and ears (Deut. 10.16; Jer. 4.4, 9.26). The uncircumcised in heart and ears is he, who does not enjoy the covenant with God, being as though referred to the Gentiles, and not referred spiritually to Israel.

“Uncircumcised in ears” means that man refuses to listen to the voice of God (Lev. 26.41; Jer. 9.26).

“You always resist the Holy Spirit”: They confronted the love and mercies of God with resistance, “In all their afflictions He was afflicted, and the angel of His Presence saved them. In His love and in His pity He redeemed them, And He bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit, So He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them” (Isa. 63.9-11).

Like their fathers, they cared for the circumcision of the flesh, and not for the spiritual circumcision of the heart and the ears; that is why their hearts got filled with hatred against the Holy Spirit, and that turned into a serious behavior: Their fathers killed the prophets in whom the Spirit worked. And here they were consummating the measure of their fathers by resisting the Holy Spirit working in the apostles and ministers of Christ. ... Nay, their evil even surpassed that of their fathers, as they betrayed and killed the righteous Messiah. ... Here, he presents against them the most horrible crime committed by man since the day of his creation until the end of ages, a crime that they could not deny.

Having realized that those rulers did not care for the facts of the Scripture, as their thought was confined in only one thing, getting rid of the name of Jesus, and proving themselves innocent in their verdict to crucify Him, he moved from defense to offense. He revealed to them that the members of the Sanhedrin who condemned the Lord Christ to crucifixion bore the same spirit of rebellion that had been in the people since the day of their exodus from the land of Egypt.

St. John Chrysostom believes that they, like their fathers, resisted the Holy Spirit: When they were commanded to offer animal sacrifices, they did not; and when commanded to refrain from offering animal sacrifices, because the sacrifice of Christ had already realized the goal, they intended to offer animal sacrifices. When they were commanded to worship God in the temple, they worshipped the idols together with the Gentiles; and when commanded not to be preoccupied with the temple, but to worship God with Spirit and Truth, they preoccupied themselves with the temple¹.

❖ "Such is the boldness of speech of a man bearing the Cross. Let us then also imitate this: though it be not a time of war (persecution), yet it is always the time for boldness of speech (testifying for Christ). For, “I will speak” says one, “Your testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed” (Ps. 119.46). If we chance to be among heathens, let us thus stop their mouths. Without wrath, without harshness. ... The boldness is a success: the anger is a failure. Therefore, if we are to have boldness,

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 17.*

we must be clean from wrath that none may impute our words to that. No matter how just your words may be, when you speak with anger, you ruin all. ... See this man, how free from passion as he discourses to them! For he did not abuse them: he did but remind them of the words of the Prophets. For, to show you that it was not anger, at the very moment he was suffering evil at their hands, he prayed, saying, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7.60). So far was he from speaking these words in anger; no, he spoke in grief and sorrow for their sakes"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ St. Paul, likewise, revealed that the Jews were guilty: While proclaiming that they lived according to the law of God, and defending their privilege of the worthiness of their fathers, they actually did wrong to the reputation of the grace of God, having taken lightly the promise that was presented to their fathers².

(Ambrosiaster)

- ❖ "And if by grace, it will be said, how came we all not to be saved? Because ye would not. For grace, though it be grace, saves the willing, not those who will not have it, and turn away from it"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "it (grace) is bestowed on us, not because we have done good works, but that we may be able to do them, - in other words, not because we have fulfilled the law, but in order that we may be able to fulfill the law"⁴.

(St. Augustine)

“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers” (Acts 7.52).

That expression is firm and definite. There was not a single prophet not persecuted by the Jews, as though the persecution of the prophets had become part of the nature of that people along the generations, and flowing in their blood.

Their fathers killed the prophets, whose main mission was to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of the world. And their transgressions had become immensely grave, when they killed the apostles of God, who proclaimed the greatest of blessings enjoyed by the nation, and even by the whole world.

If that was the crime of their fathers, their children surpassed them, when they killed the Messiah Himself.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 17.

² Comm. On Paul's Epistles (Rom. 3:2).

³ Hom. On Rom. Hom. 18.

⁴ The spirit and the Letter, 16.

Here, he addressed them frankly and boldly, accusing them of being the children of the murderers of the prophets, who prophesied about the Just One Jesus Christ. Here they shared with their fathers the shedding of the blood of the prophets; and they even consummated their measure by delivering the One, the subject of the prophesies of the prophets. He charged them of the same charge directed to them by the Lord Christ Himself (Matt. 23.29-34).

St. Stephen did not fear them, as he counted it as a great honor, to be treated the same way their fathers treated the prophets, and to partake of the passions of Christ.

❖ For they killed the prophets, and were guilty of shedding the blood of many righteous saints, they were told clearly: “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” And, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets, and stones those

Who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Luke 13.34, 35).

Their wicked deeds were not just directed to the holy prophets, but extended even to the Lord of the prophets, to Christ. In haughtiness, and as though proud of being stiff-necked, they did not care to be committed to believe in Him, but shrewdly resisted His public teachings, and rebuked those who wished to be always with Him, who were thirsty for His teachings¹.

❖ Because their wicked deeds did not only extend to the holy prophets, but to the Lord of the prophets, to Christ, ... they were not given the privilege of the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven, But we were those rather blessed with it, we who are more ready to receive the faith².

(St. Cyril the Great)

“Who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it” (Acts 7.53).

The word ‘diatages’: (order) is used in the military system, where everyone knows his rank, with the extent and limitations of its authority. It is as though the angels, each one in his rank, stood in awe before God’s love for man, as He delivered to them His law, namely, His living word. The angels were witnesses to that amazing divine work. Some believe that the angels, in their ministry to God the lover of mankind, received the law, then delivered it to men, to let him partake of their praise, and of their spiritual worship of God.

And as the word “angels” means (messengers), some believe that he means here those whom God sent, and entrusted to proclaim His word to His people along the generations. Others believe that the lightening, thunder, smoke, and earthquakes that accompanied the delivery of the law were all meant by God to let the people get in touch with the awe of the law. These are all called the angels or messengers of God.

¹ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 41.*

² *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 41.*

Finally, consummating the measure of their fathers by shedding innocent blood, they broke the law they received by the direction of angels. Receiving the law by the direction of angels is a Jewish tradition based on what came in (Deut. 33.1-4, (the Septuagint Version)). That notion was also adopted by St. Paul (Gal. 3.19; Heb. 2.2).

❖ All the ordinances of the Old Testament were given through angels, ... sometimes working personally, and other times through the Person of God¹.

(St. Augustine)

❖ By the angels, it is meant God's messengers, namely Moses, Joshua son of Nun, and other prophets up to John the Baptist. Through those messengers, the law and prophets were set and ordained through God, by the hand of the Savior, by His power. He is the Intercessor, who reconciled God the Father with mankind, to save those who will, among those who received the law from the angels².

(Ambrosiaster)

+ "And everywhere he says it (the Law) was given by angels (Acts 7.53; Gal. 3.19; Heb. 2.2). Some indeed say that Moses is signified; but without reason. For here he says Angels in the plural: and the Angels too which he here speaks of, are those in Heaven"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

9- THE OPEN HEAVEN

"When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth" (Acts 7.54).

Having been accused of blasphemy, they were unable to respond to St. Stephen, as all his speech was from the Scripture. Unable to control their hatred and rage they gnashed their teeth at him, and harbored bitterness toward him.

The Greek word (deprionto), translated as "cut to the heart", is the same translated as (sawn) in (Heb, 11.37). The evil in them had not only filled their hearts with hatred and incited their rage, but cut their hearts as though with a saw. Lack of faith together with envy kills the heart, while faith working with love heals the heart, and provides it with peace in the Lord.

"They gnashed their teeth at him" as a sign that they were completely unable to listen to him. They started to gnash their teeth at him like vicious beasts about to attack their prey, thirsty for its blood.

They were not preoccupied with his face, shining like an angel, but counted his speech as an attack against the Jewish religion since its beginning, having counted their fathers as the killers of prophets. He also spoke of the temple, saying that God does not dwell in a house built by human hands, which is counted as the worst of insults against the temple, the highest honor for the whole nation. That

¹ Epistle of Galatians, 24.3.19-20.

² Ep. to Gal. 3.19.2.

³ Homilies on Hebrews. Hom. 3.6.

is why they plugged their ears, were cut to their hearts, and gnashed at him with their teeth. Finding him worthy of being stoned, in human zeal, they rushed to execute their job, assuming that there is no time to waste, issuing a verdict against him.

“But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7.55).

Whereas their hearts were full of hatred, his was lifted up with love toward humanity, even toward his own persecutors. He gazed into heaven to see the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Why did he gaze into heaven? Certainly, as they gnashed their teeth at him, and their intention to have him stoned became apparent on their faces, God drew his heart as well as his eyes to the divine glory. Affliction is the fertile medium, in which God entrusts the believer to behold heavenly visions of divine glories, with no fear that he would fall into pride or self-esteem.

“at the right hand of God (the Father)” does not imply that the Father has right and left, but the term “right” refers to glory and power, That is why the Lord Christ is portrayed as standing at the right hand of the Father (Ps. 110.1; Heb. 1.13).

Being full of the Holy Spirit, St. Stephen’s eyes concentrated, neither upon the opposition of the rulers, upon their fierce countenance, nor on the stones they carried to stone him, but upon the open heaven, to see the glory of God shining on him, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, as though presenting His divine power to the martyr, to bring him over to paradise.

In our study of martyrdom, we realize an important fact, that during the eve before the execution, the light of God often shone in the prisons; and those about to be killed often enjoyed divine visions and dreams. Sometimes the martyr was granted to behold the Lord Christ coming to be with him at the time of his departure. That is why the word 'martyr' means also in Arabic ‘a witness’, as he is a witness to the Truth, a beholder of the true Christ; and Christ would testify to him as well, before the Father, and before all the heavenly hosts.

❖ Having followed the lead of his Lord in His deeds and words, St. Stephen lacked nothing, delivering himself to God. Moreover, the maturation of his perseverance made him worthy of beholding the divine glory, ***“He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God”*** (Acts 7.55).

This is the glory that the Savior presented to the martyr, to make him more dignified than the angels themselves. ... He saw the Subject of his love Himself, whom the angels desire (and fear) to behold (1 Pet. 1.12); and before whom the Seraphim cover their face, not daring to look at Him. He lifted up his eyes to an exceeding height, to become more exalted than the angels, higher than the principalities, and ahead of the thrones, because the voice of the Lord promised him: “Where I am, there My servant will also be” (John 12.26).

He was the first minister. ... He preceded Paul to cry out: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11.1). ... I am the first to strive together with the Teacher, and the first to behold the

hidden things in heaven. ... Yes I beheld the Son standing at the right hand of the Father. ... I actually beheld what is said, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'" (Ps. 109; Matt. 22.44; Mark 12.36; Luke 20.42, 44; Acts 2.34-35; Heb. 1.13)¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "Standing and sitting, I apprehend, indicate the fixity and entire stability of the nature, as Baruch, when he wishes to exhibit the immutability and immobility of the Divine mode of existence, says, "For you sit for ever and we perish utterly." (Bar. 3.3). Moreover, the place on the right hand indicates in my judgment equality of honour"².

(St. Basil the Great)

When the prophets happened to behold the glory of God, the scene was usually accompanied with a vision of angels, or one of the heavenly ranks like the Cherubim or the Seraphim. Yet here, St. Stephen saw none of those, probably because beholding the splendor of the Lord Christ and His exalted light made all his being preoccupied with Him, to see no one else of those around him, Or because the Lord Christ intended to tell Stephen that the moments of his stoning were indeed moments of great glory, that made the Lord Christ more preoccupied with supporting and welcoming him, than with His heavenly servants.

***"Look, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"* (Acts 7.56).**

Whoever opens his heart by the practical giving love, for the sake of his faith in his beloved Christ, will find the heavens opened for him, and the Son of Man preoccupied with him.

Who told the Evangelist Luke about what the martyr St. Stephen has seen in his last moments? His peaceful countenance and humble voice must have pierced the hearts of many of those present, especially that of Saul of Tarsus who was content with having him stoned; and probably some of those devoted have been so affected by the angelic countenance of St. Stephen, to share with him his vision, and see what he saw. It is as though the martyr St. Stephen had testified to the resurrection of the Lord Christ, until the last moments before his crossing over from this world to paradise.

What the prophet Daniel saw in the sixteenth century BC (Dan. 7.13-14) was also seen by Stephen in the first half of the first century AD. The long centuries could not separate the saints of God, or change the amazing divine truth.

The Holy Spirit who granted St. Stephen the strength to testify to the word, and an enlightenment to speak the words of the prophets, has also opened his insight, to behold the heavenly Truth, to testify before those who were stoning him, that the rejected Christ, the Subject of joy of the prophets and the heavenly creatures, is standing in heaven on the right hand of God the Father.

¹ PG 59.701-702.

² on the Holy Spirit, 8.15.

While the rulers condemned him to be stoned, charging him of blasphemy against the temple, they heard him saying that he was seeing God, the God of their fathers, opening to him the temple of heaven, to behold the Messiah standing at the right hand of glory, waiting to encounter him face to face. It is actually a bold and living heavenly testimony, that the glory of God, having departed from their temple, is filling the souls of believers with its splendor, and setting by His Holy Spirit His temple inside them.

- ❖ "He sits as Judge of quick and dead; He stands as His people's Advocate. He stood, then, as a Priest, while He was offering to His Father the sacrifice of a good martyr; He stood, as the Umpire, to bestow, as it were, upon a good wrestler the prize of so mighty a contest"¹.
- ❖ "Let Him therefore stand in your midst, that the heavens, which declare the glory of God, (Ps. 19.1), may be opened to you, that you may do His will, and work His works"².
- ❖ "Jesus was standing as his advocate, He was standing as though anxious, that He might help His athlete Stephen in his conflict, He was standing as though ready to crown His martyr"³.
- ❖ "Let Him then be standing for you, that you may not be afraid of Him sitting; for when sitting He judges, as Daniel says (Dan. 7.9-11)"⁴.

(St. Ambrose)

In a letter of condolence to Eustochium on the occasion of the departure of her mother, St. Jerome says,

- ❖ "And when the pain which she bore with such wonderful patience darted through her, as if she saw the heavens opened she would say "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away and be at rest" (Ps. 55.6)"⁵.

(St. Jerome)

¹ *Of the Christian Faith, 3.17 (137).*

² *Epistles, 63.5.*

³ *Epistles, 63.5.*

⁴ *Epistles, 63.6.*

⁵ *Letter 108 to Eustochium, 1.*

10- THE MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

“Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord” (Acts 7.57).

They cried out with a loud voice to cover up his voice, and stopped their ears to keep them from getting defiled by his alleged blasphemy.

Signs of anger appeared on the countenances of the members of the Sanhedrin, They incited the people to cry out, and to move to kill, without even caring to issue a verdict. Having got the green light, the people moved to realize the intention in the hearts of the members of the assembly.

The members of the Sanhedrin accused him of blasphemy and pointed out that what he said was a proof for their accusation.

“And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7.58).

The members of the Sanhedrin became in a condition of great agitation and disturbance. They counted what St. Stephen has just uttered as blasphemy, that they would not allow entering their ears lest they become defiled. The Sanhedrin turned from being a high court of Justice, that should issue its verdict after meditation, into a body of executioners to stone the accused without even caring to issue a formal verdict for doing that.

Stoning has been the punishment for blasphemy (Lev. 24.16). And, according to the law, the witnesses start the process of stoning. As for casting him out of the city, that was natural, as, according to the Book of Leviticus, he who is under curse should be taken outside the camp (Lev. 24.14).

Saul considered the stoning of Stephen as a realization of the dream of his life, as he for so long hoped to get rid of the one who kept arguing and debating with him, counting that action as a service to God, to purify the people of the spirit of blasphemy against God, and against the law, Moses, and the temple.

But, how could they stone him without resorting to the Roman law, having previously said to Pilate, during the trial of Jesus Christ, “It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death” (John 18.31)? It is claimed that stoning Stephen happened while Pilate was out of the country.

The witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul of Tarsus, to be the first ones to cast a stone on the accused, as a confirmation of the truth of their testimony. Saul of Tarsus had for several times debated with Stephen, as he was a member of the Synagogue of Cilicia (Acts 6.9).

It was the wish of Saul’s heart to get rid of Stephen, who managed to overcome many members of the Synagogues in debate. Some believe that because Saul had the upper hand in the decision to stone Stephen, he came later on to hear the divine voice, saying, “Why do you persecute Me” (Acts 9.6)? The portrait of the angelic face of Stephen never disappeared from the eyes of Saul of Tarsus, the apostle Paul. His speeches became a Theological program for him. He admitted that, “When the blood of Your

martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him” (Acts 22.20).

“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit’” (Acts 7.59).

St. Stephen’s life, full of the Holy Spirit, was a continuous prayer. In the few months of his ministry, he lived as a man of prayer, even in the moments of his stoning. The fruits of the Spirit in him were so abundant, that by his martyrdom, he drew the heart of Saul of Tarsus to search for the truth.

❖ "You have heard therefore how Stephen was severe (Acts 7.51-52); now hear how he loved. He offended those whom he was rebuking, and was stoned by them. His last prayer was for his enemies. Learn hereby to have "the wedding garment" (love for the enemy)"¹.

(St. Augustine)

❖ "Oh, happy also he who met all the violence of the devil by the exertion of every species of patience!"².

(Scholar Tertullian)

“Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin’, and when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7.60).

St. Stephen ended his life with an exalted farewell prayer, presenting an intercession to God for the sake of his persecutors.

Confronting death, St. Stephen testified to the Lord Christ, that He is one with the Father, and to Him he commended his Spirit. He became like his Master who cried out in the moments of His crucifixion, “Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit” (Luke 23.46). The Psalmist had likewise cried out: “Pull me out of the net which they have secretly laid for me, for You are my strength. Into Your hand I commit my spirit” (Ps. 31.4-5).

Led by the Holy Spirit, he knelt on his knees to die while praying. The Spirit gave him the strength to cry out with a great voice, when his body was extremely weak under the impact of the falling stones, and revealed as well his spacious heart, when he, like his Master on the cross prayed: “Do not charge them with this sin”.

Finally, “when he had said this, he fell asleep”. He did not die, but fell asleep in the darkness of the night of this world, to wake up in the light of the day of God, who wipes out his tears, and brings him up into the joy of his Lord, to share with the heavenly hosts their joy and rejoice.

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 40.9.*

² *on Patience, 14*

- ❖ “When he had said this he fell asleep”. How blessed is this sleep, and how real is this rest! Do you see how man can rest happy when he prays for the sake of his enemies?¹.
- ❖ By loving your enemy, you become a friend of God, and even His son, according to the words of the Lord Himself: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you. That you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5.44-45)².
- ❖ Let us strive to be like physicians toward the wicked, Let us hate their evil works, but not hate them. Let us pray for all the good people, to keep on rising up to a better life, and for the wicked, to enjoy soon a good life through the (medications) of repentance. If we pray for this, we shall be so granted³.
- ❖ Stephen grieved for the sake of their sins more than for his wounds. He grieved for the sake of their evil more than for his death. He was in this on the right path, as, in their evil deeds, there is what warrants grief; whereas, in his death, there is nothing to warrant grief. Eternal perdition followed their evil, while his death was followed by an everlasting life. ... May we love our brethren in the Church, with the same Spirit, by which Stephen loved his enemies⁴.
- ❖ Although Stephen was ordained a deacon by the apostles, yet he came ahead of the apostles themselves by his victorious blessed death. Who was of a lesser rank became superior in passion. And who was a student became a teacher by his martyrdom, consummating what the blessed prophet said in the psalm, “What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me” (Ps. 116.11)?⁵.
(Caesarius Bishop of Arles)
- ❖ Christ Himself has been a role model for us: While on the precious cross, and amid the mocking words of the Jews around Him, He prayed to God the Father for their sake, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23.34). So did the blessed Stephen, who, while being stoned, knelt on his knees saying, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (Acts 7.60). And the blessed Paul, likewise says, “Being reviled we bless, being persecuted, we endure it” (1 Cor. 4.12)⁶.
(St. Cyril the Great)
- ❖ "If your Lord be too high an example for you, turn your thoughts upon your fellow-servant. The holy Stephen was being stoned, and as they stoned him, on bended knees did he pray for his enemies, and say, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin”. They were casting stones, not asking pardon, yet did he

¹ *Sermon 220.2.*

² *Sermon 219.3.*

³ *Sermon 219.3.*

⁴ *Sermon 219.1-2.*

⁵ *Sermon 219.1.*

⁶ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 29.*

pray for them. I hope you were like him; reach forth. If you can not love him in his violence, love him at least when he asks pardon"¹.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "Instead of praying against them, he prayed for them. You, instead of praying for them, utter imprecations against them. You then are wicked in the degree that he was excellent. ... What punishment do we deserve? ... You think indeed that you are inflicting a blow upon another, but in truth you are thrusting the sword against yourself. You suffer not the Judge to be lenient to your own offenses, by this way of urging Him to anger against others. "For what judgment you judge, you will be judged, and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matt. 7.2). Let us therefore be disposed to pardon, that God may be so disposed towards us"².
- ❖ "The Holy Spirit dwells not where wrath is: cursed is the wrathful. It cannot be that something wholesome should approach, where wrath goes forth. For as in a storm at sea, great is the tumult, loud the clamor, and then would be no time for lessons of wisdom (filosofein): So neither in wrath"³.
- ❖ Once the voice of Stephen became silent, that of Paul set off like a trumpet⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Thus was Christ behavior, above all, to set before us an example. While he was still on the cross, while the Jews were mocking at him, He prayed to the Father for their sake.

Blessed Stephen also, while being stoned, knelt down praying for them.

The Blessed Paul also says, "Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure" (1 Cor. 4.12).

You may protest within yourselves, saying, "Christ forgave His enemies, and prayed for them on the cross, because He is God; but as far as I am concerned, I am only human, with a weak mind, helpless to resist the attacks of lust and pain." You may be talking sense, as man's mind easily slide to error. And yet I tell you, that God did not leave you denied of His mercy, You acquire Him inside yourself by the Holy Spirit, You are His dwelling place, as He dwells in the souls of those who love Him. He grants you strength to endure nobly whatever comes upon you, and to resist like a man the attacks of temptations. So, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12.21)⁵.

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ As the disciples followed the example of the Lord Christ, when they suffered like Him, they prayed for those who killed them⁶.

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 6.16.*

² *Hom. On 1 Tim. Hom. 6.*

³ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 17.*

⁴ *Hom. De Covers, Sancti Pauli.*

⁵ *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 29.*

⁶ *Recognitions of Clement, 6.5.*

- ❖ "It behoved the first martyr of Christ thus to be, who, fore-running the martyrs that should follow him in a glorious death, was not only the preacher of the Lord's passion, but also the imitator of His most patient gentleness"¹.

(Martyr Cyprian)

- ❖ The law of the Lord surpasses that of nature, and that proclaimed by Moses, as "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (Luke 18.27). Yet Christ did not give us laws that are impossible to follow, as demonstrated by St. Stephen at the time of his sufferings, when he knelt on his knees and prayed for his persecutors, and by Paul, who prayed for the sake of the Jews under whom he suffered much. The scarcity of these things does not imply that they are impossible, as the majority of people assumes, because they actually lack the wish to strive to reach the summit of virtue².

(Theodore, Bishop of Heraclea)

St. Stephen chose, even in the moments of his stoning, to kneel on his knees, regarding not the stones that were falling on him, but praying for the salvation of his persecutors.

St. Stephen fell asleep, with a heart full of love, and a soul full of exalted peace. He was neither preoccupied by his soul coming out of his body, nor by the horrible pain inflicted on his body during the stoning. But, having experienced the heavenly life, it was impossible for death, or for any other power, to make him lose his peace, until his last breath.

There is great difference between the death of the wicked, and the departure of the saints. The wicked become terrified during their last moments, as they enter into the unknown; whereas the saints rejoice, as their souls have, for so long, yearned for those happy moments.

¹ *Treatise 9 on the Advantage of Patience, 16.*

² *Theodore of Heraclea. Fragment, (c. 355) 40.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 7

WHEREVER I GO, I BEHOLD YOU WITHIN ME POURING YOUR SPLENDOR ON ME

- ❖ Your name is joyful, O God of Glory.
You have proclaimed Yourself to my father Abraham,
Not to glorify You, but to enjoy the splendor of Your glory.
He had not seen You in Jerusalem, or in the temple,
But enjoyed You in Ur of the Chaldeans, the pagan country.
- ❖ Although You promised him the land of Canaan, yet You did not give him even enough to set his foot on,
To let him seek the new land and the new heaven.
You promised him that his descendants would enjoy the Promised Land,
But not before they got into bondage for 400 years.
I wish to endure every pain and temptation,
To enter into, not the Promised Land, but into the heavenly Canaan.
- ❖ Grant me, together with the righteous Joseph, the heart spacious enough to accommodate those who hate me;
To believe, that, even if they sell me as a slave,
It would be for my glory and their salvation.
Let them close the gates of their hearts,
But my heart will always be spacious for them.
Let them plot evil,
For You would turn their evil into what is good for me and for them.
Send me as a slave to the land of Egypt,
To see You there, O Creator of all, who became a slave for my sake.
- ❖ Moses' parents could not keep him for more than three months,
When their human hands proved helpless, Your hands stretched to save him.
You cared for him in Pharaoh's house.
Your strength did not forsake him.
You presented to him the uncorrupted milk of Your holy Church,
As his own mother nurtured him in the midst of the heathen atmosphere.
He was learned in all the wisdom and philosophy of the world,
Yet he disregarded all the royal glory and knowledge,
For the sake of the reproach of Your cross.

- ❖ Rejected by his own people, he fled to the wilderness,
Where he forgot all about the pleasures and wisdom of the world,
Where he retreated to Your presence, O Holy One,
Where he shepherded his senses, feelings, and all his energies, as Your holy flock,
In the stillness of the wilderness of his soul.
He saw You in the bush burning with fire.
What no prophet or high priest has ever seen in the temple,
Your prophet has seen in the stillness of the wilderness.
He took his sandals off, as he stood on a ground, holier than the holy of holies.
Grant me by Your Holy Spirit, to take off all what is dead in me,
To be qualified to enjoy the light of your sacraments.
- ❖ The people opposed him and tried to kill him,
Even in the moments of his good deeds as a leader working by Your power.
His heart remained open to his opponents, until his last breath.
Solomon, who built a temple for You,
With all the glory he earned, has he reached the level of David his father?
Although Solomon was the one who built the temple, David's heart was like Yours.
- ❖ Grant me to behold You in me.
Pour the splendor of Your love and glory in my depths,
To enjoy the new land together with my father Abraham,
And the spacious heart together with the righteous Joseph,
And the realization of Your secrets together with the prophet Moses,
And the purity of heart together with king David.

THE THIRD SECTION

IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

(Chapters 8 and 9)

CHAPTER 8

SAUL PERSECUTING THE CHURCH

The martyrdom of St. Stephen was the beginning of a fierce campaign of persecution against the Church that forced a great number of believers to leave Jerusalem and scatter everywhere. Yet this scattering opened wide the gate of ministry outside Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria.

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1- A great persecution against the Church

“Now, Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the Church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8.1).

The Lord Christ proclaimed to His disciples, on his way to the cross, “You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice” (John 16.20). As St. Stephen was stoned, many believers grieved for him, while Saul of Tarsus rejoiced for getting rid of him. He initially thought it to be the beginning of the end of the disciples, of the Church, and of the name of the crucified Jesus in the world. The word ‘consenting’ bore the comfort and joy of the heart He probably admitted that before many, including St. Luke, as a self remorse and a living testimony to God’s abundant grace that transformed him from rejoicing in the killing of the preachers, to finding his contentment in his daily endurance of death, for the sake of preaching in the name of the crucified Jesus. Paul felt remorse for those days in which he consented to the persecution of the Christians, with the conviction that he was rendering service to God.

It was not in the minds of believers then, to preach among the Gentiles, as their thoughts were confined to the Church in Jerusalem. Even The disciples and the apostles, having heard the repeated commandment of the Lord Christ before His ascension, to testify to Him in the whole world, did not know yet how to begin their ministry outside Jerusalem.

The martyrdom of Stephen, and the explosion of the wave of persecution against the Church in Jerusalem, forced the believers to disperse everywhere, and turned out to become like seeds sowed in several countries, for establishing churches there.

1- The martyrdom of St. Stephen caused a great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem. What was the secret behind this?

It is very difficult to explain why the apostles remained in Jerusalem, when the congregation were scattered everywhere. But it is possible to say that it certainly was the pleasure of the Lord Christ the Head of the Church, to have the apostles staying in Jerusalem, to work for the newly established Church, to become the center of a spiritual power to support the churches to be established later on by the scattered congregation. The Lord Christ intended to proclaim His plan, that the city which opposed and crucified Him remains a living center for the spiritual work, by his holy apostles.

2- So far, both the Jews and the Romans counted the Christians as a Jewish sect, committed to worship in the temple. The Jewish leaderships, even the Sanhedrin, could not realize the real extent of the Christian faith. But the frank address of St. Stephen, and his confirmation of what the Lord Christ had previously proclaimed that the temple would be destroyed, and that the Jewish customs would change, including the circumcision of the flesh, keeping the Sabbath, and the statutes of purification, provoked the Jews to get rid altogether of the followers of Jesus, as their presence, represented a grave danger, especially in Jerusalem, where the temple and the rites of feasts were.

3- It was bitter for the Jewish leaderships, having realized in the address of Stephen, a public accusation that the Sanhedrin had committed the crime of killing the Messiah. They feared the spreading of that accusation on a public level, even among the Jewish unbelievers in Jesus, as that would shake the image of sanctity, and probably the authority of the Sanhedrin. That is why, getting rid of the followers of the Crucified was of very urgent importance.

4- He who shed blood is termed in the Holy Book as 'thirsty to shed blood', as he feels that committing it would bring fulfillment and comfort to his depths, Yet his thirst to shed blood only grows stronger, to go on killing and shedding more blood. The same thing could be said of anger, which incites in the soul a growing fire of hatred.

5- The martyrdom of St. Stephen, with such a spirit of love and zeal, has given the believers, even the weak among them, strength to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ publicly, and to enter into debate with the Jews, something that flared the situation in Jerusalem, more and more.

6- The Church had to be driven out of Jerusalem, in order to bear together with her Lord, the reproach of the cross outside the camp.

7- Saul of Tarsus, having got rid of St. Stephen, who used to embarrass him in debate, feared that another Stephen who embraces the same thoughts may appear. That is why Saul dedicated all his energies to oppose the Church, and to completely scatter its congregation.

8- Saul assumed that by the death of St. Stephen, he would surely be able to resume his normal life, with no spiritual, theological, and intellectual opposition. He did not realize that it actually constituted the beginning of a revolution of thoughts within him, to start a new life on the same path taken by Stephen. And that, the fast setting forth of St. Stephen to paradise has become a support for his own transformation to faith, and for his joyful acceptance of sufferings, persecution, and even daily

death for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ. Here, St. Luke connects between the martyrdom of St. Stephen and the entrance of Saul of Tarsus into the gospel of the Church. Having been the fiercest persecutor of the Church, who caused the believers to scatter all over Judea and Samaria, he did not realize that the Holy Spirit uses even his fierce violence to provoke believers to set forth far from the temple, with all its rites and daily gatherings, in order to open the door of faith before the Gentiles.

Yet the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, probably on account of the fact that because they were all Hebrew, the Sanhedrin did not fear that they might change the Jewish customs. But the Sanhedrin could not stand any Greek Jew converted to Christianity to stay behind, lest a new Stephen, an opponent to the temple and the customs, might appear. The apostles might also have stayed in Jerusalem, having felt that it was their duty to provoke the congregation to flee from persecution, for fear that any weak believer might fall into denial of faith, and in the hope that, by their scattering everywhere, they might be able to testify to Jesus outside Jerusalem. But the apostles bravely stayed in Jerusalem to confront the first round of persecution.

“And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation on him” (Acts 8.2).

Some believe that the word *‘devout’* means the Proselytes, who with the spirit of Piety, forsook paganism and accepted Judaism, and Stephen was probably one of them. Others believe that it has a broader meaning, that of all believers in Jesus Christ, whatever their origin might be. Those, being full of piety and zeal, took care of the body that was torn apart by stones, and carried it to its burial place.

Still others believe that those devout men might refer to the Jews, who, in spite of not accepting the Christian faith, did not embrace a spirit of animosity toward Jesus Christ, or toward His disciples and followers; or they might have been convinced by the Christian faith, yet they could not declare it. Those men were not comfortable with stoning St. Stephen, and might have felt guilty, when they saw his face shining as the face of an angel, until the last moments before his departure, and when they heard his words concerning the opening up of heaven, beside his prayer for the forgiveness of those who stoned him.

Some believe that the word *‘lamentation’* in Greek (Copton) implies pounding on the chest, from which the word ‘Egitto’ or (Egyptian) came, as it was the custom of the ancient Egyptians to pound on the chest in lamentation. The Jews imitated them, as they did when Jacob was buried, when “they mourned with a great and very solemn lamentation” (Gen. 50.7, 10, 11).

Although, according to the Mishnah¹, no lamentation is done for those condemned on account of their offense against the law, yet it seems that many Pharisees saw that stoning Stephen was itself against the law.

¹ *Mishnah. Senh 6.6.*

Some may probably marvel why a great lamentation was done for a martyr who saw heavens opened, Jesus standing on the right side of God, and whose face was like that of an angel.

St. Paula once asked **St. Jerome**, "Why shouldn't I mourn 'Blaesilla', who departed three months after accepting faith?" He answered, "And when we read that, for Moses and Aaron, lamentation was made after ancient custom, this ought not to surprise us, for even in the Acts of the Apostles, in the full blaze of the gospel, we see that the brethren at Jerusalem made great lamentation for Stephen. This great lamentation, however, refers not to the mourners, **but to the funeral procession and to the crowds which accompanied it**. This is what the Scripture says of Jacob: "Joseph went up to bury his father: and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, **and all the elders of the land of Egypt**, and all the house of Joseph and his brethren" (Gen. 50.7-8); and a few lines farther on: "And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen: and it was a great company." Finally, "they mourned with a great and very sore lamentation" (Gen. 50.10). This solemn lamentation does not impose prolonged weeping upon the Egyptians, but simply describes the funeral ceremony. ... We are told, for instance, that lamentation was made for Moses. ... But under Jesus, that is, under the Gospel of Christ, who has unlocked for us the gate of paradise, death is accompanied, not with sorrow, but with joy"¹.

That great lamentation was held to express the following feelings:

a- Those devout men intended to pay respect to the one who was unjustly stoned.

b- By taking part in it, the Christians showed that they were not ashamed of the cause, for which Stephen was stoned, and that they did not fear the Sanhedrin or others, who harbored animosity toward the believers.

c- As Stephen was the first martyr in the name of the Lord Christ, following the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, the Church proclaimed her pride in his martyrdom, being precious in the sight of God and that of the Church, and a sign of dignity and victory. They intended to present a practical testimony to their belief in the resurrection from the dead, and in the life of the age to come.

The word translated as "carried" means (collected), as one collects a crop of fruits. They collected the parts torn apart off St. Stephen's body, wrapped them in shrouds, and anointed them with fragrant spices. They were indeed like heavenly fruits, collected from the garden of divine love, for the heavenly creatures to find in them the sweet fragrance of the exalted love of Christ.

"As for Saul, he made havoc of the Church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (Acts 8.3).

The Greek word 'elumaineto' translated as "making havoc", in its origin, is used to portray the attacks of wild beasts to tear up their prey. It is close to what the apostle Paul meant when he admitted,

¹ Letter 39.4.

“I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Gal. 1.13). Saul, like a fierce beast “was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9.1).

In several situations, the apostle Paul himself described how by an authority from the high priest, he fiercely persecuted the Church, using all possible means (Acts 22.4-5, 19, 26.9-11; 1 Tim. 1.13), killing some believers (Acts 21.4, 26 10).

The Sanhedrin used to confiscate the possessions of the Christians, as, according to the actual experience of the apostle Paul, “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and enduring possession for yourselves in heaven” (Heb. 10.34).

With authority, he forced his way, day or night, into any house in which there was one or more Christians, to bind men and women in chains, and drag them in the streets, with no regard to the sick or the elderly, take everyone to prison, to be condemned to death, unless they denied faith, and blasphemed the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 26.11).

Although the Sanhedrin had the authority to imprison whoever committed a crime against religion, it had no right to condemn anyone to be stoned or executed without permission from the Roman authority.

Saul, the young Pharisee, full of zeal for his fathers’ traditions, was the best tool in the hands of the high priest to realize his goals, and the best agent of the Sanhedrin to consummate its mission. Saul believed in what he was doing, as according to him, how a crucified criminal could claim to be the Messiah, when the Holy Book testifies that anyone hanged on a tree is cursed. That is why, in his own eyes, he zealously believed in the Scripture, and considered Jesus as a fraud, and the new movement as a blasphemy against God, His law, His temple, and against the whole Jewish nation.

2- PHILIP’S MINISTRY IN SAMARIA

“Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8.4).

The words of the Lord Christ: “I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled” (Luke 12.49) were realized. The Jewish leaderships felt that the fire of preaching in Christ the Savior were kindled in Jerusalem; and intending to quench it, they poured their wrath upon all those whose souls flared with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Although the believers were scattered outside Jerusalem, it was impossible for the hosts of darkness to quench the fire of the Spirit that flared all over the surrounding regions.

They intended to drive them out of Jerusalem the city of God, But God set for Himself cities and hearts everywhere to dwell in, even among the Samaritans, against whom the Jews harbored bitter animosity.

The believers were scattered, yet they went everywhere preaching the word. The Greek word for “scatter” refers to sowing seeds. As the blood of the martyrs gave fruits, and the persecution resulted in the growth of the Church, in which there was no condition of murmur or affliction, those persecuted

went everywhere sowing the seeds of faith in several countries, Faith has no longer been confined to Jerusalem.

There is no proof that those who were scattered were ordained for preaching work, but, actually they were ordinary people. Where the heart is filled with love, the mouth speaks of the Savior. For a true Christian, there is nothing better than caring for the salvation of every soul, and working to the account of the kingdom of God, for letting everyone enjoy the exalted work of God¹.

Preaching or testimony to the gospel of salvation should be an essential work **to be practiced by every believer**, whether he is a priest or a lay man, man or woman, well-learned or illiterate. Without the spirit of preaching, the believer loses his character as a Christian, and as **St. John Chrysostom** says, What is the benefit of a lamp without light, and what is the benefit of a Christian without his love for the salvation of his brethren?

In an essay on the mission of a Christian, **St. John Chrysostom** said to the people, What a waste! Very few of the brethren care for things pertaining to salvation. A great part of the body of the Church is like a dead corpse without movement.

You may ask: "**What have we to do with this?**"

You have a great capability and responsibility toward your brethren, to advise them, keep evil away from them, and draw them away from their shameful slothfulness. It is not fitting for man to be useful only for himself, but should be for many as well.

The Lord Christ demonstrated this when he described believers as "salt" (Matt. 5.13), "leaven" (Matt. 13.33), and "light" (Matt. 5.14), as all these are beneficial for all.

A lamp does not give light for its own sake, but for the benefit of those sitting in the dark. You, as a lamp, are not supposed to enjoy the light alone, but to bring on a lost soul, as what is the benefit of a Christian who is not useful for others, and does not bring somebody back to the truth?

Salt does not preserve itself, but preserves food against corruption and perdition. ... So God made you a spiritual salt, to preserve the brethren, to strengthen them, to save them from slothfulness and corruption, and to bind them to the rest of the body of the Church.

For the same reason, the Lord called us "leaven", because leaven does not act on itself: although tiny, yet it can raise up the whole dough whatever big it is. You as well, even if few in number, you should be many and strong in faith and zeal toward God. ... And if you will, you can draw a greater number than you are, and can make them on the same level of zeal.

***"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ to them"* (Acts 8.5).**

Apprehensive of the probable appearance of another Stephen who would debate with the same spiritual zeal, Judea put its eye on the deacon Philip the second man in line directly after Stephen. This, in obedience to the command of the Lord Christ, left the city and fled to another (Matt. 10.23). He had to

¹ Cf. Barne's Notes on Acts. 8.4

leave Jerusalem and escape to Samaria, not for fear for his life, but to preach the gospel of salvation. God allowed for his affliction, to lead him to work outside Jerusalem, and to realize His divine plan. Ministry in Samaria became a bridge, across which the gospel spread to the Gentiles, as the Samaritans were a hybrid people of Jews and Gentiles.

It is not clear whether he means the city of Samaria or the whole province. Samaria in the New Testament most probably means the province and not the city. Here, the riddle of Samson was realized: “Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet” (Judg. 14.14). Persecution produced growth and spreading of the Church. Those persecuted did not escape for fear of affliction and suffering, but in obedience to the commandment of their Lord Christ, to testify in a new location that might accept the word. It is an escape for the sake of spreading the gospel among the whole world.

The city of Samaria is believed by some to be Shechem or Sychar, where the Samaritan woman encountered with the Lord Christ (John 4.7). The old city of Samaria has been the capital of the province of Samaria that was completely destroyed by Hyrcanus, who, according to the Historian Josephus, had removed every trace that could lead to its location¹. Herod the Great later rebuilt it and called it Sebaste, meaning Augusta, as a tribute to Emperor Augustus². Yet still some believe that it was the city called Gitta.

Philip, the deacon, the second in line after St. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit for evangelic ministry, set forth to minister to the inhabitants of Samaria, among whom he found those who previously proclaimed, “... We have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4.42).

The expression “**went down**” was used for coming from Jerusalem, which was located high on a mount.

Setting forth to Samaria was seen as a bold and courageous step by Philip, a Hebrew who intended to preach among the Samaritans, toward whom the Jews used to harbor animosity. Yet we read in the episode of the Samaritan woman (John 4), how the Samaritans were anticipating the coming of the Messiah with longing and zeal. Philip followed the same path of St. Stephen, who revealed the essence of the Christian faith, and called for freedom from the literal Jewish rites, as though he was his disciple. At the same time he opened the door before the apostle Paul to preach among the Gentiles. St. Philip, together with St. Stephen, were the link that connected between Peter the apostle of circumcision, and Paul the apostle of the Gentiles, between the Church of Jerusalem and that of the Gentiles.

The word to “preach” meant to proclaim the coming of a King. St. Philip came to proclaim to them that the anticipated Messiah had come to reign. The preachers preached nothing but the realization

¹ *Antiq. 13.10.3*

² *Antiq. 15.8.5.*

of the prophecies and the divine promises of the coming of the Lord Christ the Savior of the world, to reign upon the hearts.

“And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did” (Acts 8.6).

The Samaritan woman marveled as the Lord Christ spoke to her, asking for water to drink, and said to Him, “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman” (John 4.9)? Now, that the Lord Christ was coming in St. Philip the preacher, to slay the old animosity, and to grant them the spirit of love, even among themselves, the multitude listened with one accord. The word of the gospel presented reconciliation between the spirit and the flesh in the Lord, among themselves, to bear the one spirit, with the Jews who received the faith, and even with their enemies. ... All that was through the reconciliation with God, the Grantor of peace and love.

There was a great difference between the situations of the Samaritans and the Jews: The Jews opposed the Truth in the days of the ministry of the Lord Christ, as well as in the days of the apostles. They all, but a few who received the faith, followed the apostle Paul to spoil his efforts in every city. Concerning the Samaritans on the other hand, in the days of the Lord Christ, the whole city of Sychar came to the Lord, for the sake of the testimony of one Samaritan woman, who said, “He told me what I ever did” (John 4.39). And there they were, in the days of the apostles, listening to St. Philip with one accord, and moved together as a congregation to accept the faith.

“For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed” (Acts 8.7).

Having been longing for the coming of the Messiah, the Samaritans listened with one accord to Philip, to whom the Holy Spirit granted the words of wisdom, and the grace of driving out the unclean spirits and healing the sick. The whole city turned into a great heavenly festival.

Wherever the word of the gospel was preached, the kingdom of the devil collapsed, and had no more place in the souls of believers, or an abode of comfort in their minds, as all became the possession of the Savior to set His kingdom in them. Wherever the Holy One enters into the inner man, the unclean spirits depart, and the darkness no longer abides.

“There was great joy in that city” (Acts 8.8).

St. Stephen was the subject of joy to heaven, as he, in the moments of being stoned, carried angelic features, became the proto-martyr and a marvelous example of the believer, the partner of Christ in His crucifixion. Now, his fellow deacon or his disciple Philip became the subject of joy to Samaria. The Samaritans realized that they had also become the subject of the exalted love of God, that the gates of heaven were open before them, and the bosom of God awaiting them. Philip became the first one to preach outside Jerusalem.

The city of Samaria rejoiced that the Lord Christ came to dwell in the hearts of believers, to destroy the old animosity between them and God, between them and their Jewish brethren, and to gather together the Jews and the Gentiles, as members in His Holy Body, which is the Church.

Receiving the gospel or the good news brings on the soul as well as the congregation to the joy of salvation. You hear here how a great joy came over the city of Samaria; and the secret is the dwelling of the Lord Christ in their depths and among them. The people rejoiced when they saw how the kingdom of the devil collapsed under their feet; how the unclean spirits had no more authority over them; how their souls and sick bodies were healed; and finally how they came to have the one Spirit; how joy came over all, as every member rejoiced for the joy and the growth of the other members.

Preaching salvation or the good news of the gospel uproots from humanity the spirit of depression that came over them through sin, to set the joyful kingdom of God in the depths of their souls. Christianity is a call for the experience of the rejoicing heavenly life.

3- FAITH OF SIMON THE SORCERER

“There was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great” (Acts 8.9).

The use of sorcery had been common in the old world. At the beginning, the sorcerers used to be scholars of philosophy, astrology, medicine, etc. But later on, they claimed to reveal the future, through the movements of the stars, and to heal the sick by magic (Isa. 2.6; Dan. 1.20, 2.2). That was all banned by the Law of Moses (Lev. 19.31, 20.6).

“To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God’” (Acts 8.10).

Some scholars believe that that Simon was the one referred to by the Historian Josephus¹, a sorcerer born in Cyprus, who was used by Felix the Governor, to seduce Drusilla to leave her husband Azizus and marry him, a view rejected by other scholars, as Simon here, was most probably a Jew or a Samaritan, who dedicated his life to study the art of sorcery. He studied philosophy in Alexandria, then lived in Samaria².

He claimed to be Christ, rejected the Law of Moses, and became an enemy of Christianity, although he used to quote some of its teachings in order to impress and draw some people.

“They heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time” (Acts 8.11).

When the devil saw the Word of God incarnate, and probably realized that his kingdom was about to collapse, he did his best to set obstacles everywhere. He provoked Simon to practice sorcery and astonish people, from the least to the greatest, for a long time.

¹ *Antiqu. 20.7.2.*

² *Mosheim. vol. 1, p. 113-114. (Murdock’s translation).*

Simon the Sorcerer was a man of prominent personality among the people of history and science, and was counted by all as ‘the great power of God’. According to **St. Irenaeus**¹, he was accompanied by a woman by the name of Helene, who claimed that she was the product of a previous incarnation by the god of reason, namely the divine intellect, from whom all the angelic and material powers had been supposedly created. **St. Hippolytus**² presented a comprehensive report of that sorcerer’s dogma, based upon a Gnostic basis, that he called ‘The great revelation.

The martyr Justin³ tells how that sorcerer managed to draw, by the power of his sorcery, some followers to dedicate their life to his system, not only in Samaria, but in Antioch and Rome as well. In Rome, a statue was dedicated to him on which was inscribed: ‘In memory of Simon the holy god’. There, he provoked the Roman rulers against the Christians, and entered into a bitter controversy against St. Peter that ended with his defeat. According to **the scholar Origen**⁴, the Simonites kept on working against the Church up till the middle of the third century AD.

“The great power of God” meant ‘The powerful god’ or ‘the mighty Jehovah’. In the book of the Jewish Jubilee, ‘Apocripha’, it came that the people in Egypt used to follow Joseph, crying out: ‘El-El wa abir El’, meaning ‘**God, and the power from God**’. Some believe that the exact translation of **“The great power of God”** is ‘This is the power of God, called the mighty’.

Simon caused Pontius Pilate to be fired, when he proclaimed his intention to go to Mount Gerzim to excavate from under the ruins of the temple of Gerzim, the pottery that was used by the prophet Moses himself. When huge crowd followed him there, Pontius Pilate had to send a garrison to control the multitude, and a horrible slaughter took place. When the Samaritans complained to the Roman Governor in Syria, he informed Rome, and Pilate was recalled and never returned.

In a show in Rome, according to **Hippolytus**, Simon asked to be buried alive, claiming that he would rise from the dead after three days, but when he was buried, he never did.

“But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8.12).

When they compared between the Truth that was preached by the apostle Philip, and the seemingly incredible acts of sorcery done by Simon, the Holy Spirit granted Philip’s preaching the power to devastate the devil and his hosts.

The apostle Philip connects between the kingdom of heaven and Baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

The martyr Cyprian magnificently presents to us his own experience of Baptism, saying,

¹ *Adv. Haer.* 1.23.

² *Refutation of all Heresies.* 6.2-5.

³ *Apology* 1.26.

⁴ *against Celsus,* 1.57.

Just like you, I used to think that I was free, when I was actually a captive, chained in spiritual darkness.

Yes, I was free to live the way I chose, yet life was meaningless for a long time, always looking for something to believe in. Despite pretending to be self-confident, I was actually like a wave swept by wind. Although I was attracted by all the things of life, proud to have possessions and authority, I knew in my heart that all these things are nothing more than a bubble in the sea, appearing for a moment, to vanish forever. Despite my apparent confidence, I knew that I was lost in life, with no plan to follow, or a dwelling place for my soul to settle down.

You can tell that I knew nothing about the true life, the new life presented to us from high above. Because I used to search for the truth through my personal experiences, depending upon my personal logic, the Truth remained illusive, and the light of the true divine existence of God remained as a mere distant glimpse.

Then I came to hear that men and women could be born again; and that God Himself, out of His love for the creation, lost like myself, proclaimed the way to have this new birth realized.

At the beginning I assumed that to be a mere fiction: How is it possible, for somebody like me, leading such a violent sort of life, to change and become a new creation? How is it possible for somebody like me to pass through the water of Baptism, and proclaim that he is born again? As far as I am concerned, it is something incredible to stay physically as I am now, while the backbone of my being changes to become as though a new man.

I was not willing to forsake easily my disbelief and my opposition to the concept of being born from above, saying, "We are flesh and blood, with natural instincts deeply rooted in our bodies. We, by nature, put ourselves forward ahead of everyone else, fight and wrestle to overcome others, whatever the cost may be. We have acquired habits, although harmful, yet they are integrated in us, like members of our bodies. How can somebody who is fond of lavish food and drink become well-balanced and self-controlled? How can somebody, who is fond of luxurious clothes, wake up one morning, to put on a simple attire? How can he lead a humble life, after being so long dignified in the sight of society?"

That was my natural way of thinking. I was so enslaved by so many bad habits, though harmful, yet were an integral part of me, that I actually despaired of any possibility of change. And, why should I change, when I was actually enjoying fulfilling my desires, and spoiling myself?

But ... One day, I took a single, simple, yet important step, toward God. I, like a child, humbly stood before Him, and said, "I believe", then went into the blessed water, that spiritually cleansed the dirt of my past, as though some dirty stain was removed from an expensive linen cloth.

I actually experienced what is more! A light shone upon me from above, I was swamped by a gentle wave of peace that instantly purified me. My dark heart was satisfied by His presence! ... I knew. ... Yes I knew ... that the dark barrier between God and myself collapsed. ... His heart and mine

reconciled. ... I then realized that the Spirit, the breath of God the Father, who is above this world, has dwelt in me, and made of me a new man.

Since then, I grew in the knowledge of how to walk in a way that makes the new life granted to me persistently flourish. What I used to doubt, I was committed to deal with, being the Truth. What I used to hide has to come to light. What I used to misunderstand, concerning God and the spiritual world, has become clear.

As to the personal habit of my old man, I learned well how to change. ... This earthly body is being consistently recreated by God every day, to become stronger and more vivid in the Spirit of holiness.

Now, let me simply demonstrate to you the first step on the way of the Spirit: **Each day, you should stand before God in holy reverence, and like an innocent child, trust Him. This way, you will protect and keep yourself from becoming like those who wrongly assumed that they were already saved, while the ancient enemy who was waiting in hiding, captivated them anew.**

Start today to walk along the path of innocence, namely, that of the straight life before God and men. Walk in a steadfast stride. Depend upon God with all your heart and strength.

Do not you feel His presence? God the Father is around you, longing to pour His grace upon you. You have only to go to Him, thirsty for the new life. Open up now your soul, and experience His grace, that is freedom, love, and strength, that fill you and flow over you from above.

Open up your soul before Him now, your Father and Creator. Get ready to be filled by the new life, which is God Himself¹.

“Then Simon himself also believed, and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed seeing the miracles and signs which were done” (Acts 8.13).

At the beginning Simon was able to discern between what is true and what is wrong, and between what is from God and what is from the devil. He believed and continued with the apostle Philip, amazed by the great miracles and signs done by him. But unfortunately, he wished to acquire that power, and went so far to try to purchase it with money.

❖ "So again when we hear, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16.16), we do not of course understand it of one who believes in such a way “Even the demons believe – and tremble” (Jam. 2.19, nor of those who receive baptism in such sort as Simon Magus, who though he could be baptized, could not be saved. As then when He said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved”, He had not in his view all who believe and are baptized, but some only; those, to wit, who are settled in that faith, which, according to the Apostle's distinction, “working through love” (Gal. 5.6)”².

(St. Augustine)

¹ *Epistles, 1.* (David Hazard. *You Give Me New Life*. 1995, Ch. 1.).

² *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 21.16.*

❖ Even Simon the sorcerer came one day to the Baptismal font, Yet, although he got submerged in its water, yet his heart was not enlightened by the Holy Spirit; his soul was not buried together with Christ, or raised from the dead with him (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2.12).

Here I am presenting to you an example of someone who fell, so as not to fall like him. What occurred then was a lesson to the Catechumens who seek Baptism.

Let no one among you tempt the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness spring up in him, and cause him trouble (Heb. 12.15).

May no one, driven by mere curiosity, would come to think of exploring what is going on among the believers.

Do you think you are not being seen? While searching others, God is searching your heart¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

¹ *Exortium 2.*

4- Start of the Simony

“Now when the apostles who were in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them” (Acts 8.14).

St. John, who together with his brother James, once asked Jesus the Lord of glory to send fire to burn up a Samaritan village (Luke 9.25), was himself, now going together with St. Peter, delegated from the Church in Jerusalem, to support St. Philip in his ministry in Samaria. But then, they went to seek the fire of the Holy Spirit to come down to renew the hearts of the Samaritans, to pour the divine love in them and to reshape their souls to become a holy bride for the Lord Christ.

As a multitude of Samaritans came to receive the word, there was a need for other hands to work beside St. Philip. It was the first bold movement by the Church in Jerusalem, to send two apostles outside Judea to minister to the Samaritans, and to have them as members in the Church.

Sending Peter and John to Samaria confirms the collective nature of work in the Church of Jerusalem, and that there was no chief among the apostles, but they were all equal in apostolic authority. St. Peter was in no position to send delegates in his place, but, in humility, love, and fellowship, he abided to the voice of the apostles, to be sent together with St. John to work with wisdom. The apostles chose St. Peter, known for his zeal and quick decisions, together with St. John, known for his gentility and peaceful nature, who despite their difference in nature, they worked in harmony, as each of them felt his need for the other. Difference in nature and talents is a healthy sign for the Church, as long as love and humility prevail in the life of the congregation.

“Who when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8.15-17).

The believers had already got the sacrament of Baptism. Now the apostles Peter and John laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit. The Bishops received this tradition: ***“laying the hands”***, called, ***“the sacrament of anointment”*** or ***“the sacrament of Myron”***, by which the Spirit dwells deep in the soul of the believer, sanctifies his life, and leads him to carry the icon of Christ (We shall deal with it in a special annex at the end of this chapter).

The Lord Christ had previously commanded His disciples not to enter any Samaritan city (Matt. 10.5). But after His ascension and the dwelling of His Holy Spirit, He opens its gates before them to preach and baptize.

St. Philip baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, so why did not he lay his hand on them to receive the Holy Spirit? Some believe that the issue of the Gentiles receiving faith, gaining the sacrament of Baptism, and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, had been of a very serious nature. It was not possible at the beginning, for the Christianized Jews, to accept it easily. If that happened through Philip alone, they might have taken an aggressive position against him, considering his action as invalid. That

is why he undertook only preaching and Baptism, then waited for the Church of circumcision, represented by Peter and John, to come to confirm his work, by laying their hands on the believers to receive the Holy Spirit. What the two apostles did did not underestimate St. Philip, or put him in a position of inability to lay his own hand to the same effect, but was according to a divine plan to confirm the unity of work of the Church, to open the door of faith to the Gentiles.

At the beginning of preaching, receiving the Holy Spirit differed from case to another, according to what the Spirit sees, for the sake of the different situations involved.

- ❖ "in the days of Moses, the Spirit was given by laying on of hands (Num. 11.29); and by laying on of hands Peter also gives the Spirit"¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

“Now when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money” (Acts 8.18).

Simon thought that he was capable of getting the power of the apostles to perform miracles and signs by giving them money, not realizing that the apostles themselves have got it as a free gift from God Himself, and that those apostles have already sold all their possessions to follow the Crucified. What he intended to give them had no more place in their hearts, or in their mind.

Although Simon accepted the Christian faith, his heart remained captive to doing supernatural things through sorcery. He probably assumed that the apostles’ power was a kind of sorcery, although of some other nature than his. His goal, like Balaam, was to gain material benefits through that power. His behavior revealed the pride and self-esteem still contained in his heart.

- ❖ "he (Simon) loved the power which was in the Christians more than the righteousness"².

(St. Augustine)

“Saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 8.19).

St. Irenaeus³ believes that, because Simon the sorcerer thought that the miracles and signs that the apostles did were through some knowledge greater than sorcery, and not through the power of God, he intended to acquire the secret of that power by giving them money, instead of believing in God and repenting.

- ❖ "He cannot hope for the kingdom of the heavens, whose finger or wand abuses the heaven. (Him who uses stars in sorcery)"⁴.

¹ Lect. Catec. 16.26.

² in Joan. tr. 6.18.

³ Cf. Adv. Haer. 1.23.1.

⁴ on Idolatry, 9.

(Scholar Tertullian)

❖ "For as she (the church) has received freely from God, freely also does she minister [to others]"¹.

(St. Irenaeus)

❖ "For he said not, "Give me also the fellowship of the Holy Ghost," but "Give me the power." ... He offered money also to them who had no possessions; and this, though he saw men bringing the prices of the things sold, and laying them at the Apostles' feet"².

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

❖ "Which when Simon saw, supposing that this power was of men, he wished it might be his also. What he thought to be of men, he wished to buy of men"³.

(St. Augustine)

"But Peter said to him, 'Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money'" (Acts 8.20).

St. Peter revealed to him his crime, that he assumed that the divine gifts, which are not to be evaluated, could be purchased with money.

St. Peter believed that love of money is destructive to the soul, so if Simon's heart was attached to that sin, it would perish together with the money he had, that would ultimately perish and scatter, together with the whole earth. Attaching himself to what is perishable, he would go down together with it.

Assuming that he was capable of purchasing from God His divine gifts with money, Simon insulted God, the Compassionate.

"You have neither portion or share in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God" (Acts 8.21).

"Portion" was used when an inheritance was distributed among heirs. If Simon's heart was not right, he was no longer counted as a son to the Holy God, and accordingly, had no right to get a portion of the inheritance. What preoccupies the Christian's mind is not getting his portion in the inheritance, whatever its value is, but the enjoyment of sonship to God, and abiding to it, so that whatever he gains in this world, or the inheritance of eternal life, would be a natural fruit of that exalted sonship.

"Share" (or lot): When an army gets a certain victory, the spoils are gathered and distributed among the men by lot. Simon had no right to enjoy a share, having separated himself from the army of God, and was no more the good soldier who, by grace, would destroy and crush the strongholds of the devil under his feet.

¹ *Adv. Haer. 1.23.4.*

² *Lect. Catec. 16.10.*

³ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 49.10.*

Finally, to have that situation corrected, it was not enough to retract from trying to purchase that gift with money, but he should have turned from not having the right heart, to holiness and loyalty in loving God.

Although Simon believed and was baptized, he persisted on leading a twisted life, and on not enjoying the new life in Jesus Christ. God sees him according to the quality of his heart, being the One who searches the heart and mind.

'Simony' is referred to Simon the sorcerer, who assumed that he was capable of purchasing the powers of the Holy Spirit with money, either to gain material benefit or to acquire temporal dignity. Simony contradicts the work of the Spirit, because the gifts of the Spirit are granted to those who have sold the world, and crucified the self together with the lusts, for the sake of the glory of heaven. Whoever has heaven as his portion would not wish for material benefits, or temporal glories.

According to Epiphanius, Simon said about himself that he came to the Jews as being the Son, who did not really suffer, although he seemed as though he did, and among the Samaritans, as being the Father, and among the rest of the Gentiles as being the Holy Spirit¹.

In his apology directed to Antoninus Pius, **Justin martyr**² wrote: "There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between the two bridges, and bore this inscription, in the language of Rome:-"Simoni Deo Sancto," (I.E.) "To Simon the holy God."". **St. Irenaeus and the Scholar Tertullian** mentioned the same account.

❖ "The inventor of all heresy was Simon Magus³ that Simon, who in the Acts of the Apostles thought to purchase with money the unsaleable grace of the Spirit, and heard the words, "You have neither portion or share in this matter", and the rest: concerning whom also it is written, "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (1 John 2.19).

This man, after he had been cast out by the Apostles, came to Rome, and gaining over one Helena a harlot was the first that dared with blasphemous mouth to say that it was himself who appeared on Mount Sinai as the Father, and afterwards appeared among the Jews, not in real flesh but in seeming as Christ Jesus, and afterwards as the Holy Spirit whom Christ promised to send as the Paraclete And he so deceived the City of Rome that Claudius set up his statue, and wrote beneath it, in the language of the Romans, "Simoni Deo Sancto," which being interpreted signifies, "To Simon the Holy God"⁴.

¹ *St. Irenaeus. Adv. Haer. 1.23.1.*

² *Apology, 13.*

³ *St. Irenaeus adopted this view. (23.1, 2).*

⁴ *Lect. Catec. 6.14.*

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

❖ "Now this Simon of Samaria, from whom all sorts of heresies derive their origin, formed his sect out of the following materials:-Having redeemed from slavery at Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, a certain woman named Helena, he was in the habit of carrying her about with him, declaring that this woman was the first conception of his mind, the mother of all, by whom, in the beginning, he conceived in his mind [the thought] of forming angels and archangels"¹.

(St. Irenaeus)

St. Peter revealed to him the features of his hidden personality, that his heart was not right; and as his crime dwelt in his depths, he was in need of an inner renewal of the heart. He also revealed to him that his mind bore a material worldly thought that does not accept the Spirit of God. How could he then gain the powers of the Spirit?

“Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (Acts 8.22).

The apostle presented to him repentance as the cure. Although he believed and was baptized, he did not return to God in repentance. Whoever presents true repentance can lift his eyes up to God, to behold Him as the Forgiver of sins, as grave as such sins may be. Prayers and supplications would not be received without repentance.

“The thought of your heart”: Simon was not only in need of repenting his act of trying to purchase the free powers of God with money, but also of the thought hidden inside his heart, apparent before the sight of God.

The apostle sought from him to turn his eyes away from the money he had in his hands, and that which he hope to get, and from the love of power and dignity. He asked him to look deep in his depths, to see the corruption and defilement of his heart, and to cry out to God, his Savior, to forgive his sins.

Together with saying, “Your money perish with you”, he opened before him the door of repentance, saying, ***“Repent therefore of this your wickedness”*** (Acts 8.22).

“For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” (Acts 8.23).

Sin flows inside the soul a fluid as bitter as bile, makes the heart loose its peace, and the soul its joy, that makes man live with a bitter soul, sometimes even with no apparent cause.

Although Simon enjoyed a great reputation and was envied by many, and was thought to be among the happiest and the strongest of men, St. Peter saw his inner bitterness, as well as the hidden chains that kept him in darkness.

¹ Adv. Haer. 2.32.2.

St. Peter realized how Satan brought Simon inside the Church to corrupt it; how his work affected it all over the east and the west all along three centuries. The devil is actually doing his best to corrupt the Church of God by Simony that is still producing bitterness and wormwood (Deut. 29.18).

St. Peter asked him to repent and return to God, seeing him chained by the shackles of iniquity.

- ❖ "How was it then that they did not strike him dead, as they did Ananias and Sapphira? Because even in the old times, he that gathered sticks (on the Sabbath-day) was put to death as a warning to others (Num. 15. 32) and in no other instance did any suffer the same fate"¹.
- ❖ "But otherwise he did not punish him: that faith may not thereafter be of compulsion; that the matter may not seem to be carried ruthlessly; that he may introduce the subject of repentance: or also, because it suffices for correction to have convicted him, to have told him what was in his heart, to have brought him to confess himself overcome (oti ealw). For that he says, "Pray to the Lord for me" is a confession that he has done wrong"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

Here, sin is simulated to a bitter killing poison, and to deprivation of joy, all of which are the work of sin, being destructive to everything good. It is also simulated to the shackles of bondage, and the deprivation of the freedom to move and work, and to enjoy the divine righteousness (Ps. 116.16; Prov. 5.22; Rom. 7.23-24).

"Then Simon answered and said, 'Pray to the Lord for me, that none of the things which you have spoken may come upon me'" (Acts 8.24).

Simon, although greatly disturbed because of the curse that has just come upon him, was not serious in his repentance. St. Peter asked him to repent, and to pray God to reveal to him his sins, and the grace of salvation, to gain the forgiveness of his sins, and to enjoy the eternal blessings. But because Simon was preoccupied, not with his salvation, but with what could befall him of disgrace and loss of dignity, he asked the two apostles to support him by their prayers, not for the sake of his repentance, but to be spared of the punishment. It is good to ask others to pray for us, on condition that it would support us in our own prayers, to ask for it with a true feeling of our need for repentance, and not out of fear of the loss of dignity, if divinely punished before the people.

Simon was like Pharaoh when he asked the prophet Moses to pray for him (Exod. 8.28, 32), and like Jeroboam (1 Kings 13.6). The wicked sometimes ask for prayers for their sake, despite their persistence on their iniquities.

"So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8.25).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 18.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 18.

And so, with every movement, the apostles were preoccupied with testifying to the Lord Christ, and preaching the gospel.

Why did they return to Jerusalem? Some scholars believe that the apostles were keen on ministering in Jerusalem, where the Lord was crucified, and risen from the dead, so that when those who crucified Him believe in His resurrection, this would give a greater weight to their preaching in other regions.

“They returned to Jerusalem”: The Greek version used the pleural tense ‘they’, which implies that Philip returned with them to Jerusalem, from where the Spirit led him to Gaza.

5- Faith of the Ethiopian eunuch

“Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, ‘Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is desert” (Acts 8.26).

The word “*angel*” in the Holy Book bore several meanings. “An angel of the Lord” here probably refers to a heavenly messenger from God, who appeared to Philip in a dream, or in a day-time heavenly vision.

No preaching work among humans was ever entrusted to angels, but they are entrusted to deliver special divine messages, to men of God in both the Old and the New testaments, to encourage them, and to reveal to them God’s will and plan, especially in unexpected situations.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Philip, and instructed him to go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. As to how he went, recognized, and caught up with the speeding chariot, this was all the work of the Holy Spirit, the leader of the Church on her way to the kingdom.

❖ "See Angels assisting the preaching, and not themselves preaching, but calling these (men) (to the work) "¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ We understand that the angel of God was not sent to explain to the eunuch who was reading Isaiah the prophet, what he was reading, or that that eunuch was enlightened by God’s grace without help of anyone. But on the contrary, through God’s counsel, Philip came to him, sat with him, and with human words and tongue, he explained to him the holy Scripture².

(St. Augustine)

What an amazing and a living portrait of God’s care for a single soul, that longs to know the Truth! God Himself works, and sends a heavenly messenger to instruct one of His ministers (St. Philip) to catch up with the eunuch by some way or another. God keeps working for the sake of every single soul.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 19.*

² *on the Christian Doctrines. Pref. 7.*

Gaza or Aza (Gen. 10.19), a Palestinian city, given by Joshua to Judah (Josh. 15.47; 1 Sam. 6.17) is one of the five main cities of the Palestinians, about 60 miles south-west of Jerusalem.

There are two cities with the same name: the old Gaza and the new one, the prophet Zephaniah prophesied the destruction of Gaza, and Alexander the Great rebuilt part of it¹. later on another city was built and carried the same name, a little far from old Gaza that was completely deserted.

There are many ways leading from Gaza to Jerusalem, the most known, yet the longest one nowadays goes through Ram Allah.

“This is desert”: It either refers to the road leading to it being a desert road, or to the location itself.

“So he rose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8.27).

❖ "These are the eunuchs, who thinking themselves dry trees because of their impotence, hear by the mouth of Isaiah that they have a place prepared in heaven for sons and daughters (Isa. 56.3). Their type is Ebed-melech the eunuch in Jeremiah (Jer. 38.7), and the eunuch of Queen Candace in the Acts of the Apostles (8.27), who on account of the strength of his faith gained the name of a man. These are they to whom Clement, who was the successor of the Apostle Peter, and of whom the Apostle Paul makes mention, wrote letters, directing almost the whole of his discourse to the subject of virgin purity"².

(St. Jerome)

❖ "And who then is this, and what is the sign of Him that rises? In the words of the Prophet that follow in the same context, He says plainly, “For then I will restore to the people a pure language” (Zeph. 3.9)³. since, after the Resurrection, when the Holy Ghost was sent forth the gift of tongues was granted, that they might serve the Lord under one yoke. And what other token is set forth in the same Prophet, that they should serve the Lord under one yoke? ... You know what is written in the Acts, when the Ethiopian eunuch came from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia (to worship in Jerusalem)"⁴.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

Although the angel of the Lord did not tell Philip the reason for instructing him to go along that road, and St. Philip himself did not ask for an explanation, He, in complete obedience to God’s plan, hastened to do what he was told.

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 11.8.3-4; 13.13.3

² against Jovinianus. Book 1.12.

³ Septuagint Translation: “For then I will restore to the people a pure lip”

⁴ Lect. Catec. 14.7.

“*A eunuch*”: Eunuchs in the old days used to occupy leading positions in royal circles in the east, probably because they were entrusted to supervise the care for the women and maidservants of the court. The term “eunuch” does not necessarily imply that the person is physically so, but that he is one of high position, whom the king (or the queen) trusts and consults in the state affairs.

“*Candace*” is not the name, but a title of the queen. Some believe that that eunuch was a Jew who worked in the palace of the queen, as Daniel was in Babylon, and Joseph in Egypt. He was probably a proselyte, newly introduced to Judaism.

“Was returning, and sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet” (Acts 8.28).

Ethiopia at that time probably referred to the region of Nubia that extends from the first cataract at Aswan to Khartoum, whose great cities are Meroe, the capital. And Napata. The king of Ethiopia, having been reverently considered as the god of the sun, and a spiritual figure, it was not fitting for him to be preoccupied with the civil affairs of the people. It was actually the queen mother, who ran those affairs and reigned upon the country, who was given the name Candace, or Candake.

That eunuch was concerned by religion, learned in reading the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. During his return trip from Jerusalem where he went to worship in the temple, he was reading in the Book of Isaiah, and his heart was preoccupied with the One to whom the prophet Isaiah referred.

St. Irenaeus presents that eunuch as an example of the importance of studying the prophets. Preaching to him did not require much effort on the part of Philip, because of his faith in the prophets.

❖ "And immediately when [Philip] had baptized him, he departed from him. For nothing else [but baptism] was wanting to him who had been already instructed by the prophets: he was not ignorant of God the Father, nor of the rules as to the [proper] manner of life, but was merely ignorant of the advent of the Son of God, which, when he had become acquainted with, in a short space of time, he went on his way rejoicing, to be the herald in Ethiopia of Christ's advent. Therefore Philip had no great labor to go through with regard to this man, because he was already prepared in the fear of God by the prophets"¹.

(St. Irenaeus)

❖ "By the reading of the prophet the eunuch of Candace the queen of Ethiopia is made ready for the baptism of Christ"².

(St. Jerome)

❖ "The Spirit had enjoined Philip to proceed to that road: the eunuch himself, too, was not found idle, nor as one who was suddenly seized with an eager desire to be baptized; but, after going up to the

¹ *Adv. Haer.* 4.23.2.

² *Letter 69 to Oceanus*, 6.

temple for prayer's sake, being intently engaged on the divine Scripture, was thus suitably discovered- to whom God had, unasked, sent an apostle, which one, again, the Spirit bade adjoin himself to the chamberlain's chariot" ¹.

(Scholar Tertullian)

The personality of that eunuch is a wonderful example of man's commitment to strive persistently in reading the Holy Book and to seek wisdom, not only from the books of philosophers, but much more from those written by the holy men of God. Concerning this, **St. Jerome** wrote to Paulinus of Nola,

❖ "In the apocalypse a book is shown sealed with seven seals, which if you deliver to one that is learned saying, Read this, he will answer you, I cannot, for it is sealed. How many there are to-day who fancy themselves learned, yet the scripture is a sealed book to them, and one which they cannot open save through Him who has the key of David, "he that opens and no man shuts; and shuts and no man opens." In the Acts of the Apostles the holy eunuch (or rather "man" for so the scripture calls him when reading Isaiah he is asked by Philip "***Do you understand what you are reading***" (Acts 8.30)? He makes answer, "***How can I, unless someone guides me***" (Acts 8.31).

To digress for a moment to myself, I am neither holier nor more diligent than this eunuch, who came from Ethiopia, that is from the ends of the world, to the Temple leaving behind him a queen's palace, and was so great a lover of the Law and of divine knowledge that he read the holy scriptures even in his chariot. Yet although he had the book in his hand and took into his mind the words of the Lord, nay even had them on his tongue and uttered them with his lips, he still knew not Him, whom-not knowing-he worshipped in the book. Then Philip came and showed him Jesus, who was concealed beneath the letter.

Wondrous excellence of the teacher! In the same hour the eunuch believed and was baptized; he became one of the faithful and a saint. He was no longer a pupil but a master; and he found more in the church's font there in the wilderness than he had ever done in the gilded temple of the synagogue" ².

(St. Jerome)

As it was the custom in the old days to read with loud voice, St. Philip heard him reading Isaiah in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament that was written in the time of Ptolomy, to be kept in the library of Alexandria.

As a lover of the Word, the eunuch did not return from Jerusalem bearing the memory of the huge crowd of worshippers, or was preoccupied with commending or criticizing the staff of the temple, but the feast flared his heart with yearning to enjoy more the word of the Lord and to discover its secrets.

It is fitting for us after returning from collective worship to have the Holy Book as our companion, to read in it wherever we go, even while traveling on vacation, in order to keep our hearts

¹ on Baptism, 18.

² Letter 53 to Paulinus of Nola, 5.

from temporal things, and to make them preoccupied with divine love. Let us read the Holy Book whenever there is a chance, trusting in the work of the Holy God, to enlighten our minds and our hearts, to get in touch with the word, some way or another.

“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go near and overtake this chariot’” (Acts 8.29).

Here, the Holy Spirit reveals the goal of the vision. He sent him, not to preach in an assembly, or to give a speech to a large or a small congregation, or even to a family, but to preach to a single individual going on his way.

God does not conceal His secrets from him who seeks them in humility and honesty. That eunuch had both, as it is clear from the way he talked to the apostle Philip. That is why God sent to him His minister in a certain moment and according to an exalted divine plan.

St. Philip started to explain to him the secret of the slain Lamb, hidden since the ages. What was a riddle to him before his recognition of the Crucified has become simple and easy and even sweet, after he discovered the secret of the cross. He was no more hindered by the flesh from swift movement, as though he came to bear a portion of the feature of the risen body.

“So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” (Acts 8.30).

In a flaring zeal and a true longing for the salvation of every soul, St. Philip obeyed the call of the Holy Spirit. He hastened after the chariot with no hesitation or thought of any possible obstacle. It is well known that a debate with great or rich men, in matters concerning faith, is almost always difficult. Besides, St. Philip was walking, while the eunuch was riding a chariot drawn by swift and strong horses, which makes overtaking it, to come up to sit and talk with him, humanly impossible.

As the eunuch was reading in a loud voice, St. Philip dared to ask him, ***‘Do you understand what you are reading?’***

An obvious characteristic of that eunuch was his seriousness in caring for his own salvation. During such an exhausting trip, he was not preoccupied with entertaining himself with a certain hobby, or with reading some light material or a political subject, but with the enjoyment of the word of God. As a leader in his state, he felt a double responsibility, not just for himself, but for the others, to be committed to practice the pious life set upon the word of God. His great responsibility doubled his needs for a holy life.

That eunuch, realizing the value of time, was keen on keeping it uncorrupted, not even using the exhausting trip as an excuse.

❖ "He was not ashamed to confess his ignorance, and implored to be taught. Therefore, to him who became a learner, the grace of the Spirit was given"¹.

¹ Epistles, 19.5.

(Pope Athanasius the Apostolic)

“And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him” (Acts 8.31).

In humility, the eunuch did not despise the one who talked to him, but asked him to come up and sit with him in the chariot, to explain to him what came in the Holy Book.

The eunuch undoubtedly realized from the tone of voice of the saint that his question did not embrace any kind of haughtiness or superiority, but spirituality together with humility and love. His reaction was feeling a need for his help and a true longing for acquiring knowledge, even from a person he did not know.

- ❖ "It tells well also, that the eunuch looked not to the outward appearance (of the man), said not, "Who are you?" did not chide, not give himself airs, not say that he did know. On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance: wherefore also he learns. He shows his hurt to the physician. ... Look how free he is from haughtiness! ... So desirous was he of learning, and gave heed to his words; and that saying, "Who asks receives" (Matt. 7.8) was fulfilled in him"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“The place in the Scripture which he read was this: ‘He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its hearer, so He opened not His mouth’” (Acts 8.32).

This text, quoted from the Septuagint Version (Isa. 53.7-8), he probably heard while worshipping in Jerusalem, and when he returned to his chariot, he read it back to contemplate in it.

- ❖ He is called a “lamb” (Isa. 53.7, 8; John 1.29; Acts 8.32), not in the sense of irrationality, but because, by His precious blood, He purifies the world of its sins and because a lamb stands silent before its shearers. He is also called the “Shepherd”, as in “I am the good Shepherd” (Luke 10.11). Concerning His humanity, He is a “lamb”, and concerning the compassionate love of His “Deity”, He is the “Shepherd”. Do you wish to know more about rational sheep? Listen to the Savior addressing His disciples, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10.16)².

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

“In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who can describe His generation? For His life is taken away from the earth’ So the Eunuch answered Philip and said ‘I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man’” (Acts 8.33-34).

The prophet Isaiah, by the Spirit of prophecy, undoubtedly saw this secret, as though through the shadow, as it was not possible for him, or for all the prophets, or even for the heavenly creatures, to realize this secret, until the Lord Christ was crucified.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 19.

² Lect. Catec. 10.3.

Before the coming of our Lord Jesus, the Jews looked at what came here as a reference to the person of the Messiah, and at the speech about the passion of the servant, as a prophecy about the passion of the Messiah. But, after their rejection of the crucified Jesus, they started to interpret the text as referring to the passion of the prophet himself, or to that of the people of Israel.

The saint started to explain to the eunuch that it is a messianic prophecy that was already realized in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8.35).

Undoubtedly, St. Philip’s conversation with him was a long one, revealing the Person of the Lord Christ through the prophecies, speaking of His salvation work, and of the need for Baptism to enjoy the second birth. Now, the Holy Spirit who dictated the prophecy to the prophet Isaiah is the same One who opened the eyes of the eunuch to realize the richness of this secret.

❖ He returned to the queen, not to be the one in charge of her material treasury, but to be the one in charge of the treasures of the Holy Spirit, the divine wisdom, and the eternal life. Behold, his talk was far from being dry or flattering, but was rather coming from some gentle and a friendly soul¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

6- BAPTISM OF THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

“Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me of being baptized?’” (Acts 8.36).

North-east of Gaza, there is a valley with running water, probably a spring. In the Didache, going back to the first century and the beginning of the second, it came that Baptism, as far as possible, should be in running water.

❖ As for Baptism, You should baptize in the following manner:

Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit², in running water.

In case there is no running water, you may baptize in still water.

If you cannot baptize in cold water, baptize in warm water.

In case there is neither of them, pour water³ on the head thrice: in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(Didascalia)

There was no river in that region; it was most probably a spring or a fountain of water.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 19.*

² *Matt. 38.19.*

³ *Pouring water on the head is only allowed when there is no water for the person, to be baptized, to go down into. Later on, the church allowed it for the sick who are unable to go down into the baptismal font. Some call it the clinical baptism.*

“Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may’. And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’” (Acts 8.37).

The eunuch saw a spring in Wadi El Hessi, north-east of the desert of Gaza, and joyfully asked to get baptized. He truly enjoyed that joyful treasure.

“So he commanded the chariot to stand still, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8.28).

7- ST. PHILIP IN AZOTUS

“Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more, and he went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8.39).

Within a very short time, the eunuch became a disciple of St. Philip the preacher; and God opened his eyes to realize the secret of his salvation. But once the Baptism was accomplished, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip, so that the eunuch saw him no more. Within few moments, he lost his teacher, but found the Savior Messiah. He got Him, who is far greater than that teacher. He felt that he became a new man, as though risen from the dead, to walk in the light instead of in the darkness. He even became light in the Lord. It is claimed that he returned to Ethiopia to preach salvation, to enlighten the way for his brethren.

It is obvious that Baptism was done by plunging in water, or else it could have been possible for the eunuch to be baptized inside the chariot, and in that case it would not have been said, ***“When they came up out of the water”***.

The eunuch was baptized to return to Ethiopia to preach the gospel of salvation, while the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip, and the eunuch saw him no more. What preoccupied him was not his encounter with Philip, but his enjoyment of Baptism, by which he gained the joy of the Holy Spirit, a new birth, and became a new creation.

“But Philip was found in Azotus, and passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea” (Acts 8.40).

Within a moment, the Spirit brought him to Azotus, 20 miles north of Gaza. Philip became as though a spirit with no body.

Azotus is one of the cities not taken over by Joshua, but remained in the hands of the Philistines. To this city, the Ark of the Covenant was taken by the Philistines from the Israelites and the statue of the idol Dagon had fallen before the arc of God (1 Sam. 5.2-3). It is 30 miles far from Gaza, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It had a port that no longer exists. The city now is two miles far from the sea shore, because of the accumulation of sand from the desert on its shores.

Philip resumed his mission to preach and baptize and to gather the crop, and finally, having preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea, he settled down in Caesarea. Those cities are Jafa, Lebda, Askalon, and Arimarha, etc, all on the sea coast.

Caesarea: it was previously called Strato's Tower was, on the sea coast at the mouth of a small river, with a beautiful harbor, 36 miles south of Acra, 62 miles north-west of Jerusalem, and almost the same distance north-east of Azotus. Some believe that it is Hazor mentioned in (Josh. 11.1), rebuilt by Herod the Great, and called Caesarea as a tribute to Augustus Caesar. It became the site of the Roman Governor when Judea was a Roman state (Acts 23.33).

Dr. Clarke says that in history, no city like Caesarea has grown in such a record time, and also collapsed in a record time, with not a single house left. Its palaces and temples of unprecedented magnificence and art are now untraceable. Within ten years of laying its foundations, it became one of the greatest cities in all Syria, and now it is completely ruined.

AN ANNEX TO THE EIGHTH CHAPTER ON

THE DWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE LAYING OF HANDS

THE HOLY ANOINTMENT AND THE ETERNAL Wedding

The sacraments of the Church in essence are an enjoyment of the work of the grace of the Holy God in the life of the Church, as well as in that of each of its members, to be prepared for the eternal wedding. Through them, the gates of heaven are opened before the believer, to be filled with hope in the exalted grace of God; and his heart would cross over from glory to glory, experiencing the advance payment of heaven, while still striving on earth.

In the sacrament of Baptism, the believer enjoys the work of the Holy Spirit in the water of Baptism, to gain the new birth, and to bear the nature of the new man, which is according to the image of his Creator. He would be born anew, as a child who needs to suckle the uncorrupted milk of his mother – the Church.

Yet he remains in need of growing and maturing, to be truly prepared for the eternal wedding, as his soul becomes a bride, who bears every day the shines of the splendor of her Groom, the King of kings, and hears His voice saying to her, “You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen. Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor that I bestowed on you, says the Lord God” (Ezek. 16.13, 14).

That is what the word of God and the commentaries of the fathers of the Church wish us to experience through what is known as the sacrament of Anointment.

Our God who wishes to set up of His people a heavenly queen that bears the icon of her Groom, the King of kings, grants us a daily experience of the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, whom we have gained in the sacrament of the holy Ointment.

Let us now see how this sacrament began in the days of the apostles by laying of hands; then, why the Church used the holy Ointment together with the laying of hands.

THE DWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE LAYING OF HANDS

Our Lord Jesus Christ, as our representative, came to the water of Baptism, to be baptized by the hands of St. John the Baptist, to grant us the sonhood to God the Father in Him. The **Holy Spirit dwelt upon Him, directly after he went down into the water of the river Jordan** (Matt. 3.16; Mark 1.10; Luke 13.21-22; John 1.31-34).

The apostles, when baptizing, used to pray to seek the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the newly baptized, by laying hands on them (Acts 8.14-17, 19.1-6). So did the bishops, who used to lay hands on the believers directly after their baptism, to let them gain the gift of the Holy Spirit. But, with the growing number of those seeking to become members in the Church of Christ, together with the children born to Christian families, the priests started to anoint the newly baptized with the ointment of the xrisma, a Greek and Coptic word meaning (fragrant) or (oil), made by the bishops, from several drugs and ointments, and sanctified by the word of God and prayers. Thirty-six members of the body of the newly baptized are anointed with the sign of the cross, for his whole being to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to become an anointed to the Lord. Yet this anointment did not cancel the rite of laying the hands by the bishops.

The sacrament of the Myron or the Anointment (Chrism) is known in the West as the sacrament of Confirmation. And since the Church set forth, it is known as the Seal of the Spirit that is given together with Baptism.

BETWEEN THE SACRAMENTS OF BAPTISM AND ANOINTMENT

In the sacrament of Baptism, we enjoy the new birth and the forgiveness of sins; And in the sacrament of Anointment, the Holy Spirit dwells in us. And as the two sacraments are almost always done at the same time, that is why some speak of the sacrament of Baptism in a wider sense, as embracing the sacrament of Anointment.

In the writings of **the scholar Origen**, a certain statement came to indicate the wider use of the word 'Baptism': In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit was given by laying hands in Baptism¹.

This is the broader meaning of Baptism, embracing the two sacraments together. **The scholar Origen** goes on to say, The grace of the Holy Spirit and His proclamation was given by laying the hands of the **apostles after the Baptism**². These two phrases came to complete one another, to clarify the distinction of the two sacraments and their connection at the same time.

St. Augustine discerns between the Baptism and the Anointment, calling the first 'Birth by the Spirit', and the second 'Nurturing by the Spirit'. By Baptism, the believer is born by the Spirit, to receive the forgiveness of sins. This first gift prepares him for other gifts of the Spirit that grants the Spirit Himself, by whom we are purified and receive the forgiveness. He also dwells in us to grant us to behave in righteousness, and develop, to reach its perfection³.

❖ "Not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit; but in the water, under (the witness of) the angel, we are cleansed, and prepared for the Holy Spirit"⁴.

¹ *De Principiis* 1; 2.1.

² *De Principiis* 1.2.7.

³ *Cf. Sermon* 71.19, 33.

⁴ *De Baptism*, 6.

- ❖ "In the next place the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction. ... Then, over our cleansed and blessed bodies willingly descends from the Father that Holiest Spirit"¹.

(Scholar Tertullian)

- ❖ Man is not born again through laying the hands, when he receives the Holy Spirit, but in Baptism. Being already born, he gains the Holy Spirit².

(Martyr Cyprian)

BAPTISM IS NOT CONSUMMATED WITHOUT THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

- ❖ Water alone cannot wipe out sins and sanctify man, but only when it is accompanied by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. ... There is no Baptism where there is no Holy Spirit.

(St. Cyprian)

LAYING THE HANDS

Laying the hand is a sign of transferring the power, not from one person to another, but from God, the source of every power and grace, to him who is dedicated to the divine work, as it was done by the prophet Moses (Num. 27.18), and by the apostles, for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the baptized (Acts 8.17-18), which is called the sacrament of 'Confirmation', the 'Seal of the Spirit', or the sacrament of 'Anointment', the subject of our study. And likewise in the Ordinations (Acts 6.6; 1 Tim. 4.14; 2 Tim. 1.6), in the Absolutions (1 Tim. 5.22), and in the sacrament of the unction of the sick. St. Paul considers these teachings as "Elementary principles of Christ" (Heb. 6.1-2), and among the foundations of Christian life.

The apostle Paul used, concerning the Anointment of the Holy Spirit in (2 Cor. 1.21-22), four Greek words: '**establish**', '**anoint**', '**seal**', and '**the deposit (or first installment) of the Spirit**'. He says, "He who **established** us with you in Christ and **has anointed** us is God, who also has **sealed** us and **given us the Spirit** in our hearts as a deposit".

The scholar Tertullian in the second century AD speaks about the Anointment as a well established rite in his days, that it is connected to Baptism, together with laying the hands.

- ❖ "After this, when we have issued from the font (of baptism), we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction. ... The unction runs carnally, (i.e. on the body,) but profits spiritually; in the same way as the act of baptism itself too is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect spiritual, in that we are freed from sins. In the next place the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction"³.

¹ *De Baptism*, 8.

² *Ep.* 74.4.

³ *De Baptismo*, 7-8.

(Scholar Tertullian)

❖ The Samaritans, baptized by St. Philip the deacon sent by the apostles, as they had already received the canonical Baptism of the Church, it was not fitting to baptize them anew, But they lacked what Peter and John have done, namely, praying, and laying the hands to invoke the Holy Spirit to dwell upon them. Nowadays, the same thing happens: Those baptized are then presented to the bishops of the Church, who by prayers and laying the hands, invoke the Holy Spirit to dwell upon them, to seal them by the seal of the Lord¹.

(St. Cyprian)

❖ "For no one of His disciples gave the Holy Spirit, since they prayed that He might come upon those upon whom they laid their hands: they did not give Him themselves. And the Church preserves this custom even now in the case of her rulers. Lastly, Simon Magus also, when he offered the apostles money, does not say, "Give me also this power, that I may give" the Holy Spirit; but, "that on whomsoever I may lay my hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit." ...

Therefore also the Lord Jesus Christ Himself not only gave the Holy Spirit as God, but also received it as man, and therefore He is said to be full of grace, and of the Holy Spirit (John 1.14). And in the Acts of the Apostles it is more plainly written of Him, "Because God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit" (10.38). Certainly not with visible oil but with the gift of grace which is signified by the visible ointment wherewith the Church anoints the baptized. ... Seeing that He received (the Holy Spirit) as man, and shed forth as God (Acts 2.32). And we indeed can receive that gift according to our small measure, but assuredly we cannot shed it forth upon others; but, that this may be done, we invoke over them God, by whom this is accomplished"².

(St. Augustine)

In the law 60, of the English Episcopal Church, of the year 1603 AD, it is stated that each bishop is to consummate the confirmation on his visit to the church every third year: [As is the old custom revered in the Church of God, since the days of the apostles, all bishops should lay hands on the baptized children who have fulfilled the Christian catechism, pray for them and bless them, in what the common call 'Confirmation']³.

In the rite of Confirmation in the Episcopal Church, the chapter concerned with the laying hands by the apostles Peter and John, to invoke the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans (Acts 8), is read⁴.

BETWEEN THE HAND OF GOD AND THAT OF MAN

¹ *Epistle 73.8.*

² *De Trinitate, 15.26.*

³ *Rev. Hall. Confirmation, Oxford Library of Practical Theology, 1908, p.13.*

⁴ *Order of Confirmation in the American Prayer Book, 1892- (cf. Hall, p. 14).*

Fredrick mentions that the rite of laying the hands was referred to 20 times in the form of a verb, and 4 times in the form of a noun. This rite, used in healing, in the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and in ordinations, refers to the joining of God's hand with man's work¹.

God the Almighty, in His love and appreciation for man, presents His capabilities through His Church on earth, and does not despise the human hand, although the gift is from God, and not from man.

Many Jews, especially the rulers, had noticed that Jesus Christ used to lay His hands on the sick to heal them. Jairus, one of the rulers of the Synagogue, came to Him, fell on His feet, and said to Him, "My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live" (Mark 5.23). It is noticed that the Lord Christ used to lay 'His hands' (not His hand) on every one of the sick to heal them (Luke 4.40); and he most probably laid them in the form of a cross.

St. Augustine argued very strongly against any concept that the Holy Spirit is given through some magic rite, or delivered by a particular apostle or a particular bishop, by saying that this concept is foreign to the Church. Laying the hand in the Anointment, in the ordainment of priests, as well as the water in Baptism, are all external signs accompanied by prayers, to gain the gifts of the Holy Spirit from God, not from any human being.

THE PERPETUAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND MATURITY

About our Lord Jesus it was said, "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2.40). He became a child to carry us in Him as children, through our new birth in Baptism. And He grew and became strong in spirit, so that, by His Holy Spirit, we may also grow and become strong in spirit in Him, So as not to remain children, but to mature until His icon is completely consummated in us. And as St. John says, "But we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3.2). This is the perpetual work of the Holy Spirit in us that we got in the sacrament of Anointment, or the laying of hands after Baptism. The apostle Paul says, "Not by work of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Tit. 3.5-6).

❖ The catechumens (those who seek Baptism) ground like wheat into flour through fasting, then kneaded by water in Baptism, are shaped in the form of the body of Christ, and baked by the fire of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Anointment².

(St. Augustine)

❖ "Thy Holy Spirit, O Lord, which Thou sent forth upon Thy holy disciples, and Thine honorable Apostles at the third hour, this, take not away from us, O Good-one, but renew Him within us. Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me."

¹ Cf. G. Friedrich. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by G. W. Bromiley, Michigan 1993. vol. 8, p. 160.

² with amendment.

(From prayers of the Terce – the Third hour of the Agpea)

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

The apostle Paul says, “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a deposit” (2 Cor. 1.21-22). And St. John the beloved says, “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 John 3.24).

❖ "God the Father sealed you, Christ the Lord strengthened you, and gave the earnest of the Spirit in your heart, as you have learned in the lesson from the Apostle"¹.

(St. Ambrose)

❖ The arc of Noah gave the good news of the coming of Him who would sail His ship in the waters, bring back its members to freedom, in the name of the Holy Trinity (in Baptism). And as for the dove, it symbolized the Spirit that would make an Anointment, that is the sacrament of salvation².

(Ephraim Syrus)

❖ "For those upon whom the apostles laid hands received the Holy Spirit, who is the food of life [eternal]"³.

(St. Irenaeus)

THE ANOINTED

The “Anointment” was first mentioned in the Holy Book, when Jacob saw in a dream “A ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven, and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ... And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; and this is the gate of heaven’. Then Jacob ... took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it” (Gen. 28.12-18). This first anointment proclaimed the sanctification of the location, and its dedication to become “Bethel” or “the house of God”.

The Mosaic Law commanded the anointment of persons (kings and priests), places (the temple), and vessels dedicated to the house of the Lord. ... The goal of this anointment was that the person or the thing becomes dedicated to God alone. All that along the generations referred to the coming of Christ, who is “anointed by God the Father with the oil of gladness” (Ps. 45.7), to “preach good things to the poor”(Isa. 61.1). He is the divine Word, the only-begotten Son, the subject of pleasure and joy to God the Father, who incarnates to reconcile all humanity with the Father, and hence brought the heavenly joy to the long deprived poor.

¹ *on the Sacraments*, 7.

² *Letter 19 against the Scrutinizers*.

³ *Adv. Haer.* 4.63.

He was anointed, for us to be anointed in Him, being members of His body, and be counted as Anointed.

- ❖ "Wherefore we are called Christians on this account, because we are anointed with the oil of God"¹.
- ❖ The Christians were so called, on account of that they are anointed by the oil of God.
(Theophilus of Antioch)
- ❖ Who is baptized should also be anointed, to become through it, anointed to God, and to get the grace of Christ².
- ❖ Whoever gets rid of his sins in Baptism will be sanctified and spiritually renewed into a new man, and becomes thus prepared to receive the Holy Spirit³.
(St. Cyprian)
- ❖ The name of Christ = (Anointed). It is derived from the word 'anointment'. Every Christian receives the anointment, not just to indicate that he got the fellowship in the Kingdom; but that he also joined the fighters against the devil.
(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "You are properly called Christs, and of you God said, "Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm" (Ps. 105.15).

Now you have been made Christs, by receiving the antitype⁴ of the Holy Ghost; and all things have been wrought in you by imitation because you are images of Christ. He washed in the river Jordan, and having imparted of the fragrance of His Godhead to the waters, He came up from them; and the Holy Ghost in the fullness of His being lighted on Him, like resting upon like And to you in like manner, after you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams, there was given an Unction the anti-type of that wherewith Christ was anointed; and this is the Holy Ghost; of whom also the blessed Isaiah, in his prophecy respecting Him, said in the person of the Lord, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, Because the Lord has anointed Me" (Isa. 61:1).

For Christ was not anointed by men with oil or material ointment, but the Father having before appointed Him to be the Savior of the whole world, anointed Him with the Holy Ghost, as Peter says, "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10.38).

David also the Prophet cried, saying, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness, Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You, with the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (Ps. 45.6-7).

¹ to Autolycus, 1.12.

² Letter, 70.

³ Epistle 74.6.

⁴ The Hebraic word 'type' does not mean a symbolic type but as in (Heb. 9.24).

And as Christ was in reality crucified, and buried, and raised, and you are in Baptism accounted worthy of being crucified, buried, and raised together with Him in a likeness, so is it with the unction also. As He was anointed with an ideal oil of gladness, that is, with the Holy Ghost, called oil of gladness, because He is the author of spiritual gladness, so ye were anointed with ointment, having been made partakers and fellows of Christ"¹.

❖ "But beware of supposing this to be plait ointment. For as the Bread of the Eucharist. after the invocation of the Holy Ghost, is mere bread no longer but the Body of Christ, so also this holy ointment is no more simple ointment, nor (so to say) common, after invocation, but it is Christ's gift of grace, and, by the advent of the Holy Ghost, is made fit to impart His Divine Nature Which ointment is symbolically applied to your forehead and your other senses; and while your body is anointed with the visible ointment, your soul is sanctified by the Holy and life-giving Spirit.

And you were first anointed on the forehead, that you might be delivered from the shame, which the first man who transgressed bore about with him everywhere; "with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3.18). Then on your ears; that you might receive the ears which are quick to hear the Divine Mysteries, of which Isaiah said, "The Lord has given me ears to hear" (Isa. 4.1) ; and the Lord Jesus in the Gospel, "He who has ears to hear" (Matt. 11.15, 13.9, 43; Mark 4.9, 23, 17.16; Luke 14.35). Then on the nostrils; that receiving the sacred ointment you may say, "For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved" (2 Cor. 2.15). Afterwards on your breast; that "having put on the breastplate of righteousness" (Eph. 6.14), "that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6.11). For as Christ after His Baptism, and the visitation of the Holy Ghost, went forth and vanquished the adversary, so likewise you, after Holy Baptism and the Mystical Chrism, having put on the whole armour of the Holy Ghost, are to stand against the power of the adversary, and vanquish it, saying, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4.13) "².

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

❖ The phrase said by David in (Ps. 44.7-8) likewise clarifies that we would have not become fellows of the Holy Spirit, or would have been sanctified, had not the incarnated Logos, the Grantor of the Spirit, anointed Himself with the Spirit for our sake. That is why, it is us who received the Holy Spirit, when it is said that He was anointed in flesh, as it is His own body that was first sanctified. And as it is said of Him, as human, that His body has got this (Spirit), It is us, who get the grace of the Spirit, taking it "from His fullness"³.

(St. Athanasius the apostolic)

¹ *Lect. Catec. 21.1-2.*

² *Lect. Catec. 21.1-2.*

³ *against the Arians. 1.1.50.*

❖ "There was therefore a pouring out upon us of the Spirit, but upon the Lord Jesus, when He was in the form of man, the Spirit abode. ... Around us is the liberality of the Giver in abundant provision, in Him abides for ever the fullness of the Spirit. He shed forth then what He deemed to be sufficient for us, and what was shed forth is not separated nor divided; but He has a unity of fullness wherewith He may enlighten the sight of our hearts according to what our strength is capable of. Lastly, we receive so much as the advancing of our mind acquires, for the fullness of the grace of the Spirit is indivisible, but is shared in by us according to the capacity of our own nature"¹.

(St. Ambrose)

❖ The prophet David had the right to cry out, as a renewed man, "Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding Joy" (Ps. 43.4), having said before that he has grown old among his enemies, he regained his youth after being old so long, and fallen down as man. We have been renewed through Baptism, and through the pouring of the Holy Spirit, and will be also renewed by resurrection. In another text he says, "Like an eagle, your youth is renewed" (Ps. 105.3). To know the way we shall be renewed: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow," (Ps. 51.7). And in Isaiah: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1.18). Whoever changes from the darkness of sins to the light of virtue and to the grace would actually be renewed. That is why, he, who was previously covered by stupid defilement will shine now, whiter than snow².

(St. Ambrose)

THE SEAL OF GOD ON THE SOUL

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4.30).

"In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory" (Eph. 1.13-14).

❖ As the two apostles Peter and John, after one prayer, invoked the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans by laying their hands (Acts 8.14-17), So also in the Church since that time, all those baptized receive the Holy Spirit, and are sealed by His seal, through the prayers of the priests and the laying of their hands³.

(St. Cyprian)

¹ *of the Holy Spirit 1.8.93.*

² *Prayer of David. Book 4.9.35.*

³ *Letter 73 against the Heretics.*

❖ All the powers of your soul have been sealed by the seal of the Holy Spirit. ... The king has entrusted you with His message, sealing it with His seal of fire, lest the strangers read and distort it¹.

(St. Ephraim Syrus)

❖ God will anoint you, and Christ will seal you. How so? For you are sealed with the sign of His cross and passion².

❖ "You received the seal of the Spirit. ... Preserve what you received. God the Father sealed you, Christ the Lord strengthened you, and gave the earnest of the Spirit in your heart"³.

(St. Ambrose)

DEDICATION OF THE SOUL

"Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you" (1 Cor. 3.16).

❖ "The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed (with the cross), that the soul too may be fortified; the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands, that the soul also maybe illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God. They cannot then be separated in their recompense, when they are united in their service"⁴.

(Martyr Cyprian)

PRIESTS, KINGS, AND PROPHETS

By sin, man has isolated himself from God, the Grantor of glory, and it became impossible for the Spirit of God to dwell in a human soul, even in the case of the great fathers and the prophets. When God intended to restore to man his glory, He ordained that some would be anointed as kings with a holy oil, like when David who was anointed by the prophet Samuel. Some would be anointed as priests, like Aaron. A king, as well as a priest is considered as an 'anointed of the Lord'. According to the scholar Origen, It was not possible for someone to carry both the glory of being a king and a priest, as the kings were chosen from the tribe of Judah; whereas the priests were set from the tribe of Levi. But, Jesus Christ, the King of kings, who came from the tribe of Judah, is alone the King and the Priest (according to the rite of Melchizedek). Through the anointment of Myron, the dignity of priesthood together with that of royalty is restored to us.

Who can express the extent of grief of Ezekiel, the priest and the prophet, in the land of Babylon, as he, in a vision, beheld God's glory departing from the temple (Ezek. 10.18)? As thus, Israel lost

¹ *Instructing the Faith*, 5.

² *Sacraments* 6.2.7.

³ *Sacraments*, 7.

⁴ *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 8.

royalty, when the tent of David fell down; and the royal household were carried captives to Babylon. And, priesthood also falling, as the glory of God had no more place in the temple of Jerusalem. But at the fullness of time, the Holy Virgin St. Mary, the daughter of Israel, heard the joyful royal voice with the good news: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you; and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1.35). The Glory of God did not return to the temple of Jerusalem; but through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, the God of Glory, the Word of God incarnated in the womb of the Holy Virgin, who became the mother of the King of kings, and the great heavenly High Priest. She became a unique Queen, who sits on the right hand of the King (Ps. 45.9).

The door was opened before all believers along all the ages, for the Holy Spirit (through the laying of hands or the anointment of the Myron), to overshadow the human soul, and to set her as a second Mary, not for the Word to incarnate again, but for the Lord Christ to dwell in her through faith (Eph. 3.17), to make her spiritually, a queen, a priestess, and a prophetess. By the anointment of the Myron, we also become kings, with authority even over our thoughts and senses; we become priests, to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise to God (Rom. 1.12); and we become prophets, to realize clearly, our future in the bosom of our heavenly father.

The anointment of the Holy Spirit makes us proud of the amazing grace of the Holy Spirit, who grants us a consistent glory.

St. Mary became a mother to Him, who incarnated from her, while we bear the King of kings in our hearts, as according to the apostle Paul: “My little children, for whom I labor in birth **again until Christ is formed in you**” (Gal. 4 19).

The apostle John says, “**He has made us kings and priests to His God and Father**, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen” (Rev. 1.6).

❖ Look, how you have become, in priesthood, fellows of the name of Christ, and how you were given the seal of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit¹.

(St. Cyprian)

❖ I think that no one among believers doubts that the priesthood of the Jews was a symbol of the royal priesthood, that was to be realized in the priesthood in the Church, where all are dedicated, those who belong to the body of Christ, the greatest and most exalted High Priest. Now, all are anointed; whereas, in the old days, the anointment was only for kings and priests. When Peter wrote to the Christian congregation, he spoke of “**royal priesthood**”, clearly demonstrating that they are described by both titles, for which the anointment was meant.

(St. Augustine)

¹ Sermon 8.33.

Every believer is anointed to become a priest and a king, not a real king or priest, but a spiritual king and priest, to offer God spiritual sacrifices, and offerings of thanksgiving and praise¹.

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ Those who were anointed in the Old Testament were kings, priests, or prophets. Whereas we, of the New Testament, are anointed to become kings to reign on our lusts; priests to sacrifice our bodies, and to offer them to God, as living and holy sacrifices; and prophets, having come to know very great and important secrets.

(St. John Chrysostom)

A GODLY PRIESTLY ANOINTMENT

The first thing known about the anointment of persons in the history of salvation was that of the priests, Aaron and his sons (Exod. 29.7). Aaron, as the high priest, was committed to put a plate of pure gold, and engrave on it “Holiness to the Lord”, on the front of his turban on his forehead, that the children of Israel may be accepted before the Lord (Exod. 28.36-38). We, as we became priests for the Lord, carry this plate on our foreheads, minds, senses, and on all our energies of the body, soul, and spirit.

A DIVINE ROYAL ANOINTMENT

As the first chief priest and his children were anointed with the holy oil to become holy and dedicated to the Lord, so also was the first king. He was anointed by the prophet Samuel, who said to him, “Is it not because the Lord has anointed you commander over His inheritance” (1 Sam. 10.1)? And in an admonishment by the prophet Nathan to David when he sinned, he said to him, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel and Judah’” (2 Sam. 12.7). The prophet was the one to carry out the rite of anointment, by pouring the holy oil over the king’s head, but it actually was the hidden hand of God that stretched to anoint him, to enjoy a divine anointment, being a symbol of the Lord Christ who is coming for the salvation of the world, And being a king, he became a representative of the whole people in the sight of God.

A JOYFUL MATRIMONIAL ANOINTMENT

What is amazing in psalm 45, in which the Psalmist sings the secret of the union of the Lord Christ with His Church, or His matrimony to her, is that God the Father Himself is seen carrying out the hidden unique divine anointment, saying, “Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness” (Ps. 45.7). The Coptic Church has taken from this matrimonial Messianic psalm, the rite of anointing the bride and the bridegroom by the holy oil in the sacrament of matrimony.

MENTAL ENLIGHTENMENT AND ENJOYMENT OF DIVINE PROTECTION

¹ *Priesthood, 4.*

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14.27).

- ❖ By your seal (anointment), you are kept protected against the evil attacks of the devil, who, by your Baptism, have no authority over you.
- ❖ Keep this anointment pure, as it teaches you all things, if it abides in you, according to the words of the blessed St. John (1 John 2.20, 27), who uttered several wise sayings concerning this anointment, as the Holy Spirit is protection to the body, and salvation to the soul¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

- ❖ How can the guardian angel defend you and keep you against the enemy, if he is not able to recognize the seal of anointment? Do not you know that the destroyer passed over the houses of those sealed with blood, in the days of the prophet Moses, and killed the firstborns in those unsealed? The unsealed treasure is easily robbed by thieves, so also is the unmarked flock of sheep.

(St. Basil the Great)

CONVICING OF SIN

“And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16.8).

HE WILL GRANT SPIRITUAL COMFORT

“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever” (John 14.16).

HE WILL MAKE INTERCESSION FOR US

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us, with groaning which cannot be uttered. Now, he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8.26-27).

HE PROCLAIMS THE DIVINE TRUTH

“When the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him or knows Him, But you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14.17).

¹ *Sacr. 3.7.*

HE PRESENTS SPIRITUAL GIFTS¹

“But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills” (1 Cor. 12.11).

¹ Cf. HG. Late Bishop Gregorius. *The Spiritual Values ... in the Sacrament of Myron.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 8

OPEN UP MY INSIGHT, O SPIRIT OF GOD AND LEAD ME TO THE JOY OF RESURRECTION.

- ❖ The heavenly creatures rejoiced to meet the first Christian martyr.
And Jerusalem was disturbed, as it could not stand Your amazing work.
Saul rejoiced for the stoning of Stephen.
According to him, the great lamentation over Stephen was idiocy.
So he started to move like a vicious beast;
 Assuming that his violence is a service to God;
And counting his destructive actions as building the kingdom.
- ❖ Saul gloatingly watched as groups of Christians escaped from Jerusalem.
He thought of himself as a mighty one,
Who, by violence could quench Your divine fire,
And wipe out the name of Jesus from the earth.
Because the believers were scattered like live coal flaring with your fire,
The fire of Your divine love ignited in many places.
- ❖ The Jews closed their hearts before You.
But the hearts of the Samaritans opened up to receive Your witnesses.
Their eyes were enlightened, as the heavenly kingdom transfigured before them.
They greatly rejoiced, as the kingdom of the devil reigning on them collapsed.
The city entertained an amazing feast, and a great joy.
- ❖ When Simon the sorcerer saw Your amazing power,
He thought that he was capable of purchasing them with his money,
And offered the apostles money,
Not realizing that what they acquired for free, they would also give for free.
 He offered them what became of no value at their feet.
- ❖ In a swift movement, You sent Philip the preacher,
To ignite Samaria with Your divine fire.
There he is setting forth under Your leadership, to catch up with the eunuch of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia.
He did not do miracles and signs before that eunuch, as he did in Samaria,
But spoke to him the sweet words of the Spirit,
That drew the heart of the eunuch, who was serious in seeking his salvation,

And came to seek comfort in the temple.
In his chariot, he opened the Holy Scripture, seeking the knowledge of the divine Truth.
When You saw how his heart longed to the Truth,
You drew him to the cross, to enjoy seeing the Lamb of God,
The Bearer of the sins of the world.
He longed to be crucified and buried together with Him,
To be raised up, bearing the features of Him who is raised up from the dead.
He was thrilled to see water on their way,
So he plunged to get baptized, and came out to see what is unseen.
Although Philip disappeared from his sight,
The crucified Jesus transfigured before him.
He saw the prophesies realized,
And God's exalted promises within his hands.
Through Baptism, he became a son to God, the source of every joy.

- ❖ Glory be to You, O fiery Spirit.
Amazing are Your works in every generation.
Grant us Your anointment, to be counted as kings, priests, and prophets.
Grant us Your divine seal, that the forces of darkness may vanish before us.
Grant us the deposit, to live in the heavenly places.

CHAPTER 9

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

This chapter begins by the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to the Christian faith and the dedication of all his energies to the edification of the Church of Christ, after they were completely directed to persecuting her and opposing the Christian faith. By his conversion, the Lord dedicated his energies to work among the Gentiles, by the power of the Holy Spirit and to establish many Churches in the world.

1- The conversion of Saul	1 – 9
2- The confrontation of Saul with Ananias	10 – 19
3- Saul setting forth to preach	20 – 21
4- Saul fleeing from Damascus	22 – 25
5- Saul in Jerusalem	26 – 31
6- The apostle Peter in Lydda and Joppa	32 – 43

1- THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

Saul was from the city of Tarsus, in the plains of Cecilia, south-east of Asia Minor, which was under the Roman authority. His parents were Jews, who were in the Diaspora, very conservative, as far as the Jewish tradition and customs were concerned. Because his father was a prominent personality, who did great achievements, the Roman State awarded him the Roman citizenship that provided him, as well as his family, with all the privileges of Roman citizens. But Saul was proud of being a Hebrew and became a scholar in the Greek language and philosophy.

Like his father, he was also a Pharisee, I.E. belonging to the highest Jewish sect, who led a very strict and literal life according to the law, and counted himself, concerning the law, as righteous. Saul embraced a heart kindled with zeal for the tradition of his fathers and was ready to give his life even to death, for the sake of his faithfulness to his religion.

His epistles reveal a very gentle personality, easily shedding tears in love and compassion toward everyone. Yet, once he believes in a certain principle, he becomes like a fierce beast in defending that principle (before receiving the Christian faith), assuming that in so doing, he is serving God and defending the Truth.

St. John Chrysostom calls the apostle Paul the teacher of the catholic Church¹.

“Then Saul, still breathing threat and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest” (Acts 9.1).

¹ *Baptismal Instructions, 4.7.*

It was not possible for Saul to find peace, as long as any Christian was safe. So knowing that the Christians in Damascus were living in peace, he set forth furiously to charge them.

Counting the name of Jesus as representing a catastrophe against the Jewish religion, he came upon the Church in Jerusalem, breathing threat and murder.

“And asked letters from him to the Synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the way, whether men or women, he might bring them down to Jerusalem” (Acts 9.2).

The high priest was in no need for someone to provoke him to persecute the followers of Jesus. But he found in that young man, who was furiously zealous for the glory of God, His people, His law, His temple, and for the traditions of the fathers, what flared him more. Beside dedicating the energies of the Sanhedrin to this task, the high priest found it a chance to demonstrate his heroism, not just in Jerusalem, but outside it. So he provided that young man with letters, commanding the synagogues everywhere and all Jews to oppose anyone who believed in Jesus Christ. The young man likewise found in the heart of the high priest what would realize his own desire to serve God with all zeal and to oppose what he believed to be a dangerous heresy against the whole people of God.

Asking for letters from the Sanhedrin probably reveals its religious authority at that time over all the Jewish synagogues in the world; or the Sanhedrin probably found its chance to make that authority more steadfast, through demonstrating zeal for the glory of God and opposing every heresy wherever it was.

Damascus: it was the capital of Syria, in an excellent location, 120 miles north-east of Jerusalem, and 190 miles south-east of Antioch, in a very spacious plain surrounded by Cypress and palm trees, a very fertile land, irrigated by the River Barady, previously called Abanah (2 Kings 5.12). about five miles far from the city, the River Barady connects to another river, then divides into six or seven tributaries that spread over the plain to irrigate all the land, and to form one of the most beautiful sceneries in the world, called by the people there, ‘the paradise of earth’.

It was referred to in the Old Testament as a city in the days of Abraham (Gen. 15.2), but no information about who built it is known. David took it (2 Sam. 8.6; 1 Chron. 18.6); and it was mentioned as one of the most important locations in the conflict between the Jews and Syria (2 Kings 13.25, 16.5; Isa. 9.11).

It was taken by the Romans in about the year 60 BC, by the Arabs in the year 713 AD, by the Christians in the year 1250 AD, during the Crusade wars, then by Sultan Selim in the year 1517 AD, to become under the reign of the Ottomans, as one of the most important commercial centers, known for the steal industry. It was therefore called ‘The steal Damascus’.

The synagogues

As the Jews spread over the entire region around Judea, there had to be a great number of them in Damascus, and several synagogues. The Historian Josephus confirms that

10, 000 Jews were slain there in a single hour, and 18, 000 men, women, and children in another occasion¹.

Some of them were probably among those who believed in the Lord Christ on the day of the Pentecost, who on returning from Jerusalem, began to preach the Gospel in Syria.

Saul set forth to Damascus to bring those Christians bound to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrin, that considered itself responsible for the religious affairs of the Jews, who, even the foreigners among them, respected its religious authority.

The way: The new belief was so called, probably by the Jews, who counted it as some way deviating from that of Moses, the law and the sanctification of the temple of God. The believers probably so called themselves, having found the way to the Truth, along which to go until they reach their eternal home. ...As long as they were in the world, they considered themselves as being on the way.

❖ "(for elsewhere our Discipline is called "*the Way*" that when, set in "the way" of prayer, we go not unto "the Father" with anger"².

(Scholar Tertullian)

“And as he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven” (Acts 9.3).

In the darkest moments of his evil, the light of the Righteous Holy One shone on him, to be exposed before himself, to make him return to enjoy the light of righteousness. The Lord, in His love for men, always long to meet with them, having come, not for the well, but for the sick among them.

Nobody knows where that took place, whether it was just outside the eastern gate of the city, as some believe, or one mile far from it.

The light that shone on Saul's face was no doubt the splendor of the glory of the Lord Christ. The apostle Paul says, “Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one untimely born” (1 Cor. 15.8), and, “Have I not seen our Lord Jesus Christ?” Barnabas also proclaimed how Saul saw the Lord, as he was on his way to Damascus (Acts 9.27).

God used to appear to the Jews in a cloud, a pillar of smoke or fire, as well as proclaiming His presence over the Ark of the Covenant. Those signs represented the glory of Jehovah (Exod. 16.7; Isa. 6.1-4). And when the Lord Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor, He was surrounded by glory (Matt. 17.1-5).

That vision did not happen inside the temple, or in the midst of an assembly of believers, but in the open air, for Saul to realize that the Spirit of God does not confine His work to a certain place, and in

¹ *Jewish Wars*, 2.20.2; 7.8.7.

² *on Prayer*, 11.

order that no one would think that what happened could be a product of deceit by the believers assembling around him.

It did not happen in Jerusalem, the city of God, but close to Damascus, as it was fitting for him, who was called to preach among the Gentiles, to be converted to the Truth in a Gentile land, so that his heart would not be attached or confined to the Jews, to Jerusalem, or to the temple of Solomon.

The Lord Christ did not appear to him until he was very close to Damascus, probably in some moments when his thoughts reached a climax, imagining himself returning to Jerusalem, bringing many of the Christians in chains, to be humiliated and committed to blaspheme the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, the shining of the Lord Christ with the light of His glory on Saul of Tarsus, and His appearance to him, in the critical moments, when Saul was eager to wipe out the name of Jesus out of ignorance, reveals God's longing to have the souls quench their thirst from the fountains of His love and to discover His plan to glorify them.

❖ As the deer pants for the water brooks (Ps. 42.1), so He descended to shine over Saul (Acts 9.3), and over His Church, Bethel, namely, the house of God, As the call to Paul is a strength to the Church¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me’? (Acts 9.4).

What happened to Saul of Tarsus when a light shone around him is like what happened to the prophet Daniel, when he saw a vision, and “no strength remained in him” (Dan. 8.17, 10.8).

Calling Saul by his name and repeating it revealed to Saul God's care for him, and His compassion toward his person. God used to repeat the name of the person whom He calls, with the intention of confirming His message (Luke 10.41, 22.31, 23.37). That was how God called “Abraham, Abraham, Moses, Moses, Samuel, Samuel, Martha, Martha, Simon, Simon”. That call bore a warning, as well as an encouragement.

By His admonishment, ***“Why do you persecute me?”*** He reminds him of the saying, “They hated me for no reason”.

Many Christian believers have undoubtedly got the information that Saul was on his way to Damascus, coming like a fierce wolf to attack the helpless lambs; and they were disturbed to hear the news, as is obvious from the words of Ananias (Acts 9.13-14). Yet they did not realize that the God of lambs is capable of transforming the fierce wolf into a docile lamb that longs to be slain for the sake of God and to suffer for the sake of those helpless lambs.

Saul's cup got filled with evil, yet, because he did that in ignorance, God's mercies approached him in the last moments before he reached Damascus, to turn him from his evil, and to grant him enlightenment and a realization of the divine Truth. As the devil dwells in the human soul through the

¹ *Isaac or the Soul, 3.31.*

darkness, the Lord of glory, the Light of the world, shines on the soul with His light, to let her enjoy the fellowship of His glory, and to make of the believers, the children of light.

Saul most probably fell from his horse to the ground, as the horse got startled and terrified by the sudden light. But God kept Saul, and no bone in him was broken.

Saul would not have ascended to the apostolic work by exalted heavenly capabilities, unless he had first fallen on the ground; his eyes got blind; and he had become in need of someone to lead him by the hand. Thus, he would feel his weakness, and his complete helplessness, to be ready to receive the rich grace of God.

- ❖ "heaven, ***"Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me"*** (Acts 9.4)? struck down the frantic one, raised him up whole, killed the persecutor, quickened the preacher"¹.
- ❖ "I am in heaven, and you in earth, and yet you persecute Me. You do not touch the body, but my members you are treading down. Yet what are you doing? What are you gaining?"².
- ❖ "He is at once above, and below; above in Himself, below in His; above with the Father, below in us. Whence also was that Voice to Saul, ***"Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?"*** He would not say, ***"Saul, Saul,"*** unless that He was above. But Saul was not persecuting Him above. He then who was above would not have said, " Why do you persecute me?" unless He were below also.

Fear Christ above; recognize Him below. Have Christ above bestowing His bounty, recognize Him here in need. Here He is poor, there He is rich. That Christ is poor here, He tells us Himself for me, "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison" (Matt. 25.35). That Christ is Rich, who knows not? And even here it was a property of these riches to turn the water into wine. If he who has wine is rich, how rich is He who makes wine? So then Christ is rich and poor; as God, rich; as Man, poor. Yea rich too now as Very Man He has ascended into heaven, sits at the right Hand of the Father; yet still He is poor and hungry here, thirsty, and naked"³.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Take heed that the Lord Himself said that He is in heaven (John 3.13), And He is on earth, as we, dear brethren, confess that the Lord Christ is the Head of the Church.

If this is true, so He is in heaven, being the Head, and on earth, concerning the body.

Moreover, when the blessed apostle Paul was persecuting the Church, Christ proclaimed to Him, ***"Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute Me?"*** He did not ask him, "Why do you persecute My ministers?" Or "Why do you persecute My members?" But said, ***"Why do you persecute Me?"*** Because the tongue

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 37.15. Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 37:15.*

² *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 66.7.*

³ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 74.4.*

screams, when the foot is trodden, “You treaded on Me.” Although nobody can ever tread on the tongue; yet through the harmony of love, the Head screams on behalf of all the other members¹.

(Caesarius, bishop of Arles)

“And he said, ‘Who are You Lord?’, And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 9.5).

He got out of Jerusalem, heading to Damascus, assuming that he was consummating an exalted divine mission, and confronting a blasphemy against God. But he could never imagine that his plans would evaporate and vanish, and that he would never return to Jerusalem as a Jew and a Pharisee.

Together with the exhaustive journey, his fierce actions against the Christians were disturbing his conscience. He could never forget the face of St. Stephen, which was like an angel, or the inner peace of the Christians that reflected on their behavior, even during their sufferings. Their voices echoed in his ears, as they testified that they see heaven open, and enjoy seeing Jesus Christ sitting on the right hand of God the Father. All that was goading his conscience, but he kept trying to suppress it, confirming to himself that he was rendering a service to God.

Amid that whirlpool, the Lord shone with His face from heaven on Saul, who, unable to look at the splendor of His glory, fell on the ground as a dead man. When he heard the voice, he thought that it was that of an ordinary man, but he was surprised at realizing that it is of the living Jesus, rebuking and warning him.

Saul could not recognize the Speaker, as he did not expect it to be Jesus, who did not keep the law, who said, “bring down the temple”, who made Himself greater than Abraham, counted Himself as having been there before him, and greater than Moses who brought Manna from heaven. But when Jesus soon let him recognize His identity, he realized that he has indeed completely lost his way, persecuted the Church of Christ, opposed the divine Truth, and brought grief to the heart of God. He realized that he has surely cast himself in eternal perdition, while thinking that he was serving God.

He spoke to him as though to someone on the rim of a great abyss, into which he was about to fall, and from which the God of heaven Himself moved to rescue him. How amazingly rich God’s exalted love is, even toward His opponents among people!

“I am Jesus”: it is obvious that it was a personal appearance of the Savior to Saul. But was it the Son of Man in His glory, or was it just His divine light? That, no one can confirm. He proclaimed to him that He is Jesus who was recently crucified, as though saying to him, “I was crucified for your sake, but now I want to be crucified through you. ... I want you to share with Me the passions of love.”

“Of Nazareth”: That was the title that Saul used to ridicule the Christian believers.

¹ Sermon 87.3.

We never heard Jesus complaining that somebody persecutes Him. It was the first time for Him to admonish someone so strongly. He readily accepted his cross, yet then, He moaned together with His people; He stood to turn His persecutors into witnesses to His divine love.

“**Goads**”: the iron part at the end of a stick, by which one pricks a horse or an ox to get it moving. It is written that “Shamgar ... killed 600 men with an ox goad” (Judg. 3.31).

It is not possible for man to oppose God, His plan, and law, and stay happy.

- ❖ Saul was called a “young man” only when he was guarding the clothes of those who were stoning St. Stephen (Acts 7.58). ... However, Christ saw him while the light shone around him (Acts 9.3), as young men are called back from sin, through fear more than through convincing. Therefore, the Lord Christ mercifully told him not to kick against the goads¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“So he, trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ And the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do’” (Acts 9.6).

It was not a dream while sleeping, but a true vision, during which he entered into a conversation with Jesus Christ, the Lord in heaven. He saw light that blinded his eyes, and knocked him down to the ground. He heard a clear voice, and entered into a debate while completely conscious. Saul of Tarsus trembled and was astonished. In his own sight, in the sight of the Sanhedrin, and in the sight of God Himself, as he wrongly assumed, he was a righteous man and a faithful minister, who was ready to give his own life and his energies, to the account of God’s glory. So what was the crime that he has committed? He probably, at the beginning, could not realize the significance of that strange encounter and the identity of the One who spoke to him.

Saul’s soul bowed in contrition, to proclaim its readiness to give up all its concepts and knowledge, even its obedience to the Sanhedrin, to obey that heavenly voice. He then refused to submit to any authority on earth, once that heavenly being proclaimed Himself to him.

The Lord Christ instructed him to go to Damascus in order to know the way to his salvation through the Church. Because Saul was converted to faith by an exalted miraculous work by the Savior Himself, who appeared in His glory to him, He no longer had any doubt that He is the Messiah, for whom he for so long waited. The first thing to which a believer is committed is to obey the will of God and to attach himself to Him through His holy Church. That is why the divine command to him was to go to the city, and there, the Church would tell him what he should do. Saul did not, for one moment, think about his reputation, or his long history, or what other people might think of him.

Those were awesome moments, when the Lord Christ chose a (vessel), which has, for so long, reviled and blasphemed the name and the Church of Christ, to turn him into a ‘chosen vessel’, who bore love for both the Gentiles and the Jews and opened his heart to everyone he encountered. Saul enjoyed

¹ Joseph. 10.58.

the open heaven and the open conversation, as the Lord Christ did not talk to him through riddles, as He did with St. Peter, when he saw a great sheet coming down from heaven, and a voice talking to him in riddles.

- ❖ "And when Christ in His own Person called and addressed Paul, although He might have opened out to him at once the way of perfection, yet He chose rather to direct him to Ananias and commanded him to learn the way of truth from him, saying: "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9.6).

So He sends him to an older man, and thinks good to have him instructed by his teaching rather than His own, lest what might have been rightly done in the case of Paul might set a bad example of self-sufficiency, if each one were to persuade himself that he also ought in like manner to be trained by the government and teaching of God alone rather than by the instruction of the Elders. And this self-sufficiency the apostle himself teaches, not only by his letters but by his acts and deeds, ought to be shunned with all possible care, as he says that he went up to Jerusalem solely for this reason; viz., to communicate in a private and informal conference with his co-apostles and those who were before him that Gospel which he preached to the Gentiles, the grace of the Holy Spirit accompanying him with powerful signs and wonders: as he says "I communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain" (Gal. 2.2). Who then is so self-sufficient and blind as to dare to trust in his own judgment and discretion when the chosen vessel confesses that he had need of conference with his fellow apostles? Whence we clearly see that the Lord does not Himself show the way of perfection to anyone who having the opportunity of learning despises the teaching and training of the Elders, paying no heed to that saying which ought most carefully to be observed: "Ask your father, and he will show you, Your elders, and they will tell you" (Deut. 32.7)"¹.

(Abbot Moses)

- ❖ "Let us beware of such dangerous temptations of pride, and let us rather consider the fact that the Apostle Paul himself, although stricken down and admonished by the voice of God from heaven, was yet sent to a man to receive the sacraments and be admitted into the Church; and that Cornelius the centurion, although an angel announced to him that his prayers were heard and his alms had in remembrance, was yet handed over to Peter for instruction, and not only received the sacraments from the apostle's hands, but was also instructed by him as to the proper objects of faith, hope, and love"².

(St. Augustine)

¹ *St. John Cassian. Conferences. 2.15.*

² *on the Christian Doctrines. Pref. 6.*

St. Augustine resumes that such behavior grants man dignity, as God talks through His human temple, as “For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Cor. 3.17). He also adds that such behavior binds humans together by love. Moreover, love itself that binds humans together by a bond of unity would not have the means to pour a soul into another, as though mixing them up, unless men learn things from their fellow humans¹.

“And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one” (Acts 9.7).

It seems that at first they had fallen to the ground (Acts 26.14), when the light shone, then arose when they heard the voice, although they could not discern the words. They stood speechless, realizing that a conversation was going on between Saul and a certain heavenly being. They heard Saul’s voice and understood it, but could not discern what that heavenly voice was saying.

Saul was still helplessly lying on the ground, as the divine light deprived him of the outer sight, to reveal to him the extent of darkness that filled his heart and all his inner being. All of them have fallen down when the light shone, but all got to their feet, except for Saul. They all heard the voice; but Saul alone could discern every word, answer, and enquire. Those around him stood speechless, seeing no one. It was a personal appearance for Saul alone, who, accordingly, counted himself as one of those chosen by the Lord, to whom He proclaimed Himself, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me” (1 Cor. 15.8).

That encounter had its special significance to Saul of Tarsus, who counted it as a practical testimonial to the resurrection of the Lord from the dead, and His ascension to heaven. That encounter was a call to testify to the living Christ, raised from the dead.

That encounter opened Saul’s insight, to realize God’s plan for salvation, to accept the incarnation of the divine Word, to confess His Deity, to believe in the cross as a unique sacrifice for the salvation of the world, and to get in touch with the power of the heavenly Christ, who loves His Church and defends it.

“Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus” (Acts 9.8).

When the light shone, he had to close his eyes; and in his astonishment, he did not think of opening them until the debate came to an end. When he tried eventually to open them, he realized that he could no longer see. That blindness is something natural that happens as a result of the intense glare of the light, something called ‘gutta serena, or amaurosis’, which happens when one directly stirs at the sun, especially in the equatorial regions, and when one stirs at the sun while in eclipse.

Saul’s physically collapsed; and he temporarily lost his outer sight, to receive in his depths what is more exalted, to recognize the Person of the Lord Christ, to praise Him, saying, “By Your light, O

¹ on the Christian Doctrines. Pref. 6.

Lord, we see the light” (Ps. 26.49 lxx). Saul, who once thought of himself as a mighty one capable of shaking and destroying the Church was then tracing his way like a blind man, helped and led by those around him. He entered into Damascus, not haughtily but silent and speechless, and reluctant to eat or to drink. In Judah’s house, he sat in a corner, recalling the events of all his life, and those that happened on his way to Damascus. He felt in need of the rich grace of God and of the guidance of His Holy Spirit, to start a new life and to accompany him until the end. That vision terrified him. Yet at the same time, it granted him an exalted longing to see the face of our Lord Jesus and to hear His voice. He experienced the concept of repentance in a magnificent way, when the soul bows to hearken the divine voice, and groans in longing to encounter with Him within the circle of love.

❖ Paul, the fierce wolf, the little ‘Benjamin’, got blinded, to gain his insight, that the sudden terror of the surrounding darkness would lead him to call the One Whom he persecuted in His believers, a Lord.

(St. Jerome)

❖ "Would the persecutor Saul have died, unless he were wounded from heaven (Acts 4.9); or would the preacher be raised up, unless by life given him from His (Christ's) blood?"¹.

❖ "Saul the persecutor was overthrown, Paul the preacher built. ... So is said to Jeremiah, “I have this day set you, ... to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1.10). Thence is that voice of the Lord, “I wound and I heal” (Deut. 32.39). He smites the rottenness of the deed, He heals the pain of the wound. Physicians do thus when they cut; they smite and heal; they arm themselves (use a scalpel) in order to strike, they carry steel, and come to cure”².

❖ His eyes were shut to the vanities of this world, yet his insight was enlightened. What was so far a vessel for perdition became a chosen vessel of God³.

(St. Augustine)

“And he was three days without sight; and neither ate or drank” (Acts 9.9).

He abstained from eating and drinking, probably because he could not figure how he could fall into such a great sin, to oppose the Messiah whom the fathers and prophets longed to see and to enjoy His salvation work. He realized that he blasphemed against God, and violently persecuted His Church. For three days he remained greatly confused, as what he considered as a service to God, and as righteousness, he ultimately discovered that it was an opposition to the divine Truth, and a destruction to every Truth.

¹ St. Augustine. *On Ps. 102.*

² St. Augustine. *On Ps. 51.*

³ Fr. Caesarius of Arles. *Sermon 226.3.*

I do not think that he abstained from eating and drinking as an optional fasting, but it was a natural reaction of the bitterness of his soul, because of what he has done in ignorance. He realized that he had intentionally rejected the light and fallen under the authority of the hosts of darkness.

❖ "He was blinded, but in the body only, that he might be enlightened in heart"¹.

(St. Augustine)

2- AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SAUL AND ANANIAS IN DAMASCUS

“Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias, and to him the Lord said in a vision: ‘Ananias’. And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord’” (Acts 9.10).

We know nothing about Ananias. But it is obvious that he was a resident in Damascus, and not a fugitive from Jerusalem because of the persecution. He was a Jew from Damascus, who probably believed on the day of the Pentecost while he was in Jerusalem for the feast. When he heard the sermon of St. Peter, he believed, repented, and was baptized, then he set forth to Damascus to preach. He probably has been one of the seventy disciples, who heard what Saul of Tarsus was doing, though he did not know him personally.

“So the Lord said to him, ‘Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas, for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying’” (Acts 9.11).

God did not forsake Saul, who was blinded, and who abstained from eating and drinking, because of the bitterness of his soul, but He sent Ananias to him. After three days in a condition like being dead, He then granted him healing, for his soul to enjoy the strength of resurrection.

God commanded Ananias to go to Saul of Tarsus and not to wait for Saul to come to him. So, as God is the Initiator of love, when He sent us His Son to save us, it is fitting for the minister of God to be likewise an initiator of love, to look for the lost souls, and to seek their healing. Like the woman who lighted a lamp and searched for the lost mite, like the shepherd who left behind the 99 sheep to search for the lost one, and like the father who hastened to throw himself on the neck of his prodigal son to kiss him, God commanded Ananias to hasten to Saul, to let him rejoice in the Lord, together with the heavenly creatures. The good Shepherd found his lost sheep, and there He is inviting His friends to rejoice together with him.

The Straight: This way nowadays extends three miles, from the eastern gate of Damascus to its western gate, crossing the whole city in a straight pattern. It came in the tradition that the apostle Paul was baptized on this way, in a spring of water, from which Christians used to drink.

“For behold, he is praying”: This phrase reveals how Saul of Tarsus spent his three days of seclusion with no food or drink. He was praying to the One he used to persecute. For the first time, he lifted up his prayer, not as a Pharisee, proud of his righteousness and knowledge, but with a contrite

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 66.7.*

heart before the Crucified, trusting in the richness of the grace of God, that he would gain in the heavenly Jesus Christ. That was a sign of the truth of his conversion to the Truth, that he became a man of prayer. He used before to pray with haughtiness, but then he, with contrition, asked for forgiveness.

God intended to say to Ananias, "As a compassionate Father, I can not bear to hear the screams of my little son. Now hasten to him, offer him milk to drink, because he is hungry. He, who was spitting poison like a deadly viper and kicking even against the goads, is now, like a baby, praying and seeking milk to satisfy his hunger."

“And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so he might receive his sight” (Acts 9.12).

Now, Saul of Tarsus, in a dream, before the arrival of Ananias, saw him coming to him and putting his hands on him to receive back his sight. To put Ananias’ heart at ease, God told him that Saul, the Persecutor of the Christians, has become a man of prayer, who, in submission, anticipated the free gift of God. Thus, God satisfied Saul's heart showing him that He was not forsaking him in his blindness, but would send him his (Ambassador) to grant him divine comforts and the enlightenment of the heart through Baptism.

“Then Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem” (Acts 9.13).

Ananias’ answer does not imply his reluctance to go to Saul, or disobedience of the divine command, or fear of suffering or even death, but all that was in a dream, in which Christ confirmed to him that the man he heard about, either in letters from friends in Jerusalem, or from those who came to Damascus fleeing from persecution in Jerusalem, was called to become truly a chosen vessel to preach among the Gentiles, and that he has become a man of prayers. Thus, God revealed to Ananias His divine plan concerning Saul of Tarsus.

“Saints”: Here the believers are called “Saints” or ‘hagioi’, as they are sanctified to the Lord; and their hearts are dedicated by the Holy Spirit to His kingdom.

“And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name. But the Lord said to him, ‘Go for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9.14-15).

The Lord Christ, who had chosen His apostles while He was on earth, is He Himself who chose Saul as His apostle after He ascended to heaven. He has previously proclaimed, “You did not choose Me, But I chose you” (John 15.16).

The Lord Christ commanded Ananias to hasten to Saul to give him every possible help, as he became a chosen vessel, a tool in the hand of the Lord Christ, who entrusts him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He became a vessel of honor, which bears inside the treasure of the gospel to give to many. He

is indeed an “earthen vessel” (2 Cor. 4.7), yet he is a chosen vessel used by God Himself, who finds pleasure in it.

“**To bear My name before Gentiles**”: He became a holy tool, moved by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the exalted knowledge of Christ before the Gentiles, and to bear the joyful good news to the heathen nations. He became the apostle of the Gentiles (Rom. 11.13, 15.16; Gal. 2.8), to testify to the Lord Christ before kings, like King Agrippa, and Caesar himself (Acts 25.23, 26.32, 27.24), as well as before the children of Israel. He would start his preaching in the Synagogues of the Jews, who would reject him to go to the Gentiles.

Intending to encourage Ananias, the Lord Christ confirmed to him that He would let him, not only put an end to his animosity toward the Church and to his persecution of her, but also find pleasure and joy in suffering persecution for her sake. As a matter of fact, wherever Paul went, he was chased by troubles, tribulations, trials, and oppositions, in which he found fellowship with the Crucified.

Saul realized the divine Truth, for he is a chosen vessel, called by God, who “separated him from his mother’s womb, and called him through his grace” (Gal. 1.15). He received an evangelic teaching that consummates the law, delivered to him, not on the Mount of Sinai, but from heaven itself. He did not see the shining face of Moses, but that of the Lord which shines more than the sun at noon time, before which the splendor of Moses’ face greatly fades.

- ❖ "Do not, I repeat, weigh faith by years, nor suppose me better than yourself merely because I have enlisted under Christ's banner earlier than you. The apostle Paul, that **chosen vessel** framed out of a persecutor, though last in the apostolic order is **first in merit**. For though last he has labored more than they all (1 Cor. 15.10) "¹.
 - ❖ "The chosen vessel who had Christ's name ever on his lips kept under his body and brought it into subjection. Yet even he was hindered by carnal desire and had to do what he would not. As one suffering violence he cries: “O, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death” (Rom. 7.24)?" ².
- (St. Jerome)**
- ❖ "He, the least, made great, not by himself, but by Him whom he once persecuted, was sent to the Gentiles, from a robber become a shepherd, from a wolf a sheep. He, the least Apostle, was sent to the Gentiles, and labored much among the Gentiles, and through him the Gentiles believed. His Epistles are the witnesses"³.

¹ Letter 58 to Paulinus of Nola, 1.

² Letter 125 to Heliodorus, 8.

³ Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 27.6.

- ❖ Paul accepted the yoke of faith, and was chosen as a teacher to the Gentiles, a role model to the martyrs, a terror to the demons, a forgiver of sins, and a vessel for virtues¹.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Paul was made a **chosen vessel**. As he was converted only through the deep love of the Lord, he did not refer any thing to his own worthiness, but referred everything to Christ, saying, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor. 15.9, 10).

He dwelt in the house (the camp) (Deut. 23.12), that he used to empty of its dwellers.

He dwelt in the mansions of Christ, after being used to wander in the forests like a wolf.

He was covered by God (Deut. 23.12), when Christ appeared to him, and although he could see nothing, when his eyes were opened (Acts 9.8), yet he could see Christ, and could hear His voice inside himself².

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ Paul, the chosen vessel (Acts 9.15), interpreted all those blessings (the prophecies) that came in the law, in a spiritual way. Knowing that they are not physical blessings, he says to the Ephesians, “Blessed be the Lord and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1.3)³.

(Scholar Origen)

- ❖ Who is better than all men? Who is he, but that “tentmaker” (Acts 18.3), ... the teacher of the whole world, who crossed over the land and the sea, as though with wings, ... the “chosen vessel, the friend of Christ the Bridegroom, who “planted the Church” (1 Cor. 3.6), ... the “wise master builder” (1 Cor. 3.10), ... the “preacher” who ran the race and “fought the good fight” (2 Tim. 4.6), ... the warrior, ... the coach of the wrestlers, who left memories of his virtues everywhere in the world?⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9.16).

When the Lord appeared to Saul to transfer his vision up to heaven, He also appeared to Ananias to call him to go to the house of Judas to encounter Saul of Tarsus, whom He chose as a vessel to bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel, and whom he would show how many things he must suffer for his name’s sake. The Lord chose him a vessel that finds pleasure in suffering for His name’s sake more abundantly than the rest of the apostles (2 Cor. 11.22-23). “I now rejoice in my

¹ *Sermons, De Apstolis Petro et Paulo.*

² *The Patriarchs, 12.58.*

³ *Homilies on Luke. Hom. 39.3.*

⁴ *on the Incomprehensible Nature of God, 8.3.*

sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the Church” (Col. 1.24).

- ❖ "No man loved Christ more than Paul: no man exhibited greater zeal, no man was counted worthy of more grace"¹.
- ❖ Paul reached greater perfection every day, He was always longing to have greater troubles, greater labors, greater risks, and greater sufferings, for the sake of Christ, in a similar way to the spreading of fire in a forest until the whole forest becomes aflame².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And Ananias went his way and entered the house, and laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 9.17).

“**Laying his hands on him**”: That was a Church rite for presenting divine blessings, and for invoking the Holy Spirit.

He called him “**Brother Saul**”, as a fellow in the Christian faith.

“**The Lord Jesus**”, In Hebrew it came: “**The Lord, who is Jesus, sent me**”, in order that Saul would realize that the Lord Jehovah whom he worshiped is Himself Jesus.

“**Who appeared to you on the road as you came**”: The Lord informed Ananias in Damascus of what happened to Saul on the road, in order that Saul would be sure that it was from the Lord Jesus. He referred to him indirectly that his call is directly from the Lord, according to the words of the apostle himself: “Paul, an apostle (not from men, or through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead)” (Gal. 1.1). “But I make known to you, brethren that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, or was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1.11-12).

- ❖ "Paul the persecutor of the church, that ravening wolf out of Benjamin (Gen. 49.27), bows his head before Ananias one of Christ's sheep, and only recovers his sight when he applies the remedy of baptism"³.
- ❖ "Neither the virtues nor the vices of parents are imputed to their children. God takes account of us only from the time when we are born anew in Christ. Paul, the persecutor of the church, who is in the morning the ravening wolf of Benjamin (Gen. 49.27), that is yields himself up to the sheep Ananias (Acts 9.17)"⁴.

¹ on the Priesthood. 1.3 PG 48.645.

² De Laud. S. Pauli, Hom. 1.

³ Letter 69 to Oceanus, 6.

⁴ Letter 60 to Heliodorus, 8.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ "And whereas He could Himself have restored to Saul the use of his sight, He nevertheless sent him to His disciple Ananias, that by his blessing Saul's eyes might be restored, the sight of which he had lost"¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once, and he arose and was baptized” (Acts 9.18).

No real scales like those of fish fell from his eyes, but “something like scales”. It was imperative that something like scales should fell from his eyes, to receive his sight, because in holding fast to the letter, he was blinded. And once the hands were laid on him, and the Holy Spirit dwelt in him, the scales of darkness fell, the darkness that was scattered by the dwelling of light.

- ❖ It is not a rule that the one who baptizes is greater than the one baptized. Ananias was not greater than Paul. Philip baptized (Acts 8.13, 38), And Peter gave the Holy Spirit through the laying of hands².

(The Scholar Origen)

The scholar Tertullian³ says that Saul of Tarsus encountered with the Lord, and believed that Lord Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God; but because he was in need to be baptized, the Lord sent him to Ananias.

- ❖ "From a persecutor Paul becomes a preacher. His bodily eyes are blinded to clear the eyes of his soul, and he who once haled Christ's servants in chains before the council of the Jews, lives afterwards to glory in the bonds of Christ"⁴.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ Paul was a vessel, and proved himself by his testimony to the Truth, and not to falsehood. He rejected every earthly thing, through the Baptism that removed the scales off his eyes (Acts 9.18), and became a child to the Holy Spirit, as he was formed from His sweet fragrance. After that, this vessel was made of chosen bronze, and became a vessel in which the wine of the word of God is poured, and filled with knowledge of secrets, that it is in no need of any human work, as Paul did not take his teachings from flesh and blood (Gal. 1.16). But he produces the holy drink, and pours it to those who wants it, whereas the various virtues similar to perfumes with the sweet fragrance of Christ are formulated according to the need of the different persons who receive the word of God: the Jews, the Greeks, men, women, masters, slaves, parents, children, and everyone submitted or not to the law.

¹ Concerning Repentance, 1.8 (34).

² Fragment, 52.

³ on Baptism, 13.

⁴ Letter 16 to Pope Damasus, 1.

These various marvelous teachings unite with every virtue, and the perfume is mixed in a vessel according to the need of every person who receives the word of God¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“And when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Paul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus” (Acts 9.19).

Although St. Luke the Evangelist did not mention Saul’s visit to Arabia, he did not deny it either. After his Baptism, Saul spent some days with the believers (the disciples) in Damascus. How long? We do not know. Afterwards, he went from Damascus to Arabia, then returned to Damascus and from it to Jerusalem (Gal. 1.17).

Saul’s conversion to the Christian faith bears a strong testimony to the truth of that faith for the following reasons:

1- As a Jew, Saul was known for his knowledge, He so reached the top in Jewish thought, together with a high culture, that his conversion to faith came as a shock to the Jewish leaders, who were hoping that he would remain as a strong tool to uproot Christianity altogether.

2- His conversion to faith was not based upon material benefits or more dignity, as the Christians, then, were poor people, subject to ridicule by both the Jews and the Gentiles, and prone to persecution even to death. So it was not possible for Saul to be exempted from all that, if not more so.

3- Saul’s old concepts were so completely contradictory to the evangelic thought toward which he used to embrace every animosity and hatred, that it was not possible to convert to it so quickly, except by the intervention of the exalted grace of God.

4- Once he accepted the faith, he became a witness and a preacher of the gospel, moving from one city to another, proclaiming his joy for his new faith, and longing, if possible, that all humanity would enjoy what he did.

5- It was not possible for him to convert from a persecutor to a preacher, except through a call from heaven, and through divine work in his heart and his mind, to steer his potentials and talents, to what he used to bear such great animosity.

3- Saul setting forth to preach

“Immediately he preached the Christ in the Synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9.20).

He immediately started to preach that Jesus is the Christ, not just to confirm his faith, but because his fiery heart that was previously opposing the Truth was converted to realizing the Truth was longing to bring everyone to experience what he did, and to enjoy the Messiah, the desire of the fathers and prophets, the Messiah Son of God, the Backbone of all the Old Testament.

¹ *Homilies on Song of Songs, 14.*

Once Saul saw the exalted light of love, and the new covenant by the blood of Jesus the Lord of glory, he arose and was baptized, gained the new birth, and was strengthened by the food of faith. Now the wolf became a lamb, and the enemy became a minister, loving and beloved.

He set forth to testify to the light, in the Synagogues, longing for everyone to enjoy what he did. He started to preach that Christ is the Son of God, having experienced the natural sonhood of Christ to God the Father, through his personal enjoyment of sonhood through the grace of Baptism in the name of Jesus. The divine vision, the personal encounter, and Christ's love granted him a true revelation of the Person of Jesus Christ. He previously was saying together with the prophet Isaiah, "Truly You are God, who hides Yourself, O God of Israel the Savior" (Isa. 45.15). But now he realized the significance of the words of the Lord Christ, "the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father has made Him known" (John 1.18).

St. John Chrysostom speaks of Saul's setting forth, directly once he was converted, saying,

- ❖ Do you see how faithful Saul's heart is? Do you see how he confirms to us that what he did before was in ignorance? ... Anyway, once he knew from the Giver of the law Himself that he was on the wrong path, he did not put off forsaking his sins, or delayed his repentance. But once he was enlightened by the light of the Spirit, he became a preacher of the Truth¹.
- ❖ Have you seen him, like a lion, jumping everywhere? Look at him now, changing to a docile lamb! Who used before to put in chains those who believe in Christ, put them in prison, persecute, and chase them, is now being let down through the wall in a large basket, to escape from the plots of the Jews (Acts 9.25)².

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Then all who heard were amazed, and said, 'Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests'" (Acts 9.21).

That sudden conversion, together with a practical movement, not just to receive the faith, but also to preach it, had amazed everyone. He, who came to destroy the Church in Damascus, became her ally and a worker to her account.

Who can imagine the condition of those Synagogues, anticipating the arrival of Saul of Tarsus to lead them on a campaign of an utter persecution and devastation of the Christians, to see him coming to them with a powerful Spirit, to call them to enjoy the grace of the Lord Christ, and his exalted work of salvation and to worship Him with complete submission! Many of them have undoubtedly heard about the Person of Jesus and the signs and miracles done in His name, but the decree of the Sanhedrin was firm and they dispatched Saul of Tarsus to put it into effect.

¹ *Baptismal Instructions*, 4.7, 9.

² *Baptismal Instructions*, 7.10.

❖ "Paul proclaims Christ, saying, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4.5).

Who then is this? The former persecutor. O mighty wonder! The former persecutor himself preaches Christ. ...

He went forth to persecute, and after three days the persecutor is a preacher in Damascus. By what power?

Others call friends as witnesses for friends but I have presented to you as a witness the former enemy: and do you still doubt? The testimony of Peter and John, though weighty, was yet of a kind open to suspicion: for they were His friends. But of one who was formerly his enemy, and afterwards dies for His sake, who can any longer doubt the truth? At this point of my discourse I am truly filled with wonder at the wise dispensation of the Holy Spirit; how He confined the Epistles of the rest to a small number, but to Paul the former persecutor gave the privilege of writing fourteen ... in order that we all might thus be made believers. For all were amazed at Paul, and said, is not this he that was formerly a persecutor (Acts 9.21)? Did he not come hither, that he might lead us away bound to Jerusalem? Be not amazed, said Paul, I know that it is hard for me to kick against the pricks: I know that I am not worthy to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God (1 Cor. 9.15); but I did it in ignorance (1 Tim. 13.1) for I thought that the preaching of Christ was destruction of the Law, and knew not that He came Himself to fulfill the Law and not to destroy it (Matt. 7.15). But the grace of God was exceeding abundant in me (1 Tim. 14.1)"¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

"But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9.22).

If the divine proclamation on the road has granted him a confirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the daily work of God with him has granted him a new daily strength that encouraged him more and more to carry out the preaching work with all daring. That daily increasing strength created an atmosphere of excitement among the Jews, who marveled at the Person of that Jesus of Nazareth, who had such an activity, even after His crucifixion and death.

St. John Chrysostom² says that the Jews, having seen the strength of Saul's preaching, found no time to plan for bringing him to trial, to claim any charges, or to search for witnesses; The situation for them represented great danger that needed swift action.

Stephen, who debated and confounded the Jews in the Synagogues in Jerusalem, has been stoned to death, and now, his successor, Saul of Tarsus, who used to oppose him, and had a role in his execution was carrying out his same mission outside Jerusalem. Saul became a witness to the resurrection of Christ, not only depending on the testimony of Stephen, especially at the moments of his

¹ Lect. Catec. 10.17.

² Cf. Hom. On Acts. Hom. 20.

stoning, but on his own testimony, as it is said, “For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen, and the things which I will yet reveal to you” (Acts 26.16).

“Increased all the more in strength”: this conforms to the saying of the Lord, “And the things which I will yet reveal to you.” This proclamation to Saul, as well as to every true believer, is a dynamic work that incessantly grows. Our experience with God is a daily affair that always brings us into deeper knowledge and a greater enjoyment of His power working in us. God wishes to present consistent divine proclamations, as long as the soul is serious in its longing for it. And as the Lord says, “Those who seek me diligently will find me” (Prov. 8.17).

“Proving”: Saul seriously started to study the law, the prophecies, and the events, under a new light, to recognize the secrets of God’s kingdom that were hidden due to the scales that were in his eyes.

4- Saul fleeing from Damascus

“Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him” (Acts 9.23).

Those many days include the period of two to three years the apostle spent in Arabia (Gal. 1.18). The Jews plotted together with the representative of Aritas the Arab king, to have the apostle killed because of his fiery zeal and the success of his ministry.

“But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gate day and night, to kill him” (Acts 9.24).

We do not know how the apostle knew that plot, to which he also referred in his second epistle to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11.32-33).

Having felt that the apostle knew of their plot, they watched the gates of the city to keep him from escaping. The ruler was probably a Jew, who shared their views, and intended to get rid of Paul; or he probably was not a Jew, yet, because the Jews in Damascus convinced him that the apostle was an opponent of authorities, he gave commands to watch his movements, his going out and coming into the city.

So the apostle Paul turned with an amazing pace from being a persecutor to being a believer, from being a believer to being a preacher, and ultimately from being a preacher to being a man of sufferings, who knows how to suffer for the sake of Christ’s name. The Lord granted him the blessings of entering into many sufferings.

“Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket” (Acts 9.25).

The Synagogues were now divided into three categories: the first consists of those who were serious in seeking their salvation, who saw the Truth through the exalted work of God in Saul of Tarsus, and longed to see what he saw and to experience what he was in of the joy of the kingdom. A second category stood perplexed between the literal thoughts they inherited, together with their complete

obedience to the Sanhedrin and what Saul of Tarsus proclaimed. The third category has found that the only solution to the situation was to kill Saul, to mute that voice, fiery with the Spirit. They put a plan to watch the gates of Damascus to keep him from escaping. But the disciples hid him by day, and let him down by night through the wall of the city in a large basket, the same way Rahab the harlot did with the two spies of Joshua (Josh. 2.15); and when David escaped from king Saul's face (1 Sam. 19.12).

In this action by the disciples, and the apostle's consent of it, we see abidance to the commandment of the Lord Christ to His disciples, to flee from one city to another, if they are persecuted (Matt. 10.23).

For three years he ministered in the Synagogues (Gal. 1.18), yet his call was to minister to the uncircumcised and not to the circumcised. Therefore he had to be expelled from Damascus, to set forth to the ministry to which he was called. The apostle about the circumstances of this expulsion as follows: "In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to apprehend me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands" (2 Cor. 12.32, 33). The name of that governor who co-operated with the Jews against Paul and gave his orders to guard the gates of the city is not known.

That king was Aretas the fourth (40- 9 BC). He reined over the court of the Nuptians, whose capital was Petra, where Paul spent the years of his seclusion. It was called Arabia, and extended from Damascus to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Letting Paul down in a basket through a window in the wall constitutes a kind of humiliation to someone for whose movements Jerusalem used to tremble, and for whose arrival as a hero to defend the Truth, Damascus was eagerly waiting. But the apostle accepted this humiliation for the Lord's sake, and counted it among the tribulations he suffered.

Saul of Tarsus began his ministry among the Jews, assuming that their knowledge of how he used to persecute the Church and his history as a Pharisee with a vigorous zeal for keeping the law and the fathers' traditions would all be points to his credit, in convincing the Jews of the truth of the Christian faith and of Christ's proclamation to him. But God insisted on making him an apostle to the Gentiles, knowing that it was impossible for the Jews to accept him. And, according to the first homily by **St. John Chrysostom** on the epistle to the Hebrews, All those circumstances caused the Jews to hate him more, having been one of them, then all of a sudden deserted them and they considered him as a traitor. He was opposed even by the Jews who were converted to Christianity, as being a threat to the law and the Jewish traditions, to which they were still abiding.

❖ Some claim that it was unfitting for Paul to escape by the help of his disciples, and not through God's help. But God's intervention would be necessary, only when human help fails¹.

(Ambrosiaster)

¹ *Comm. On Paul's Epistles (2 Cor. 11.33).*

5- SAUL IN JERUSALEM

“And when Saul has come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9.26).

How did the disciples not heard of Saul’s conversion?

1- The means of communication between different countries was not as effective and swift as they are nowadays.

2- There was an animosity between Herod and Aretas king of Arabia, as the former married the daughter of the later then divorced and expelled her later on. That led to war between the two; and there was no communication between both countries.

3- Some Jewish leadership who did hear about Paul’s conversion probably tried to keep the news from reaching the local Christians, who would use it to draw more Jews to the Christian faith.

4- Not coming to Jerusalem directly after his conversion, and his delay for three years, made even those who heard the news, not sure of the truth of what they heard.

He tried to join the congregation of Christians, but they could not believe that he truly believed in the Lord Christ, and had their doubts that he was using deceit to enter in their midst, in order to intensify his strikes against them. As a matter of fact, his history presented a bitter portrait of his violent opposition to the Christian faith.

When he returned to Jerusalem for the first time after three years, he did not go to the chief priest and the Pharisees, or to the Sanhedrin, but intended to join the believers, who became in his eyes some kind of a heavenly congregation.

“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus” (Acts 9.27).

St. Barnabas introduced him to St. Peter and St. James (Gal. 1.18-19), probably because the rest of the disciples and apostles were, at the time, away from Jerusalem.

“So he was with them at Jerusalem coming in and going out, and he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 9.28).

They trusted him and received him in fellowship. Yet his stay in Jerusalem was for only 15 days (Gal. 1.18).

“He disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him” (Acts 9.29).

He encountered with the Hellenist Jews who spoke the Greek language, those before whom St. Stephen used to testify to the Lord Christ (Acts 6.9). As he was boldly speaking before them about Jesus, testifying that He is the Christ, they were unable to debate with him, or to oppose the Holy Spirit working in him. ... Saul, in this short time, entered into the same Synagogue where Stephen was

debating. Saul at that time was opposing him. But then, as he was debating with the Jews, with the same Spirit of Stephen, they could not bear it any longer, and they attempted to kill him.

“When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him out to Tarsus” (Acts 9.30).

When the believers found out, they feared that Saul would be stoned, the way it happened with St. Stephen three years before or a little more. So they helped Saul to escape to Caesarea, and from there to Tarsus his home town, where he probably was preoccupied with preaching the gospel.

The name of Saul of Tarsus was still a source of terror; the three years that he spent in Damascus and Arabia did not help to wipe out his reputation in Jerusalem, because of the bitter persecution that the Christians suffered there on his hands. When he attempted to join the Church, they thought of him as a spy who came to consummate his previous plan to persecute them. But when St. Barnabas introduced him to the apostles, and convinced them of the truth of his conversion, the whole Church rejoiced. They have undoubtedly heard of his conversion during those years, but it was not easy for them to believe what they heard, until they saw him, and got in touch with the grace of God working in him, for which they glorified God for listening to their prayers for his sake. “And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, that he who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God in me” (Gal. 1.22-24).

He stayed only fifteen days in Jerusalem, although he had the intention to stay longer to minister to the Jews and the Hellenists (As we said before: those were either Jews who lived before in Greek cities, or proselyte Gentiles who converted to Judaism).

While Saul was praying in the temple, the Lord Christ appeared to him in a vision, to command him to hasten to depart from Jerusalem. He tried to convince the Lord that his ministry in Jerusalem would be more effective (Acts 22.17-21), as, according to his human logic, having been a persecutor of the church before he started preaching the Lord Christ, his ministry would be more effective among the Jews there. But the wisdom of God elected him to minister to the Gentiles, not to the circumcised.

The Lord confirmed to him that he had to depart, as he was called to work in several nations. When he informed the brethren, they brought him to Caesarea, and from there to Tarsus, his home town, the capital of the province of Celicia.

“Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” (Acts 9.31).

Because the persecution of the church halted for a while, her leaders used the chance to intensify the preaching. The number of believers multiplied, and the church grew, and progressed in spiritual knowledge. The spiritual leaders thus, work in both affliction and peace, finding all things working together for the good of those who love God.

Some believe that the Jews at that time, because of certain very serious events that had bearings on their very existence, got preoccupied away from their opposition to the Christians. Dr. Lardner says that when Caligula ascended the throne, the Jews suffered from persecution by the Egyptians in Alexandria that ended in the devastation of all their places of worship there. Moreover, in the third year of his reign (39 AD), Caligula sent Petronius to Syria, with orders to set the Emperor's statue in the temple of Jerusalem. That Imperial decree, according to Philo the Jew from Alexandria, and the Historian Eusebius, came down like lightning upon the Jews. Eusebius says that Petronius came to Jerusalem with a great army of three garrisons. And, according to the command of the Emperor, those who chose to oppose him, were executed, and all the rest of the inhabitants of the land would be taken captives¹.

Philo says² that all the Jews: men, women, children, elders, and youth came out, when Petronius came to Phoenicia (Lebanon), and cast themselves on the ground before him, crying and mourning.

They were not temporarily preoccupied with the Christians. But when they saw the statue of the Emperor put by force in the temple of God, and came to know that opposing that would be punished by death and bondage, they temporarily stopped their persecution of the Christians, and peace dwelt in the church. Therefore, the church grew in the regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

Those circumstances, together with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to faith, and his stay away in Arabia for the duration of three years, all contributed to the suppression of the wave of persecution in these regions against the Christians, and to the dwelling of peace in the churches.

Now, the church set forth, until it reached Samaria, according to the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples and His divine plan. And when the believers heard that many have received faith on the hands of St. Philip, they greatly rejoiced in the Lord.

6- THE APOSTLE PETER IN LYDDA AND JOPPA

“And it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda” (Acts 9.32).

Having returned from Samaria together with St. John, the apostle St. Peter seems to have found comfort in the ministry outside Jerusalem, so he set forth to minister in the surrounding province, until he came to Lydda on the sea coast, where St. Philip had once been.

Lydda or Lyd: is an ancient city (1 Chron. 8.12; Ezra 2.33; Neh. 11.53), on the way between Jerusalem and Caesarea Pilippi, 10 or 12 miles south-east of Jaffa, belonging to the tribe of Ephraim. The Greeks used to call it Diospolis or the city of Jupiter, because the temple of Jupiter was probably set there, one time or another, but now it is completely destroyed. According to the Christian tradition,

¹ See Lardner's Works. vol. 1, p. 101-102. London, 1829.

² Philo. DeLegat. Ad Cai. pp. 1024-1025.

Emperor Justinian built there a church, where the martyr St. George wrestled with the dragon. And it is claimed that the Lord Christ would come to it to kill the great dragon (the anti- Christ). Lydda was known for its purple fabrics.

As an apostle, St. Peter did not confine himself to a certain location, or commit himself to a certain church, but visited several of the newly built churches to confirm them in the faith they accepted through the preachers scattered because of the persecution. Setting forth from Jerusalem, he, and the other apostles, was like their Lord, who walked around doing good.

“To the saints”: Having been characterized by the Spirit of holiness, the new Christian believers were called in the Holy Book, as “saints” (Ps. 16.3).

“There he found a certain man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed” (Acts 9.33).

He healed him in the name of Jesus Christ. Aeneas and all those around him must have lost every hope for his healing, and expected that he would stay in his bed of sickness until he goes to his grave. But God, through His apostle Peter, confirmed that He is the God of the impossible.

“And Peter said to him, Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed’. Then he arose immediately” (Acts 9.34).

Paralysis would last for eight years, but in the proper time chosen by God, He works in us to grant us complete recovery from our paralysis, arise from our beds, and move to work incessantly.

But before healing the paralyzed man, Peter drew his sight to the true Physician, the Grantor of healing, Jesus Christ. The words of St. Peter bore the power of instant and complete healing, as they presented the name of Jesus Christ, the source of power. He instructed the sick man to arise and to make his bed; I.E. his paralysis turned into health with strength and action.

Our Christ, God of the impossible, particularly cares for the sick with hopeless ailments, to proclaim the power of His name as the source of healing, and of the power of resurrection, that the sick would carry his bed, and strongly testify. And through him, souls would turn to the Lord.

“So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord” (Acts 9.35).

Having seen the power of the name of Jesus Christ, they turned to the Truth, and received the Lord Jesus in their life.

Sharon or Sharona is close to the Plain of Sharon, a fertile land extending to Mount Carmel.

“At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas. This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did” (Acts 9.36).

St. Luke presents another miracle done by St. Peter to confirm the gospel. That miracle surpasses the previous one, in raising a woman by the name of Tabitha from the dead.

Joppa: On the Mediterranean Sea coast, 10 miles north-west of Lydda, 10 miles south of Caesarea, and 45 miles north-west of Jerusalem. It belonged to the tribe of Dan. It was a main port of

Palestine, which although modest, yet it was used by King Solomon to receive the wood he imported from Tyre to build the temple (2 Chron. 2.16), and was used for the same purpose in the days of Ezra (Ezra 3.7). It is a very ancient city, whose name was mentioned in the inscriptions by Tohotmes the third (1490-1436 BC). It was also mentioned in (Josh. 19.36, as the people of Israel entered into the Promised Land, yet it remained under the Palestinian authority. Jonathan the Maccabee invaded it and took it over from the kings of Syria in the year 148 BC, But Pompei the Roman took it back for the Syrians in the year 47 BC, and was given to Hercanus the second, the Maccabee, the Jewish king and priest. Most of its inhabitants were Greek. It was destroyed by Vespasian in the year 68 BC. Nowadays, Joppa (or Jaffa), in the State of Israel, is known for its gardens and excellent fruits.

Tabitha: is A Hebrew name, translated in Greek as Dorcas, meaning (a deer). Having accepted the faith in the Lord Christ, she was baptized and became a disciple of the Lord Christ through one of the preachers. She was full of good works and charitable deeds, as fruits of her living faith, and translated her faith into persistent work. Her testimony to her Christ was not with words, but rather with good works full of love and compassion.

“But it happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room” (Acts 9.37).

They washed her body as it was the custom of many people, and laid her in an upper room, probably anticipating the arrival of St. Peter, as requested by the disciples.

“And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them” (Acts 9.38).

The disciples probably sent for St. Peter to comfort the grieving souls, as she has been a support to many widows and poor. Expecting him to raise her from the dead was most probably not there, as we never heard that any of the apostles raised someone from the dead since the ascension of the Lord Christ and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the Church.

“Then Peter arose and went with them. When he had come, they brought him to the upper room. And all the women stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them” (Acts 9.39).

The widows whom Tabitha dedicated her life to serve read no lamentation or poetry to commend her, but were not embarrassed to demonstrate the products of her love and compassion, as a living testimony of her piety. They had the spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude, and proclaimed their need for such a pious disciple.

The tunics in the Jewish and Greek customs were put on over the garments, That is why, as the Lord Christ entered into Jerusalem, they spread tunics on the ground before him, which were their outer garments.

Some believe that those widows of Joppa, having experienced the practical and giving love of Tabitha, sent for St. Peter the apostle to walk ten miles and come to raise her from the dead. They amazingly believed in the capability of faith, and the weakness of death before the power of the resurrection of the Lord Christ.

- ❖ When someone approaches death, may his friends, preparing his shrouds, would convince their dying friend to leave something for the poor, to have Christ as his heir¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But Peter put them all out, and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, ‘Tabitha arise’. And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up” (Acts 9.40).

St. Peter put them all out, He did not seek praise from anyone, or vain glory from the world. He came, not to show off his capabilities, but to practice his inner compassion in the Lord. He intended to have a quiet talk with his Savior, away from disturbance. He offered his prayer for God’s help, with the spirit of piety and submission as a minister of the Lord, unlike his Lord Christ who raised Lazarus from the dead by His own divine authority.

St. John Chrysostom² commends us to have Christ's tongue and to utter his very words, as St. Peter (Acts 9.40) said the same words of Christ (Matt. 5.5), so that when we speak, we utter the very words of Christ, not only to say: “Arise and go” (Matt. 5.5), or “Tabitha arise” (Acts 9.40). But when reviled I bless, and when harmed I pray for the sake of those who do me harm. ... For my tongue is the hand that touches the feet of Christ (supplicating to Him). My tongue would be like that of Christ, if it shows fitting zeal, and if it utters things that are fitting for us as His children. What are such things? Words full of meekness and humility, the same way He did when he talked to His crucifiers.

“Then he gave her his hand and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (Acts 9.41).

- ❖ She, who helped sustain the suffering widows, was worthy to be restored to life through their supplications³.

(Martyr Cyprian)

“And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord” (Acts 9.42).

That was the first miracle of its kind done by the hand of an apostle, through which many realized that the gospel is a heavenly message and believed in it.

Raising Tabitha from the dead did not glorify St. Peter, but the Lord Jesus, as “Many believed on the Lord”, having tasted the gospel of salvation.

¹ *Homilies on Hebrews. Hom. 27:9.*

² *In Matt. 79. PG. 58.715 A-B.*

³ *Treatise On Works and Alms, 6.*

“So it was that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner” (Acts 9.43).

Raising Tabitha from the dead opened the door before St. Peter to preach in Joppa, where he stayed for several days, and where many accepted the faith. He did not stay in Tabitha’s house, although she was rich, that no one may assume that he did that sign for personal benefit.

It was not also without significance that St. Luke the Evangelist mentioned the profession of Simon with whom the apostle Peter stayed several days, As tanning was not a clean profession in the sight of the Jews, on account of that everything on its premises are defiled, namely, the hides of dead animals, some of which may also be rotten. Here, the apostle Peter began to set himself free from the letter of the law.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 9

TRANSFIGURE IN ME, O LORD TO LET ME TESTIFY TO YOUR LOVE

- ❖ Saul assumed that he was the second man after Gamaliel,
As, concerning the law, who was more righteous than he was?
And concerning the traditions of his fathers, who was more zealous?
Family-wise, he was a true Hebrew, a Roman citizen, and with Greek culture,
The right hand of the chief priest, the opponent of Christ and His followers,
The strong will in the hand of the Sanhedrin, to destroy the Christians.
In his own eyes, who could better serve God and his people?
- ❖ That zealous young man set forth to realize the wish of his heart.
He set forth on the road to Damascus, looking for those of the 'Way'.
He set forth on the road of his heart, full of hatred,
Seeking those who were on the road of the divine love.
- ❖ As he was approaching Damascus,
Thinking only of how to let no one of the 'Way' escape from his hand.
All of a sudden, he himself fell in the hand of the Philanthropist,
Who shone on him with the light of His glory.
He did not see Him in a cloud, or through a pillar of smoke or fire.
He did not see him in Jerusalem, but on the road to Damascus of the Gentiles.
He saw Him in a heavenly divine light.
And as it was not possible for his eyes to behold Him, who is Imperceptible,
He fell like dead, to arise borne on the arms of Him who is resurrected from the dead.
He also temporarily lost his physical sight,
To enjoy, together with it, the eternal insight.
He heard an accusation, directed to him from the Lord of heaven.
Yet not to bring him over into the eternal prison,
But to lift him up to an exalted angelic level.
- ❖ Now, he realized who Jesus is:
That He is love itself, who pours His love even on His opponents;
That he does not destroy those against Him, but transforms them into energies to edify many;
That He is the Creator of heaven and earth, who is not confined to Jerusalem,
Or to the temple of Solomon.

- ❖ Saul heard the Head of the Church crying out:
 “Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute Me?”
 You tread on My feet (the Church), and do not you count it an insult against Me?
 Whoever touches one of My toes insults the Head itself.
 Reconsider your situation, to realize whom you are opposing.
 It is hard for you to kick against the goads.
- ❖ What he previously considered as deceit,
 When the Christians proclaimed seeing the gates of heaven open,
 He saw it by himself,
 And heard the Heavenly talking to him personally.
 He did not believe his eyes and ears,
 That He who said, “Destroy the temple” is set, with His heavenly glory, in the divine sanctuaries.
 He heard the Heavenly One calling Himself “Jesus of Nazareth”.
 The name that he used in mocking is treasured by the Creator of heaven.
- ❖ The Lord of the Church talked to him.
 He commanded him to go to His Church.
 There, he would learn the Truth and enjoy the new life.
 The Lord did not teach him pride and self esteem,
 But, instructed him to bow humbly under the hand of Ananias,
 To receive from the Church the gifts of the Spirit.
- ❖ For three days, he fasted and prayed.
 He realized that he was in need of divine guidance.
 For three days, he lived as though in a grave.
 God sent Ananias to him, to experience the power of resurrection from the dead.
 He realized that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is not the product of imagination by any one,
 But a fact that he lived and experienced every day.
 The opponent became a witness, He saw Jesus, who resurrected from the dead,
 And ascended to heaven.
- ❖ The Lord did not send Saul to Ananias.
 But Ananias set forth to enquire about Saul.
 He bore the spirit of the Church that seeks those who perished,
 And searches for the lost mite,
 And the prodigal son who forsook his father’s house.

- ❖ Something like scales fell from his eyes,
To behold by the Spirit the secrets of God,
To comprehend the law in a spiritual way,
To understand that the prophecies have been realized in the Person of Jesus Christ.
The scales of the letter that blind the insight have fallen from his eyes,
And he had the unutterable light of the Spirit.
- ❖ Saul became a chosen vessel,
Carrying the perfumes of the Holy Spirit and bearing the sweet fragrance of Christ.
His perfumes were not the product of his own hands,
But the word of God, presented to the Jews, as well as to the Gentiles,
To the masters, as well as to the slaves,
To the grown-ups, as well as to the children.
From this vessel, milk is offered to the children, and solid food to the mature.
How amazingly rich is the grace of God!
- ❖ After three days in his unique seclusion,
Saul was given the sacrament of Baptism.
And from Baptism, he set forth by the Holy Spirit, to preach.
He, who came to kill and to destroy believers, was then, longing to die together with them!
The persecutor became within moments a preacher of the Truth!
- ❖ He set forth to preach and to testify to what he daily experienced,
Having before his eyes, the face of his mentor St. Stephen, at the moments of his stoning.
He seriously started anew to study the Old Testament with a different perspective.
He started to realize and to discover the secrets of God, by the Spirit of God dwelling in him.
- ❖ He had to be confronted and persecuted.
He had to be let brought down in humiliation, through the wall of Damascus, in a basket.
He got down to have the doors of ministry opened before him, among the Gentiles.
- ❖ In Jerusalem, the disciples did not welcome him, for fear that he might be deceiving them.
But when they got in touch with the work of God in him, they glorified the Lord.
He wished to minister to his brethren in Jerusalem,
But in the temple, the Lord appeared to him in a vision and commanded him to set forth to the Gentiles.
In Complete submission, he abided to God's command.
- ❖ He Who turned Saul into a preacher,
Was working in the rest of the disciples.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Peter healed Aeneas,
And in His name, he raised Tabitha from the dead.

- ❖ Tabitha prepared for herself shrouds that no mites could touch.
She shrouded her body with works of love and compassion.
Death could not touch her soul,
And even her body was raised from the dead for a certain time,
To be raised eternally later on.

THE FOURTH SECTION

TO THE END OF THE EARTH

(Chapters 10 to 28)

CHAPTER 10

THE EYES OF THE APOSTLE PETER OPENED TO THE MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES

Now, after the previous chapter ended by raising Tabitha, who abundantly presented works of love to the widows and the needy, from the dead in the name of Jesus Christ, What would be the situation concerning the Gentiles, especially those of them who longed for the salvation of their souls? Were they to be forsaken dead in their graves, just because they belonged to the Gentiles?

The Lord Christ had clearly proclaimed about preaching among the Gentiles (Matt. 28.19). And on the day of the Pentecost, St. Peter talked about the prophecy of Joel, who said, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2.21). Yet, even several years after the day of the Pentecost, the apostles themselves were still assuming that there would be no introduction for the Gentiles into the faith in Jesus Christ, unless they turned first to Judaism.

The present chapter introduces the beginning of a new era in the history of the ministry of the apostles, as the message of the gospel was no more confined to the Jews, but extended to the Gentiles, to be proclaimed to all mankind.

St. Luke, through the previous chapters, presents the preaching in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. At the same time, the Spirit of the Lord was preparing the atmosphere to the opening of the door of faith before the Gentiles. After the ministry was confined within the circle of the circumcised, St. Peter, the apostle to the circumcised, was getting the clear divine command that confirms the opening of the door before the Gentiles. St. Peter was particularly chosen for this mission, that no schism would happen in the Church of Christ, to become two separate and opposing Churches: One embracing those of Jewish origin, or who became Jews later on; and the other embracing the uncircumcised. It was essential to proclaim to the apostle to the circumcised that the letter of the law has been lifted up, lest those who preach among the Gentiles would be accused of being opponents to the law, and not caring for the blessings of the Old Testament.

Opening of the door before the Gentiles had been a mystery even to the apostles themselves, and the subject of their astonishment, despite the fact that the Lord has prepared their minds beforehand to accept it (Mark 16.15), and despite the several prophecies concerning this in the Old Testament. We should not marvel then to see the Lord motivating St. Peter to preach to Cornelius, the firstfruit of the Gentiles, and to baptize him. Now, the wall that separated the circumcised from the uncircumcised had fallen; the two sitting together at the one table of the Lord with no discrimination, partaking of the worshipping and enjoyment of the gifts of the one Spirit and all becoming members in the one body of Christ, referred to one Father.

1- The vision to Cornelius

1 – 8

2- The vision to the apostle Peter	9 – 16
3- An encounter with the messengers of Cornelius	17 – 23
4- An encounter with Cornelius	24 – 33
5- An address by St. Peter	34 – 43
6- Baptism of Cornelius and those who were with him	44– 48

1- THE VISION TO CORNELIUS

“There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian regiment” (Acts 10.1).

In the previous chapter, St. Luke presented a very interesting portrait of a certain man under the law, namely, the eunuch of Candace, who despite his high position, enjoyed great piety, together with an amazing longing to study the Holy Book and a flaring zeal toward the salvation of his soul. Here, in this chapter, he introduces another man of equally high position and rank, who although not a Jew, or under the law, yet was equally great in piety. According to **St. John Chrysostom**, it is rare to find someone who combines such two qualities together¹.

❖ “the praise of the former is, his undertaking so long a journey, and this when there was no (festival) season to require it, and his reading on his road, and while riding in his chariot, and his beseeching Philip, and numberless other points: and the great praise of the latter is, that he makes alms and prayers, and is a just man, holding such a command”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

The Lord Christ chose the firstfruits of His believers from the Jews, from the simple fishermen, to put to shame the more wise and prudent. As for the Gentiles, He chose, not a Greek philosopher, or an idol priest, but a Roman military leader, only preoccupied with keeping order, executing laws and providing freedom and security to everyone, especially those carrying the Roman citizenship, A free spirit, not under the pressure of anyone, or could be deceived by anyone.

Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army, with 100 men under him. We previously read about another centurion, whose faith surpassed all the children of Israel, to make him worthy of sitting in the kingdom of heaven together with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob (Matt. 8.11-12); And about another centurion who testified to the Lord Christ on His cross, when an earthquake occurred, saying, “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Matt. 27.58); And now we read about a third centurion, who, because of his longing to the divine Truth, he was used by God to give a lesson to St. Peter to open the door of faith before the Gentiles. Still a fourth centurion to join this group was assigned to guard the apostle St.

¹ Cf. *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.*

Paul in captivity, and to take him to Rome, who refused to kill the captives when the ship collapsed, in order to spare the life of Paul (Acts 27.42-43).

The Historian Polybius says that the centurions used to be considered as the ‘salt’ of the Roman army, as they were chosen of the prudent, wise, and straightforward officers, who could also control themselves¹.

The Italian regiment was between 600 and 1000 men, although until the year 41 AD, there were no such big regiments. But in the days of King Agrippa the first (Acts 12.1), there were several of them. It was so called, probably because all its members were Romans, not from any other country under Rome and were fully trusted by the Roman emperor. They were inevitably working to the account of the Roman authority; no one to betray the emperor would emerge from them.

“A devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10.2).

Some of the Greeks and Romans, even among those in the army, probably influenced by pious Jews, worshipped the One God (the unknown) and refrained from worshipping idols and from following unclean practices. The hearts of such people were opened by the Holy Spirit to receive the Christian faith.

❖ "he says, **“A devout man and one who feared God with all his household”**: that you may not imagine that it is because of his high station that these things are done.

When Paul was to be brought over, there is no angel, but the Lord Himself: and He does not send him to some great one, but to a very ordinary person: but here, on the contrary, He brings the chief Apostle (to these Gentiles), not sends them to him: herein condescending to their weakness, and knowing how such persons need to be treated. As indeed on many occasions we find Christ Himself hasting (to such), as being more infirm. Or (it may be) because (Cornelius) was not able himself to leave his home. But here again is a high commendation of alms, just as was there given by means of Tabitha"².

❖ **“And one who feared God with all his household”**: Let us hear this, whoever of us neglects them of our own house, whereas this man was careful of his soldiers also³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Cornelius was a devout man, who did not worship idols or vain gods and did not allow himself to indulge in the abominations practiced by the heathens. All what he knew and believed was the existence of God the Creator of heaven and earth, one true living God, although unknown to him. And despite his

¹ Hist. 6.24.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

high authority as a centurion, he harbored reverence and fear toward the unknown God, demonstrated by the following features:

- ❖ He led his household to a life of piety and worship and did not have under his roof any idol worshipper, or any evildoer. All his household and working hands feared God.
- ❖ He was characterized by practical compassion and alms-giving. He, although a Roman leader in the Italian regiment, in Caesarea the capital of the state, and a Gentile, gave his alms abundantly to the poor and the needy among the Jews.
- ❖ He was both a man of worship and prayers, who practiced prayer all the time and mixed the good work with a life of prayers.

Some believe, from the words of St. Peter and of other disciples, that Cornelius was a Gentile, of a foreign race, uncircumcised and did not receive the law (Acts 11.1-3, 10.28). He probably admired the Jewish religion and the belief in One God, the ethical and behavioral principles of the Jewish people and their resorting and praying to God. Yet he did not join them as a member of the Jewish nation, or as a proselyte. Some call him semi-proselyte.

“About the ninth hour of the day, he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius’” (Acts 10.3).

The Jews have always been proud that they got the law through the ministry of angels. Here is a Gentile, pious and a man of prayers, who also enjoyed the ministry of angels.

About the ninth hour (3 O’clock PM), a time of praying for the Jews, an angel of God appeared, not in the temple among the worshippers, but to a Gentile worshipping together with his household in his own house. He appeared to him, not in a dream, but publicly and clearly.

He probably learned from the Jews to pray at certain times of the day: In the early morning, the ninth hour of the day, and at sunset.

Cornelius, although a Gentile, presented his prayer as sweet incense before God, who received his prayers and alms as sacrifices of pleasure. He nevertheless was in need of the enjoyment of the precious blood, without which there would be no forgiveness of sins.

The Church arranged for the believer to pray at certain times of the day, in order not to become slothful in praying. This however does not imply praying only at these hours, but man can pray all the time, as while being preoccupied in prayers, we get to remember the salvation works of God; and the cross does not depart from our mind, or the image of the Savior from our hearts.

- ❖ Offer your **prayer at the third hour** of the day (Mark 15.25), as at this hour, Pilate issued his verdict against our Lord and Savior to be crucified; ... at **the sixth hour** of the day, the time of crucifixion;

and at **the ninth hour** of the day, when the sun darkened, and the earth trembled, unable to behold the bitterness of that hour¹.

(The apostolic statutes)

- ❖ If you are at home, pray **the third hour** and praise God. And if you are away from home, pray in your heart, as in that hour of the day, Christ was nailed on the cross. That is why, in the Old Testament, the law commands to present the bread offering always at the third hour, as a remembrance of the slaying of the silent and perfect lamb, as Christ are both the Shepherd and the Bread coming down from heaven.

Pray also at **the sixth hour**, as at that time Christ was hanged on the tree of the cross; the veil of the temple was torn in two; and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour (Luke 23.44, 45). Let us then pray in this hour, to remember Him who prayed and turned all creation into darkness to the unbelieving Jews.

We should also hold a great prayer and praise at **the ninth hour**, to know that the souls of the righteous bless the Lord, the true God, who sent to His saints His Son, His Word, to give them light. At that hour, Christ was stabbed in his side by the spear and blood and water flowed from Him. There was light in that day until the evening. That is why, when he started to sleep, another day started, giving by that an example of resurrection².

(The apostolic tradition of Hippolytus)

- ❖ "Why does he see the angel? This also was in order to the full assurance of Peter, or rather, not of him, but of the others (who were with him), the weaker ones"³.
- ❖ "when he was released from his cares and was at quiet, when he was engaged in prayers and compunction"⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Although Cornelius did not learn the commandments of the gospel, he prayed faithfully in his secret place, to become worthy of hearing the voice of an angel speaking. What would we say about Jonah, who was not even in his secret place, but in the trap of the inside of a whale, He was also found worthy of having his prayers heard from the depth of the sea and to be safe inside such a great beast⁵.

(Khromatius, bishop of Aquila)

¹ *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.34.

² Gregory Dix. *The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*. 36.2-7. 1992, p. 62-64. A monk belonging to the Coptic church. Sources of Church rites.

³ *Hom. On Acts*. Hom. 22.

⁴ *Hom. On Acts*. Hom. 22.

⁵ *Chromatius of Aquileia. Tractate on Matthew*. 27.1.4-5. Chromatius was a friend of Rufinus and Jerome the bishop.

This vision took place at the ninth hour of the day, by day light, that Cornelius would not think that he was subject to fantasies or imaginations; he was widely awake.

It was also the time of prayers in the temple, when the priests wished that God would be listening to their prayers and receiving their sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the people. They did not realize that God cared for a Gentile in his home at Caesarea and sent his angel to proclaim to him that his prayers and alms were well received, to sing together with the prophet David, **“Let my prayer beset before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice”** (Ps. 141.2).

“And when he observed him, he was afraid and said, ‘what is it Lord?’ So he said to him, ‘Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God’” (Acts 10.4).

Seeing the splendor of the angel and the way he appeared, he realized that he is a being greater than man and must be an angel. He was afraid, especially that he called him by name. He realized that he was before a heavenly messenger who came just for him, carrying a personal message he knew nothing about, So he said to him, **“What is it Lord?”**

He entertained a true longing to recognize the intention of God. He was ready to listen and to respond to any heavenly command, just like when Joshua son of Nun said, **“What does my Lord say to his servant?”** And like when the prophet Samuel said, **“Speak Lord, for Your servant hears”**.

The angel revealed to him that his prayers and his alms have ascended to the presence of God. As a matter of fact, prayers have no value without love and mercy; and the works of mercy to people (alms) have no value without love for God, demonstrated through prayer. Cornelius’ prayers and fasting were not set forth at street corners, to be commended by people, the way the Pharisees did, but ascended together secretly up to God’s throne, to be recorded in a memorial before God, in which the names of those who fear Him are written.

“He observed him”: Having a heart that loves both God and men, Cornelius’ eyes were able to concentrate on seeing heavenly matters, without being drawn by the earthly temporal things.

While the Jews were offering the evening sacrifice, hoping that it would be accepted by God, An angel sent by the Lord was proclaiming to a Gentile that his prayers and alms have ascended even to the divine throne. God seeks the sacrifices of love, obedience and praise (1 Sam. 15.22; Eccl. 5.1; Isa. 1.11-15; Amos 5.21-22; Hos. 6.6).

Some may probably wonder how the prayers and alms of that Gentile have ascended to heaven. Was he not first in need of the blood of the Son of God, to reconcile him with God the Father? There is no indication that that Gentile depended on his personal works of righteousness. But, because he presented his prayers and alms through his fear of God, he longed to recognize the will of God and wished to consummate it. When the angel of God appeared to him, he did not argue; but, in complete obedience, he consummated the divine command. And because he longed for a Savior, he listened to the heavenly message and received the preaching of St. Peter concerning salvation, readily and without delay.

- ❖ Let us learn from the loving and compassionate Lord how he despises no one; but once he sees an exalted soul, he pours His grace on it in abundance¹.
- ❖ Prayer above everything can always keep the splendor of this spiritual garment. Together with prayer, an abundance of giving should be our crown of good deeds and the way of salvation of our souls. Prayer together with alms can provide us with innumerable goods, quench the fire of sin and grant us great freedom².
- ❖ Let those drafted in the armed forces listen to this. Let them learn that military service does not contradict with the way of virtue for him who wants to be exalted. Let them learn that man can care for his virtue, even while wearing the military uniform, even if he is married and with children and even if he is committed to a public service³.
- ❖ You should not allow the love of riches to flare inside you, or to possess you. This excessive lust should be destroyed and scattered by the fire of the Spirit and be rent by its sword. It is a splendid sacrifice that need not be presented by a priest, but can be presented by whoever practices it. It is a splendid sacrifice that is offered down on earth, but ascends on the spot to heaven. ... So were the offerings of Cornelius, to whom it was said, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God". How splendid is that combination!⁴.
- ❖ "Observe how what the angel speaks he does not speak immediately, but first rouses and elevates his mind. At the sight, there was fear, but a fear in moderation, just so far as served to fix his attention. Then also the words relieved him of his fear. The fear roused him: the praise mitigated what was unpleasant in the fear"⁵.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "He (the Lord) taught us that the more violent devils cannot be overcome, except by prayer and fasting. Cornelius the centurion was found worthy through alms-giving and frequent fasts to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit before baptism"⁶.

(St. Jerome)

“Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter” (Acts 10.5).

God sent an angel to lead Cornelius to His Church represented in one of her apostles, not to present to him the gospel of salvation, or to proclaim to him the faith in Jesus Christ. He just instructed

¹ *Baptismal Instructions*, 7.29.

² *Baptismal Instructions*, 7.27.

³ *Baptismal Instructions*, 7.28.

⁴ *Homilies on Rom. Hom. 19.*

⁵ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.*

⁶ *Against Jovinianus. Book 2, 17.*

him to send for the apostle Peter who would take care of all that. Preaching the gospel is the work of the ministers of the word, not of the angels. It is indeed an exalted grace given to the men of God that reveals the “un-searchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3.8). The angels are indeed ministers to those who are to inherit salvation (Heb. 2.5), sent by God to preachers, fathers, as well as to those in need of enjoying the word of God. Their goal is to lead them all to encounter with Jesus Christ in His holy Church.

“He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do” (Acts 10.6).

“His house is by the sea”: Having been a tanner, tanning required plenty of water, especially sea water. St. Luke intended to say that Simon’s house was away from any other house, as the Jews considered his profession as unclean.

❖ "Do you mark how the Apostles, for love of solitude and quiet, affected the retired quarters of the cities?"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually” (Acts 10.7).

With instant obedience and without hesitation, Cornelius sent two of his household servants and a soldier to call St. Peter. If Cornelius longed to realize the will of God and enjoy salvation alone, he would have gone himself to St. Peter. But because all his household and probably some of his soldiers and his friends also cared for their salvation, he sent for St. Peter to come to him.

“So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa” (Acts 10.8).

The Church lived in an amazing glory, presented to her by the Holy Spirit, the Leader and Comforter of the Church. That is why we see appearances of angels, holy dreams and divine visions; and sometimes the Spirit even carries ministers along and sets forth bringing them to locations of preaching.

It is indeed amazing for a Gentile Commander to see an angel ordering him to call a Jewish man he did not know beforehand and probably never heard of him, then to send a delegation, after designating to them the exact location of the house and the name of that person. It is as though the command was issued from the highest rank of the army of heaven, to which the Commander responded in complete obedience and with no doubting. To become truly the firstfruit of the Church of the uncircumcised, he received the Holy Spirit in a unique way, to open before his uncircumcised brethren the stores of the Holy Spirit and His exalted graces.

❖ "observe the unassuming character of the man: for he does not say, Call Peter to me: but, in order also to induce him to come, he declared the whole matter:-this was so ordered by Providence;-for he did not choose to use the authority of his rank to fetch Peter to him; therefore "he declared the matter"¹.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

(St. John Chrysostom)

In all respect and admiration, we stand before that Commander, who sees in the authority love and spaciousness of heart. He did not issue commands, by which his servants and soldiers were committed to obey; but he explained everything, like a loving father to his beloved children, to let them partake of the divine blessings. What a splendid portrait of the concept of leadership and authority, which we do not often see even among parents, spiritual guides, or priests.

He sent them to Joppa, from where St. Peter set forth to Caesarea, to draw the firstfruit of Gentile believers. It is the same location from which the prophet Jonah set forth to preach to the Gentile people of Nineveh, to offer penitence, in order to enjoy the divine mercies.

2- THE VISION OF THE APOSTLE PETER

“The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on his housetop to pray, about the sixth hour” (Acts 10.9).

As the delegation set forth to Joppa, 20 miles far from Caesarea, heaven moved to proclaim to St. Peter, just before the arrival of the delegation that set forth early in the morning to arrive about noon (horses cover this distance in about 6 hours). A vision appeared to the apostle Peter, as the delegation was at the doorstep enquiring for him. It is as though the divine command is issued to him to arise at once from his trance, to baptize the Gentiles and to receive them in the fellowship of God’s banquet.

Because it was difficult to realize that command, as the law has banned any mingling with the Gentiles, whatever their behavior was, it was necessary to issue divine commands to the apostles before their practical movement to start their ministry to them. There was a need for a heavenly vision to St. Peter to set forth to Cornelius’ house, as there was a need for such a vision to Ananias to go to the house of Saul of Tarsus, to preach and baptize him. Despite the straightforward and clear prophecies in the Old Testament of the return of the Gentiles to God, the practical movement to realize that was not possible without a heavenly vision, at the time of beginning to work.

Peter went up on the housetop to pray and there the Lord granted him the vision. He did not reveal to him what happened in Cornelius’ house, or about the delegation coming to call him, or what would happen when he would confront Cornelius, but the vision came, just to instruct him to go with those messengers. God only reveals to His ministers what is fit for a specific stage. St. Peter had to move in obedience to the vision, in order to see with his own eyes the amazing works of God that he did not expect. He should not enquire about what would happen, but should trust in the exalted work of God and should realize that, for God, there is always a certain time for everything.

“On the housetop”: The law committed the believers to build a fence all around the housetop to keep anyone from falling. The bare housetop or the little room on it was considered the best place to retreat to pray to God. No one of the neighboring houses, or on the street, could see the one who stands,

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

sits or kneels during his retreat on his housetop. Some believe that praying on the housetops gives the best atmosphere to pray, as the one praying would be only able to see heaven exposed before his eyes, that nothing would distract his thoughts to earthly things, but would also anticipate his own setting forth to his heavenly home, liberated from every earthly interest. From the housetop, he can see a great portion of the city, so he can speak to God in the name of the whole people and can ask for the sake of his brethren. On the housetop he can not hear anybody, and nobody can hear him, so he can speak freely to his God.

“About the sixth hour”: The majority of Jews regularly kept the morning and evening prayers; whereas, only the devout used also to keep the noon prayer; they used to pray three times in day, as did the prophet Daniel in captivity (Dan. 6.10-13), as well as the prophet David (Ps. 55.17). The early Christians, according to St. Clement of Alexandria, used to keep these three prayers.

“Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat, but while they made ready, he fell into a trance” (Acts 10.10).

“A trance”: This refers to a condition in which the mind is completely absorbed into a certain thought or preoccupation; and the outer senses seem to stop completely or partially. It is a condition of retreat of the mind and heart from what is seen and heard, namely, the retreat of the being into his depths, as though there was nothing around him, or as though the soul has set forth from the body, to cross over in a spiritual atmosphere that does not submit to physical senses. It was said about Balaam, that “He sees the vision of the Almighty; he falls down with eyes open wide” (Num. 24.4, 16), and about St. Paul, that he fell into a trance while praying in the temple (Acts 22.17), and again in (2 Cor. 12.2).

When St. Peter became very hungry and wanted to eat, the Lord Christ offered to him food that satisfies the souls of the heavenly creatures; that is, the entrance of the Gentiles into faith. When the Lord Christ Himself became hungry after fasting for forty days, Satan asked him to turn the stones into bread, which the Lord refused to do, having been anticipating the day when he would turn the human stones that became solid and with no senses, because of the worship of stone idols, into truly heavenly bread that brings pleasure to the heart of God. Stones have become fulfilling bread, as they turned into children to Abraham, as promised by the Lord Christ, when He said that God is capable of turning stones into children of Abraham.

❖ "What means this expression, ekstasij, "trance?" Rather, there was presented to him a kind of spiritual view (qewria): the soul, so to say, was caused to be out of the body (ecesth). “He saw heaven opened”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

- ❖ Isaac, father of Jacob, sought the food of the word, as man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Gen. 27.4; Matt. 4.4; Luke 4.4). For such food St. Peter became hungry, as he saw the secret signs of the future of the faith of the Gentiles¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“And saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth” (Acts 10.11).

The Old Testament used to refer to heaven, as though its gates open to let something come down from it, As though, having been closed for so long before humanity, they open to realize a certain mission, but they stay closed before him, who gives God his back. The incarnate Son of God came to open the gates of heaven and to set His kingdom inside man.

Once the apostle St. Peter lifted his heart up to heaven, its gates opened to him, to see the riches of the grace of God and his goodness.

- ❖ "You have already gone up upon the housetop like the apostle Peter. Who when he became hungry among the Jews had his hunger satisfied by the faith of Cornelius, and stilled the craving caused by their unbelief through the conversion of the centurion and other Gentiles. By the vessel let down from heaven to earth, the four corners of which typified the four gospels, he was taught that all men can be saved. Once more, this fair white sheet which in his vision was taken up again was a symbol of the church which carries believers from earth to heaven, an assurance that the Lord's promise should be fulfilled: "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Matt. 5.8)"².

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ Someone may probably ask why a huge vessel in the form of a sheet appeared containing all kinds of animals. No doubt that was for a reason. We know that mites that corrupt other clothes do not affect a sheet, that is why everyone who intends to realize the secret of the (catholic) Church has to cast off from his heart the corruption of evil lusts. He, who wishes to grasp the secret of the sheet that symbolizes the Church, is committed to abide to faith in a way that mite-like evil thoughts would not corrupt it.

Why did the sheet come down three times from heaven? Because all the nations belonging to the four corners of the earth, where the Church spread, are baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. The four corners of the sheet are the four directions of the world. The three appearances symbolize the secret of the Trinity; and all of them (4X3) refer to the figure 12, to the 12 apostles. And as the 12 apostles were assigned to preach in the name of the secret of the Trinity, in the four corners of the world, the sheet came down from heaven three times³.

¹ *Flight from the world*, 8.49.

² *Letter 125 to Rustius*, 2.

³ *Sermon 176.4*.

(Caesarius Bishop of Arles)

❖ Share with St. Peter that kind of trance, as though he was both hungry and drunk. He became very hungry; but while they made ready, he fell into that holy and vivid trance, through which he came out to see: “Heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter, kill and eat’. But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean’. And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed, you must not call common’, this was done three times” (Acts 10.11-16). From the voice that spoke to him the first time, we learn that God the Father is He who cleanses; and the second time, that the only-begotten Son is He who cleanses; and the third time, that the Holy Spirit is He who cleanses everything. Such a trance happens from the wine presented by God to everyone who sits at His banquet. God truly encourages whoever approaches Him and leads a life of virtue, not those away from him. Eat and drink beloved brethren, “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11.29). He calls them ‘brethren’, those who are worthy of this food, “For whoever does the will of God, is My brother and My sister and mother” (Mark 3.35)¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air” (Acts 10.12).

That sheet descending from heaven refers to the holy Church. Like the sheet that contained, not only domestic animals, but also wild beasts, not only four-footed animals but also birds of the air, So also the Church, being the body of Christ, who loves all mankind, opens the gates of faith before all kinds of people: those with calm and docile nature, who, although living among the mud of the earth, yet their hearts yearn to soar in heaven, as well as those wild like beasts. ... He sets out of all of them a holy people similar to angels. The Church embraces both the Jews and the Gentiles, the masters and the slaves, the big and the small, “Barbarians and Scythians” (Col. 3.11). The Church’s net embraces and sanctifies all kinds and sets out of them all various organs of the one harmonious body.

“And a voice came to him, ‘Rise Peter, kill and eat’” (Acts 10.13).

The voice commanded Peter to kill and eat, without discerning between what is clean and unclean according to the law, as all have become partakers of the body of Christ in the cross, yearning to be slain together with Him in the spirit of love and giving, for all to become holy in Him, as He is Holy. Food used to distinguish between the Jew and the Gentile. The Jews do not eat what is unclean according to the law, and do not also partake of the food presented to idols by the Gentiles.

¹ *Homilies on Song of Songs, 10.*

It was not an angel from heaven who appeared to St. Peter, but he heard the Divine voice Himself, calling him to kill and eat. Because the matter was very serious and difficult to believe, the Lord Himself spoke to Peter, as is obvious from Peter's response.

- ❖ "And the Law itself throughout the whole world, it is evident, has four quarters, the East, and West, South, and North, as the Scripture says. And hence the vessel which bares all the emblematic animals, which was exhibited to Peter, when he was told, "**Kill and eat**," that it might be shown that the Gentiles should believe and enter into the body of the Church, just as what we eat enters into our body, and which was let down from heaven by four corners (these are the four quarters of the world), showed that the whole world should believe"¹.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Saying to Peter to "Kill and eat refers to that the (catholic) Church has symbolically to (kill) first, and then (eat) all those who believe in Christ. In other words, non-belief should first be (killed), to plant belief in its place. Nobody can believe in Christ unless he first dies. And according to the apostle: "For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3.3)"².

(Caesarius Bishop of Arles)

"But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean'" (Acts 10.14).

At the beginning, Peter refused to eat, for he assumed that the divine promises and the pure heavenly blessings would never be presented to the unclean Gentiles, as, in his sight, they did not belong to God and they were not Israelites.

What is the difference between 'common' and 'unclean'?

The 'common', in Greek, is the thing that is (public), namely, not dedicated to God. Whoever worships gods other than God, according to the Law of Moses, is counted as 'common'. That is why the Jews consider all the Gentiles as 'commons'.

The 'unclean', on the other hand, is what is not purified. The Jew, if he touches a dead body, is counted as 'unclean' until he gets washed and purified in the evening. The goose slain by someone other than the Rabbi is counted as 'unclean' and not fit for eating, while if it is slain and its blood is drained by a Rabbi, it is counted as 'clean' and 'pure'.

The apostle Peter, like all Jews, did not consider the Gentiles as 'unclean', I.E. needed to be purified, but they were considered as 'common' and foreigners from God, who would never be purified.

The Old Testament discerns between the 'clean' and 'unclean' animals (Lev. 11.2-27; Deut. 14.3-20). St. Peter had never broken that principle. But now, the time has come to realize the law, not

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 75.9.*

² *Sermon 176.5.*

according to its deadly letter, but by the living Spirit, as these statutes have their spiritual concepts, that we have already dealt with in our commentary on the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy.

“And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common’” (Acts 10.15).

By “What God has cleansed”, He means, what God proclaimed to be ‘pure’, or what God commands you to do, could certainly not be ‘common’ or wrong. If you have in your mind some way of discerning between what is clean and what is not, based upon the literal interpretation of certain statutes of the law, now is the time to adopt a spiritual way of thinking to discern between the two, not through the literal eye of the law. The Gentiles who were once considered as ‘common’, are called to get the same goods and blessings, offered by God to the Jews. The middle wall separating the two categories has been broken; and the whole world is called to have the same fellowship and to enjoy one gospel and one faith (Eph. 2.14; Gal. 3.28). After the collapse of that middle wall of division, the understanding of the Mosaic statutes should be reconsidered.

There was a middle wall of separation between the Jews and the Gentiles: The Jews assumed that they alone have a portion in the temple of the Lord, and that all the others are rejected. Now came the Cornerstone, who binds together the two walls together in the new temple.

In a speech about food, **St. Clement of Alexandria** comments on the concept that all kinds of food are equal, quoting the words of the Lord, “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man” (Matt. 15.11), and “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it” (Prov. 15.17). ...It is not vegetables that are love, but we should eat our meals with love, that is what the term “Agapi”, or the (meal of love) means. Concerning this, moderation is the best policy: Over-eating as well as over-fasting are both risky¹.

“This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again” (Acts 10.16).

The sheet came down from heaven, accompanied by the voice that was repeated three times. It is as though the Church of Christ enjoys sonhood to the Holy God, in order that every true believer would become holy and pure in the Lord through the water of Baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit, when plunged in the name of the Holy Trinity. God confirms His love for the Gentiles, as when they believe and are purified by Baptism, they become the children of God.

The sheet was taken up into heaven again. What Peter rejected as common or unclean was received by heaven. “I will call My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved” (Rom. 9.25).

¹ *Paedagogus 2.1.*

- ❖ "The earth then, this is what the linen sheet denotes, and the wild beasts in it are they of the Gentiles, and the command, "Kill and eat," denotes that he must go to them also; and that this thing is thrice done denotes baptism"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

3- AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE MESSENGERS OF CORNELIUS

“Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon’s house, and stood before the gate” (Acts 10.17).

After ministering for about three years in Arabia and in Damascus, Saul went to Jerusalem to encounter with Peter, James, and John, who probably acknowledged Saul’s call to minister to the Gentiles. Although St. Peter did not have in mind to minister to the Gentiles, as he was called to minister to those circumcised, God intended for him to start by melting the ice which prevailed on the relationship between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, by harvesting the firstfruit of the ministry of the Gentiles, in order that the people of circumcision would not assume that there is any contradiction between the two ministries.

“And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there” (Acts 10.18).

“While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Behold, three men are seeking you” (Acts 10.19).

The Holy Spirit, the Leader of the Church, calls on him to stop contemplating in what he saw and heard and to set forth to work. The Spirit that presented to him the divine proclamation would eventually give him the explanation for everything.

St. Peter probably expected from the Holy Spirit to provide him with a clear explanation of the vision, But the Holy Spirit commanded him to start work, and the explanation would be provided to him during work. We as well, while we sit quietly to contemplate in the word of God, the Holy Spirit reveals to us new living concepts of the Holy Book. But we would discover new depths of the word of God, when the word turns into work under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Work does not contradict contemplation, but is one with it, with no division.

“Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them” (Acts 10.20).

The command was issued for swift work, without delay or doubt, to set forth joyfully to the Gentiles, although St. Peter did not know what he was going to do, or why he was chosen to do it. While he was confused, and thinking about the vision, the Spirit practically explained it to him, proclaiming

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

that the delegation was sent by Him. While he was wondering, how heaven would command him to eat something common or unclean, the Spirit pushed him, against his will, to go down to Caesarea, to encounter those who called him, as though the Holy Spirit has girded him, girded his mind, his heart, and his whole being, to carry him where he does not wish (John 21.28).

The message to Cornelius came through an angel, whereas that to St. Peter was by the Holy Spirit Himself. As much as one is filled by the Holy Spirit, he is led by the Spirit, and enjoys talking to Him.

- ❖ ""For I," He says, "*have sent them.*" Great is the authority of the Spirit! What God does, this the Spirit is said to do. Not so the Angel, but having first said, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God", to show that he is sent from thence, then he adds, "Now send". The Spirit not so, but, "I have sent them""¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, 'Yes I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?'" (Acts 10.21).

Nobody heard the men knocking on the door; and maybe they did not knock altogether. St. Peter went down to them commanded by the Holy Spirit. He probably went down to them through the external stairs directly from the housetop. Once they told him the reason why they have come, the riddle of the vision was revealed. He realized that God was calling him to carry out a mission outside the circle of the Jews, which is more exalted above thinking about clean and unclean food.

- ❖ "And he does not say, for to this end did the vision appear unto you; but, "I have sent them. Then Peter went down". This is the way the Spirit must be obeyed, without demanding reasons. For it is sufficient for all assurance to be told by Him, This do, this believe: nothing more (is needed)""².

(St. John Chrysostom)

"And they said, 'Cornelius the Centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you'" (Acts 10.22).

They introduced to him the person of the Centurion as a just man who feared God; and although he was not a Jew, all the nation of the Jews witnessed for his piety and even heaven witnessed for him, having sent to him a holy angel to summon St. Peter; And now he was ready to hear words and to learn from him.

"Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa" (Acts 10.23).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

St. Peter lodged them, as though he was the landlord, and they spent the day with him after a journey of 6 hours, to go with them the next day. He lodged them, although they were of the Gentiles, and was not ashamed from sharing a meal with them (Among them were two servants and a soldier); he started to realize what is behind the vision he has seen.

We hear no objection from the landlord, or from the congregation that assembled there as the Church of Joppa. There is no doubt that all of them stood in astonishment to hear what the men were saying about Cornelius and about his vision, understanding nothing of what was going on. God was gradually preparing the minds and the hearts to accept the opening of the gate of faith before the Gentiles.

The next day he set forth with them to Caesarea, accompanied by 6 Christian men from Joppa (Acts 11.12). It was the custom of the apostles to have company in their journeys. And as that particular journey had its own significance in history, it was important for some believers to be there to proclaim the events as eyewitnesses.

4- AN ENCOUNTER WITH CORNELIUS

“And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends” (Acts 10.24).

Having traveled most probably on foot, St. Peter entered Cornelius’ house, to find him together with his relatives and close friends waiting for them. Cornelius invited them to enjoy with him the divine blessings he expected to get, according to what the angel has told him.

❖ "This is the part of a friend, this the part of a devout man, that where such blessings are concerned, he takes care that his near friends shall be made partakers of all"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him” (Acts 10.25).

Considering St. Peter as an Ambassador of God, Cornelius fell down at his feet and worshipped him. It was the custom in the East in the old days, to worship at the feet of kings and those of high positions. Cornelius probably thought Peter an incarnation of the Godhead, or even the Messiah, anticipated by the Jews.

❖ "This, both to teach the others, and by way of giving thanks to God, and showing his own humility"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up, I myself is also a man’” (Acts 10.26).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 23.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 23.

What a military Commander was expected to do was a little bowing of his head, lest he be counted as insulting the Emperor, whom he represented. But Cornelius, having been confused, bowed and worshipped to the ground. St. Peter hastened to lift him up, so that all of them would, in spirit and truth, worship Him, who is worthy of worshipping. Rejecting such reverence, St. Peter embraced him, and lifted him up like a friend. A holy man or an angel would never accept such worship (Rev. 19.10, 22.9). He made it clear to the Centurion that he was also a man, an earthen vessel that contained inside a heavenly treasure. As though he was saying to him, 'I myself am nothing. I, like you, am merely a man. It is not fitting for me to accept such a reverence from you'.

❖ "Do you mark how, before all else (the Apostles) teach them this lesson, not to think great things of them?"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ A creature should not worship another creature. The servant should worship the Lord, and the creature should worship God.

That is why, when Cornelius intended to worship Peter, the apostle kept him from doing that, saying, "***I am also a man***".

And when St. John, in the book of Revelation, intended to worship the angel, the angel likewise prevented him from doing that, saying, "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book, Worship God" (Rev. 22.9).

The angels themselves knew that, although they are superior to others in glory, yet they are all creatures, who are not to be worshipped, but who should worship the One God².

(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

"And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together" (Acts 10.27).

Most probably he received him by the entrance of the gate, to express his great joy for his coming and his longing to listen to him. Going in, St. Peter was astonished to see the great number of people assembling, something he did not expect. The Holy Spirit has worked in Cornelius' heart, even before receiving faith, to draw many, to listen together with him, and to enjoy what heaven has called him to have.

"Then he said to them, 'You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean'" (Acts 10.28).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 23.

² Adv. Arian. 2.16.23.

The Jewish statutes banned entering into marital relationships or treaties with the surrounding nations (Lev. 18.24-30; Deut. 7.3-12; Ezra 9.11-12). The Jews went so far to keeping away from friendships or even from commercial relationships with them.

The apostle told them about the vision he had, and how God intended to remove the middle wall of division between the Jews and the Gentiles, by preaching the gospel of salvation to the whole world. St. Peter was keen on revealing to them that changing his view concerning this matter was not his own thought, but was through a divine call.

He started his speech by revealing the riches of God's mercies for all mankind, for which, Peter played no role. With a spirit of humility, he showed that, in what he was doing, he was just a tool in the hand of God.

St. Peter learned a divine principle, which was not very easy for him to accept: "God showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10.28). He admits that he came to them according to a divine proclamation, and counted those moments as the beginning of opening the road of faith to the Gentiles, to enjoy, at the same level with the Jews, the divine promises.

❖ "They who were with Peter were in doubt whether the uncircumcised ought to be baptized"¹.

(St. Augustine)

"Therefore I came without objection, as soon as I was sent for. I ask then, for what reason have you sent for me" (Acts 10.29).

He came to them without objection or hesitation; and he was ready to help them. Although his heart, like those of the other apostles, yearned for the salvation of the whole world, it was difficult for them to connect to the Gentiles, until heaven gave them the green light to do with neither fear nor hesitation. The apostles probably assumed at the beginning, that what the Lord Christ commanded them to do, to preach to the whole world, would be realized when the Gentiles enter first into Judaism, and become bound to the letter of the law. But now, St. Peter realized that the door is opened with no need for that. Now, from the apostle's side, he had to proclaim the truth, so how about them, Why have they called him?

The law has indeed put strict limits on the Jews, concerning their dealings with the Gentiles, because of the great danger on the believers, of their worshipping the idols, doing the abominations and the unethical practices. But then, after the Holy Spirit dwelt upon the Church, her duty was to testify to the Lord Christ before the whole world, including the Gentiles, for all to join the one Head, as members in His one body. The Church no more feared the abominations or the defilements, as the blood of Christ is capable of cleansing from every sin; and His arms are stretched to embrace all the nations together, with the spirit of love and unity, in a holy and pure life.

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 49.2.*

“And Cornelius said, ‘Four days ago I was fasting until this hour, And at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing’ (Acts 10.30).

St. John Chrysostom¹ believes that the text is "since the fourth day of the week" not "four days ago".

“And said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God’” (Acts 10.31).

- ❖ "See how great the virtue of alms, both in the former discourse, and here! There (Ch9), it delivered from death temporal; here, from death eternal; and opened the gates of heaven"².
- ❖ "Such is alms. Beside this fountain, not poplars and pines, nor cypresses, but other plants than these, and far better, of goodly stature: friendship with God, praise with men, glory to God, good-will from all; blotting out of sins, great boldness, contempt of wealth. This is the fountain by which the plant of love is nourished: for nothing is so wont to nourish love, as the being merciful: it makes its branches to lift themselves on high. This fountain is better than that in Paradise (Gen. 2. 10); a fountain, not dividing into four heads, but reaching unto Heaven itself: this gives birth to that river "which springs up into eternal life" (John 4.14)"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Cornelius the Gentile, Although he did not become a Jew before God’s gift, as is obvious from the holy Scripture, was justified⁴.

(Ambrosiaster)

“Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you. So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now, therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God” (Acts 10.32-33).

The first assembly of the Church of the Gentiles started in Caesarea, led by a Roman Centurion, and in the presence of all his relatives and close friends, for all to hear what the Lord commanded, on the tongue of St. Peter and to enjoy faith and gain Baptism.

It is amazing to know that the apostles have not forced their way to the Gentiles to preach to them. But it was the Gentiles who forced their way to the apostles and asked for one of them to come to preach to them.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 23.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 22.

⁴ Comm. On Paul’s Epistles (Rom. 3.29).

The Lord Christ has previously commanded His disciples to testify to Him among the Gentiles, and having delayed doing that, the Gentiles admonished them and provoked them to fulfill their mission, as The Centurion said in the name of all the Gentiles: “***We are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God***” (Acts 10.33). He was as though gently admonishing the apostles, for their delay to preach them and for their disregard of their right to enjoy the divine promises.

5- A SPEECH BY ST. PETER

“***Then Peter opened his mouth and said, ‘In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality’***” (Acts 10.34).

St. Luke presents a summary of St. Peter's speech, or his preaching sermon to Cornelius, his family and his close friends.

By saying, “***Peter opened his mouth***”, St. Luke tells about how the mouths of the apostles were previously shut up, as far as the uncircumcised Gentiles are concerned. They had nothing to say to them. But the Holy Spirit then opened their mouths, and gave them permission to preach to them; and He Himself even talked through their mouths. What St. Peter was about to say was something new in its kind that had never come to his mind, or had prepared for it by his human wisdom. It was actually the talk of the Holy Spirit through his mouth.

“***Shows no partiality***”: God does not do well for someone for the sake of his rank, family, riches, or a personal reason. The Jews assumed that they, and no one else, had the right to enjoy the good gifts of God, for nothing else but because they were Jews, the seeds of Abraham according to the flesh. They assumed that salvation is their own alone.

We find the same teaching in (Rom. 2.11; Eph. 6.9; Col. 3.25, confirming that God does not save someone just because he is a Jew, learned, rich, or dignified, But according to his inner serious longing for salvation. Likewise, He will not allow for the perdition of someone, just because he is a Gentile, but because of his persistence on opposing the truth and his rejection of the free grace of God.

- ❖ "if He did not overlook the Magi, nor the Ethiopian, nor the thief, nor the harlot, much more them that work righteousness, and are willing, shall He in anywise not overlook"¹.
- ❖ "Observe God's providential management. He does not suffer the speech to be finished, nor the baptism to take place upon a command of Peter, but, when He has made it evident how admirable their state of mind is, and a beginning is made of the work of teaching, and they have believed that assuredly baptism is the remission of sins, then forthwith comes the Spirit upon them. Now this is done by God's so disposing it as to provide for Peter a mighty ground of justification And it is not simply that the Spirit came upon them, but, "they spoke with tongues:" which was the thing that astonished those who had come together. They altogether disliked the matter, wherefore it is that the

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 23.

whole is of God; and as for Peter, it may almost be said, that he is present only to be taught (with them) the lesson, that they must take the Gentiles in hand, and that they themselves are the persons by whom this must be done. For whereas after all these great events, still both in Caesarea and in Jerusalem a questioning is made about it"¹.

God shows no partiality. He judges according to works. Paul says that the Jews differ from the gentiles, not in works, but in person only. This is not a reason behind dignifying one and humiliating the other, as according to works, one is dignified while the other is humiliated².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ St. Peter filled his listeners both with the Lily of the word of God, and with myrrh. When those present received the word of God, they were buried together with Christ, and they became dead to this world (Acts 10.34-48). There are several examples in the life of saints, who became the public mouths of the Church, and who, like St. Peter, filled their listeners with myrrh, that put their lusts to death, and made them bear fruits by the lily of the word³.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“But in every nation, whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10.35).

Here also he confirms that the good gifts of God are not limited to the Jews, but extend to all nations, to be enjoyed by all who honor God and who keep His commandments, by those who worship God, longing to have fellowship with Him, as a Friend. He did not say “in every religion”, but “in every nation”, as the door is open before all peoples. But salvation requires true faith, as in the great day of the Lord, man is not asked about his race, or his nationality.

“Works righteousness”: one is committed to walk together with his brethren according to God’s righteousness, without practicing oppression.

St. Peter learned from that vision not to call anybody common or unclean and not to discern between a Jew and a Greek, as God does not favor the Jew on the expense of the Gentile. This teaching, although it seems as new to the mind of a Jew, yet God has previously paved the way for this principle in the Old Testament, when He said, “Are you not like the people of Ethiopia to Me, O children of Israel? Says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel from the land of Egypt, The Philistines from Captor, and the Syrians from Kir” (Amos 9.7)?

St. Clement of Alexandria⁴ believes that the gates of the Lord are open, and through them the righteous from all nations enter (Ps. 118.19-20), and “the Lord is on the many waters”, as the various teachings are presented to both the Greeks and the Barbarians, to lead them to righteousness.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 24.

² Hom. On Romans. Hom. 5.

³ Homilies on Song of Songs, 14.

⁴ Stromata, 6.8.

- ❖ "For rightly the Scripture says, "The cow (the ox) and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together" (Isa. 11.7). For the Jew is designated by the ox, from the animal under the yoke being reckoned clean, according to the law; for the ox both parts the hoof and chews the cud. And the Gentile is designated by the bear, which is an unclean and wild beast. ... For he who is convened from among the Gentiles is formed from a beastlike life to gentleness by the word; and, when once tamed, is made clean, just as the ox"¹.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

- ❖ "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord" (Ps. 128.1). The inspired word proclaims that the blessing is not to him who is of the seed of Abraham, or of the descendants of Israel, but to the person who is adorned with the godly fear (the piety)².
- ❖ "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed, who fears the Lord" (Ps. 128.4). God is the Judge of behavior and not of race, and that is the way God rewarded 'Job' by the crown, he who was a descendant of Esau. That is the way by which Abimelech was led to the truth (Gen. 21.22, 26); and that is the way of the eunuch, of Cornelius, and of all the nations³.

(Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ When the hand of the righteous does mercy, it is seen by the eye of God; and when he prays, the divine ear is drawn to listen. An example of this is the prayer of Cornelius that warranted the reward⁴.

(Andrias)

St. Jerome wrote a letter of condolence to Salvina, one of the ladies of the Imperial palace, on the occasion of the death of her husband Nebridius, in which he compared him to Cornelius the Centurion:

- ❖ "As a soldier Nebridius took no harm from his cloak and sword-belt and troops of orderlies; for while he wore the uniform of the emperor he was enlisted in the service of God"⁵.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ The Church is likened to a hotel which accommodates all, contrary to the narrow concept of the Jewish law and of the formal worship. Instead of hearing the saying, "No Ammonite or Moabite will enter among the congregation of God" (Deut. 32.3), you will hear: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28.19). And also, "*In every nation, whoever fears Him and works*

¹ *Stromata*, 6.6.

² *Comment. on Ps. 128*.

³ *Comment. on Ps. 128*.

⁴ *Andreas. Catena. A monk, who most probable lived in the seventh century. He collected many of the writings of the early church fathers especially the commentaries on some of the books of the Bible.*

⁵ *Letter 79.2.*

righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10.35). Christ loves virtue and accepts all who diligently do the good works¹.

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ Paul shows that God does not reject neither the Jews nor the Gentiles, who believe in Christ, But all are justified by faith².

(Ambrosiaster)

- ❖ It is said about God that He is far from the wicked (Prov. 15.19). As much as the wicked are far from Him, He is near to the saints³.

(St. Jerome)

“The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ – He is Lord of all” (Acts 10.36)

As St. Peter's listeners were from the Gentiles, he showed them that, although the gospel of Christ is the goal of the word that He sent to the children of Israel, Yet He, who was promised in the Old Testament, is the Lord of all, and not of Israel alone. Indeed, the word came to Israel for the sake of the enjoyment of inner peace in man, as well as in his brother, in Jesus Christ, and accordingly between the Jews and their Gentile brethren.

St. Peter proclaims that the gift presented to the children of Israel is the appearance of the incarnated Word – Jesus Christ, as the angels brought the good news of peace, not for the nation of the Jews alone, but for the whole world. Because the incarnated is the ***“Lord of all”***, the angels proclaimed, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”*** (Luke 2.13-14). Heaven itself testifies that the Lord Christ came to the people as a whole, not to the Jews alone.

St. Paul expressed this splendidly, saying, ***“But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contain in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near”*** (Eph. 2.13-17).

- ❖ ***“But when he says, of all, do you except nothing from His Lordship: for whether Angels, or Archangels, or principalities, or powers, or any created thing named by the Apostles, all are under the Lordship of the Son”***⁴.

¹ *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 68.*

² *Comm. On Rom. 2.11.*

³ *Ep. to the Eplussions. 1.2.13-14.*

⁴ *Lect. Catec. 10.10.*

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

- ❖ "At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." Now, without what God and without what Christ were these Gentiles? Surely, without Him to whom the commonwealth of Israel belonged, and the covenants and the promise"¹.
- ❖ "Newly born of a virgin by the Spirit of God), "that He might reconcile both unto God" (even the God whom both races had offended-both Jew and Gentile), "in one body," says he, "having in it slain the enmity by the cross." Thus we find from this passage also, that there was in Christ a fleshly body, such as was able to endure the cross"².

(The scholar Tertullian)

- ❖ Those who know the spiritual law and live by it within the citizenship of Israel became more than those Israelites according to the flesh alone³.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ He reconciled the two, namely, those of Gentile origin and those of Jewish origin. He reconciled them in one body offered for all, to become ultimately one body. He calls all believers one man, as Christ our Lord is the one Head; and those who enjoy salvation are His members⁴.

(Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus)

“That word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the Baptism which John preached” (Acts 10.37).

After heaven testified to the exalted gift: “Christ of all”, St. Peter started telling them the story of the Lord, having appeared in Judea, been baptized, and then moved to Galilee to select His disciples and begin the ministry.

As Caesarea was not far from Galilee, the news of the works of Christ and His exalted miracles in Galilee must have reached the inhabitants of Caesarea. That is why he says, “You know”.

“How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing well and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10.38).

God the Father proclaimed that He has anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He is the Messiah who went about doing well and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. If in His birth, heaven brought the good news to the whole earth, and to the whole humanity, The Lord in His ministry came to save the world from the devil, the evil prince of the world. If the nations have

¹ *Against Marcion. 5.17.12-13.*

² *Against Marcion. 5.17.15.*

³ *Ep. to the Ephesians. 2.13.*

⁴ *Epistle to the Ephesians. 2.16.*

fallen captive to that enemy, the Lord came to set them free from him, as He did to all those on whom he had authority among the Jews.

Here he concisely speaks about the story of the Lord Christ, His works and His goals, with no details of certain episodes or miracles, which refers to the fact that the listeners, and particularly the Centurion, had plenty of knowledge of the subject. St. Peter's role was to reveal the plan of the Lord in all those works.

❖ The dwelling of the Holy Spirit on Him in the Jordan was a dwelling on us, because He has put on our body.

That was for the sake of our sanctification, to partake of His love, and in order to hear, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you” (1 Cor. 3.16)?

When the Lord got down to the Jordan as a Man, We were the ones who went down into it. And when He received the Spirit, it was us who received the Holy Spirit through Him. That is why, His anointment is not like that of Aaron, David, or the others, but it was “with the oil of gladness, more than His companions” (Ps. 45.7-8), which is interpreted as “the Spirit”, saying, “***How God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit***” (Acts 10.38).

When were those things said about Him, but as He came to be in the body, baptized in the Jordan, and the Holy Spirit came upon Him. The Lord truly says to His disciples, “He (the Spirit) will take of what is Mine” (John 16.14), and “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20.22). Actually, He who is given to the others, as the Word and the splendor of God the Father, is now said to be sanctified (Jesus), having become Man; and what is being sanctified is His body itself¹.

(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

He was not anointed by a man, but by God the Father Himself. Then He went about, not to have authority, but to liberate from ailments and from the power of the devil.

“And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree” (Acts 10.39).

If God sent the word first to the Jews, the apostles testify that the Jews crucified Him on Jewish land out of Jerusalem.

“Him God raised up on the third day and showed Him openly” (Acts 10.40).

After speaking about the goal of His birth, His Baptism, His selection of the apostles, His ministry to humanity, and granting them conquest over the devil, he spoke about His salvation work by the cross and the resurrection on the third day. Here St. Peter concentrates on confirming the resurrection, and that it reveals things that touch the future of all humanity, as it confirms that He is the judge of both the living and the dead; and that in Him, prophecies were realized, for everyone who

¹ Adv. Arian. 1.12.47.

believes in Him, to gain the forgiveness of sins. He is the true Passover sacrifice, on whom the iniquity of all mankind was put.

The Lord Christ, raised from the dead, appeared openly to many people. His resurrection is thus a fact, not to be doubted, in which there is no deceit.

“Not to all the people but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (Acts 10.41).

The Crucifixion took place openly before the multitudes, with the hope that recognizing Him as the Messiah in whom the prophecies were realized, they might accept Him, and believe in His amazing salvation. Whereas, as far as His resurrection is concerned, He proclaimed it only to those entrusted and longing to encounter with Him, to those seeking the Truth.

Then He confirmed it, not only by His apparitions to His disciples, but by eating and drinking together with them after His resurrection.

“And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10.42).

Although Cornelius and those who were with him did not have the chance to enjoy the coming of the Lord Christ for salvation, He is going to come again to encounter with those who are alive on the day of His coming, and also with those who had departed (1 Thess. 4.16-17; 1 Cor. 15.52). He will come to judge, to grant His believers the fellowship of glory, while those who reject Him will fall under judgment.

❖ "These are the clouds in whom He comes, excepting His last Advent, when He will come to judge the quick and the dead. He came first in the clouds. This was His first voice which sounded forth in the Gospel: “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24.30). ... He first came in His own preachers, and filled the whole round world. **Let us not resist His first coming, that we may not tremble at His second**"¹.

(St. Augustine)

❖ Hail to You, O King of all the living!
Hail to You, O Judge of all the dead!
You sit on the throne on the right hand of Your Father, in the power of the highest.
And from there, You judge the sinners.
You, one day, will surely come².

(Prudentius)

¹ *On the Psalms. 96.14.*

² *Prudentius (c. 348-425). Hymn 9, Hymn for Every Hour.*

- ❖ Paul called God “The Father”, as He judges no one, but he called the Son “The Lord”, as He is the Judge. He called God “The Father”, referring to His protection of us, And he called the Son “the Lord”, for us to realize that we were called children through the goodness of God, and that Jesus is the true God by nature, and He is our Lord¹.

(Severian, Bishop of Gabala)

“To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10.43).

By His resurrection He proclaimed that the sacrifice offered in the name of the whole humanity, the living and the dead, has been received, for every believer to receive the remission of sins. And in saying “Whoever believes in Him”, He is canceling the privilege that was for the Jews alone, to become a general privilege for all humanity. Faith and divine promises are not confined to one nation or to a special people.

6- BAPTISM OF CORNELIUS AND THOSE WHO WERE WITH him

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word” (Acts 10.44).

On the day of the Pentecost in Jerusalem, St. Peter provoked his listeners to repent and gain Baptism for the remission of sins and to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38). But here in Caesarea, the order came different, as the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and those who were with him before Baptism. This is not a new day of Pentecost, but it is an extension of the Pentecost that was previously realized with the Jews, being realized equally with the Gentiles, in what is according to the start of opening the gate of faith before them.

St. Peter would not be able to know this, if he had not enjoyed the vision. But because he was in need of the testimony of heaven to confirm the truth of this teaching, the Holy Spirit did not wait for him to end his speech, or for those present to gain Baptism, but ***“the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word”***. It was as though the house has become another upper room of Zion, or as though the day of the Pentecost happened once again. The Holy Spirit, intending to proclaim the impartiality of God to a particular people, fell upon those Gentiles even before their Baptism, and before St. Peter laid his hand on them. The Holy Spirit proclaimed His comfort in the Gentiles who faithfully returned to Him and that there is no favor for anyone in this gift. And by that, the apostle, in his turn, could very strongly proclaim, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. ... If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God” (Acts 11.15-17)? And he also said, “So God who knows the heart, acknowledge them, by giving them the Holy Spirit as He did to us” (Acts 15.8).

¹ Pauline Comm. From the Greek Church (Rom. 1.7).

The dwelling of the Holy Spirit was realized before the apostle ended his speech, so that he and those who were with him would know that the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles happened by a divine command, with no favor of anyone, And to dare to baptize them with no hesitation or fear from those of circumcision. On the other hand, the timing of the dwelling of the Holy Spirit is counted like a heavenly seal presented to the Gentiles, to make them believe in what the apostle spoke to them about. It is as though God Himself testifies to the truth of the apostle's preaching, and certifies it with His divine power and through the dwelling of His Spirit upon them.

The dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius was a sign of the beginning of the realization of the unity, or the reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says, "For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2.18). And on this phrase, **Father Marius Victorinus** comments that both Judea and the Gentiles had access to God the Father through Christ Himself. How? "By one Spirit". Because the Spirit, who is one with Christ, enters into us when we believe in Christ. Then we would feel the presence of God, acknowledge God and worship Him. And thus, we would come to the Father by the same one Spirit through Christ. Nobody, whether a Jew or a Gentile, would come to God the Father except through Christ¹.

"And those of the circumcision who believed, were astonished as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also" (Acts 10.45).

The Christians who accompanied St. Peter had not yet realized that the gospel has extended to the Gentiles, with their Jewish bigotry blinding their eyes to that fact. The secret behind their astonishment is probably because the glory of God became apparent, and His dwelling became public; whereas according to the Jewish tradition, the divine presence is only proclaimed occasionally through the two Cherubs on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies. Now, the veil was torn; the gates of heaven were opened; and the Spirit of God openly dwelt on the Gentiles outside the temple in Jerusalem.

"For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered" (Acts 10.46).

God granted them the gift of speaking with tongues, as it was a visible sign that reveals that they have gained new hearts as well as new tongues.

As the entry of the Gentiles into faith is something that a Jew cannot easily accept, the Holy Spirit presented visible signs to confirm that this fact is coming from God. Speaking with tongues confirms the continuity of the day of the Pentecost until the Gentiles enter faith; and magnifying the name of God is the most important feature that distinguishes the people of God from the other peoples. The people of circumcision became witnesses to the work of God with the Gentiles and to their being accepted as people of God.

¹ *Marius Victorinus. Ep. to the Ephes. 1.2.18.*

- ❖ "For the Holy Ghost was at that time given in such sort, that He even visibly showed Himself to have been given. For they who received Him spoke with the tongues of all nations; to signify that the Church among the nations was to speak in the tongues of all. So then they received the Holy Ghost, and He appeared evidently to be in them"¹.

(St. Augustine)

“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10.47).

When the apostle and those who were with him saw and heard, and all of them became sure that the Holy Spirit dwelt upon the Gentiles, the apostle found himself committed to baptize them. What the apostle said here was speaking to himself as well as to those around him of the circumcision. He was then sure that, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common” (Acts 10.15). He was no longer able to call the Gentiles as such.

Has the Holy Spirit not dwelt so publicly and visibly, Peter would have not baptized them, unless they first entered into Judaism. Now he says, “He made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15.9).

- ❖ "I dislike men to delay the complete dedication of themselves to God. When I read of the centurion Cornelius that he was a just man I immediately hear of his baptism"².

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ As the Holy Spirit dwelt before the use of water, and as the water was essential and not secondary, the apostle said, **“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”**³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days” (Acts 10.48).

The Holy Spirit committed him to baptize them, having proclaimed that heaven received them. But why did not the apostle baptize them himself, instead of commanding those who accompanied him to do that? Probably because the testimony would be stronger, when those ministers (the priests) proclaim that the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles has committed them to baptize them, and that they did it themselves. St. Peter probably also intended to confirm the same thought of St. Paul the apostle, that God did not send him to baptize but to preach, leaving Baptism, if possible, to his minister assistants (1 Cor. 1.14-17).

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 49.10.*

² *Letter 60 to Heliiodorus, 9.*

³ *Homilies on St. John. Hom. 15.2.*

In the Counsel of the apostles to deal with the issue of the acceptance into faith, St. Peter, having been the apostle of circumcision, did not take a hard position against the Gentiles, but he counted what was done on his hands, through the work of the Holy Spirit, as something to be proud of: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago, God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15.6-7).

“To be baptized in the name of the Lord”: For him, who is baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, his Baptism is based upon his faith that the Lord Christ is God, to receive God the Father as a Father, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus the Lord.

❖ "It is not I that say this, but the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power in this matter: for He says, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven” (John 3.5). Neither does he that is baptized with water, but not found worthy of the Spirit, receive the grace in perfection; nor if a man be virtuous in his deeds, but receive not the seal by water, shall he enter into the kingdom of heaven. A bold saying, but not mine, for it is Jesus who has declared it: and here is the proof of the statement from Holy Scripture. Cornelius was a just man, who was honored with a vision of Angels, and had set up his prayers and alms-deeds as a good memorial before God in heaven. Peter came, and the Spirit was poured out upon them that believed, and they spoke with other tongues, and prophesied: and after the grace of the Spirit the Scripture says that Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ; in order that, the soul having been born again by faith, the body also might by the water partake of the grace”¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

Having got the gift of the Spirit, they yearned more and more to enjoy the apostolic teachings for their continuous spiritual growth, so they asked St. Peter to stay a few days, which they counted as golden days that would never be forgotten.

¹ *Lect. Catec. 3.4.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 10

FOR YOU, O LORD, THE EARTH AND ITS FULLNESS

- ❖ In every nation, You have faithful witnesses.
In the hearts of many, You have a special place.
The Gentile Centurion searched for You.
He kept praying, seeking to recognize You.
For Your sake, he gave alms to the poor;
Whereas some of the priests closed their hearts before Your face.
Although they dwelt in Jerusalem and ministered in the temple,
They were afar from You.
- ❖ To Your apostle Peter, You proclaimed the plan of Your love,
To open the gates of faith before all, with no discrimination.
Before You, there is no Jew or Gentile,
Or man or woman,
You are the Creator of all, and the Savior of all.
- ❖ You sent Your angel to minister to the Gentiles,
And You openly spoke to Your disciple Peter,
That You will be impartial, As You seek the salvation of all.
- ❖ You sent Your Spirit upon Cornelius and upon those who were with him.
Your Holy Spirit is the spirit of unity,
Who dwells upon both the Jews and the Gentiles,
Who sets all members in Your one body.
By Your Spirit, all become one in You,
As You are the one Head of the one body.

CHAPTER 11

A CONTENTION BECAUSE OF THE MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES

The Evangelist St. Luke could not end his speech about the encounter of St. Peter and those who were with him, with Cornelius, at the end of the previous chapter, without portraying the position of the leaders and the people in Jerusalem, concerning the acceptance of that group of the Gentiles in the faith, without a reference to circumcision or to commitment to keep the Mosaic statutes, beside the fact that St. Peter stayed in Caesarea together with that congregation for many days, eating with them, although they were uncircumcised.

The gate became wide open before the Gentiles to enjoy faith, and to gain the divine blessings, on the same level with their Jewish brethren who became Christians. Before this, the devil did not stand still, but incited the apostles and brethren of circumcision against St. Peter. Since he ate together with uncircumcised men, they accused him of slothfulness in keeping the law and of getting defiled.

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1- A CONTENTION WITH THE APOSTLE PETER

When St. Peter went to Caesarea and entered the house of Cornelius, and after all the events that followed, the Christians of Jewish origin were astonished, as well as the unbelieving Jews. They heard the news before the arrival of St. Peter to Jerusalem, because Caesarea was not far from there.

“Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God” (Acts 11.1).

It seems that the apostle stayed a long period of time in Caesarea, to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Gentiles. And hearing this, the Christians who were of circumcised origin in Jerusalem entered into a contention with St. Peter.

That event caused great unrest in Judea, both inside the Church and among the unbelieving Jews, who counted the behavior of St. Peter as contradicting all the thoughts and principles of the Jews; no wonder that it led to a contention with him.

“And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him” (Acts 11.2).

They contended with him, as though he committed a great crime.

The latent struggle between Jerusalem and Caesarea cannot be ignored. Jerusalem according to the Jews was the Capital, the great city of God, that embraced the holiest place in the whole world – the temple of Solomon. Whereas, the Romans chose Caesarea to be the Capital, a city of Greek culture, whose inhabitants were a mixture of heathen Greeks, and Syrians. There is no wonder that the Jews in Jerusalem bore a kind of resentment, if not hatred toward Caesarea and the Roman Governor dwelling in it.

What happened to St. Peter should be expected by everyone whose hand extends to ministry, to be faced with opposition, not just from those who are outside the Church, but also from those inside her, not just from those on the level of leadership, but even from the common people. He would be opposed, not only on account of faults he has committed, but even on good deeds and even those done according to a divine command.

“Saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them’ (Acts 11.3).

With the vision to St. Peter, the appearance of an angel to Cornelius, with the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, and their speaking with tongues and with God’s magnificence before Baptism, the souls of those of circumcision were disturbed and they considered St. Peter as slothful to the law. The entrance of some Jewish priests and Pharisees into the Christian faith was probably conditioned, on their side, by a promise that they would remain on their zeal for the temple and on their literal keeping of the circumcision and the law. Those were not expected to accept the entrance of the Gentiles into faith, unless they get circumcised, and learn the law, the rites and the Jewish customs.

❖ "And see what they allege. They do not say, why did you preach? But, why did you eat with them? But Peter, not stopping to notice this frigid objection-for frigid indeed it is-takes his stand (istatai) on that great argument, If they had the Spirit Itself given them, how could one refuse to give them the baptism? But how came it that in the case of the Samaritans this did not happen, but, on the contrary, neither before their baptism or after it was there any controversy, and there they did not take it amiss, nay, as soon as they heard of it, sent the Apostles for this very purpose (Acts 8.14)? True, but neither in the present case is this the thing they complain of; for they knew that it was of Divine Grace: what they say is, Why did you eat with them? ... Moreover, it is so managed (as part of the Divine plan) that he is accused in this way: on purpose that they may learn: for Peter, without some cause given, would not have related the vision. But observe his freedom from all elation and vainglory"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 24.

2- ST. PETER EXPLAINING THE SITUATION

“But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying” (Acts 11.4).

In that gentle debate by the apostle Peter, He did not speak from a position of high authority or commanding superiority; but with love, he was explaining his position. It is obvious from the people’s attitude that they had no consideration of superiority for St. Peter, or that he had the final word. They opposed the man and contended with him; and when he explained the situation to them with the spirit of love and humility, they accepted his action and praised God.

St. Luke the Evangelist insists on stating what St. Peter said, repeating for the third time, the episode of receiving the Gentiles with all its detail: The first time when it happened; the second time, when told to Cornelius; and the third time, when narrated by St. Peter before the Church of Jerusalem. In the same way, St. Luke mentioned the episode of the entrance of Saul of Tarsus into faith, three times.

Such repetition bears the strong confirmation of how the Church was opened to the Gentiles, without committing them to enter into Judaism, and of how Saul of Tarsus was chosen to minister to the Gentiles. Getting rid of the bondage to the letter of the law was not easy to be received, and has caused serious divisions, not only in Jerusalem, but in many other cities, like Galatia and Rome. It was not possible for the Jews to accept the Gentiles as fellows in the faith, on the same level, before they first get circumcised and pledge to keep the law.

“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners, and it came to me” (Acts 11.5).

The apostle started telling them what happened, not to defend himself, but to open their hearts with love and spiritual thought, to the acceptance of the Gentiles and to preaching among them.

He told them his vision as it came in the previous chapter (Acts 10.9). In saying: “And it came to me”, he intends to explain that because of his need to recognize God’s plan toward the Gentiles, and because it was equally difficult for him to comprehend and accept this divine plan, that vision came personally to him. What they were going through, he personally has gone through; and the matter needed a divine interpretation to accept God’s plan and then to extend it to them and to others. Here, the apostle is diluting the magnitude of their contention against him, on account that he harbored the same thought as they did, were it not for the intervention of God to explain to him the secret of His love for the Gentiles, as well as for the Jews.

“When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air” (Acts 11.6).

The apostle was keen on telling them his experience with God and the vision which he saw, more so than telling them about the vision of Cornelius, so as not to arouse them, as they would probably say that while trusting in the words of the apostle, how can they trust in Cornelius, unless the two stories conform and consummate one another.

“And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter, kill and eat’” “But I said, ‘Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth’” (Acts 11.7-8).

In his commentary on the epistle of the apostle Paul to the Ephesians, **St. John Chrysostom** quoted this phrase to confirm that some issues have been unclear even to the apostles, and they were in need for divine proclamations to comprehend them, for their own benefit and for that of those to whom they ministered¹.

- ❖ Do you mark? "I did my part," says he: "***I said, that I have never eaten anything common or unclean***" with reference to this that they said, "***You went in, and ate with them.***" But this he does not say to Cornelius: for there was no need to mention it to him.... Observe how he justifies himself (by reasons), and forbears to use his authority as teacher. For the more mildly he expresses himself, the more tractable he makes them"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common’” (Acts 11.9).

In accepting the Gentiles, there is no breaking of the law, because if the law has banned eating what is common or unclean, the New Testament commanded us to do the same. But the situation has now changed, as God has cleansed what is common or unclean. So, who and what we used to consider common, through the work of salvation of the Lord Christ, has become pure. So it is not anymore fitting for us to call the Gentiles common; and nobody has the right to blame the apostle Peter, because God has cleansed the Gentiles.

“Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven” (Acts 11.10).

It was done thrice to confirm that what he saw or heard was not fantasy or illusion, but it was a divine command. That is why the vision ended by drawing up the sheet to heaven from where it came, to confirm that the matter was indeed heavenly.

“At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea” (Acts 11.11).

The Lord confirmed to him that what he saw was through a divine plan at the convenient moments. That is why, once the vision came to an end, the messengers of Cornelius were already before the door enquiring for him.

“Then the Spirit told me to go with them doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house” (Acts 11.12).

¹ Hom. On Eph. 6.3.1-2.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 24.

Together with all those heavenly confirmations, the Holy Spirit Himself talked to St. Peter to put his heart at ease and to take away any doubt he might have had. It is as though the apostle was telling them that if they doubt his behavior, he himself had equal doubts. He was in need for a confirmation from the Holy Spirit Himself, who commanded him to go with them doubting nothing. So although the invitation came through Gentiles, to go to a house of a Gentile, he did not go without the call of the Spirit, And he did not go alone, but he took with him six brethren to testify to those exalted events. Together with them, the seventh (Peter), were all of the circumcision, for everyone to be sure later on, that all those in connection to the events were of the circumcision and have been committed to receive the Gentiles by a unanimous decision, as the whole work was coming through a divine command.

❖ "Do you mark that it is to the Spirit the enacting of laws belongs!"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. Peter did not refer to the name of the man concerned (Cornelius), to his position as a Centurion, or to his devotion, prayers, or alms, lest they think that he was impressed by those matters. All what preoccupied him was that he went according to a divine call and not to anything else.

“And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa and call for Simon whose surname is Peter’” (Acts 11.13).

He told Peter that God, through a divine vision, sent him an angel, to call him from Joppa. He did not see the angel in the temple, but in his own house. Peter told the apostles that he and that man, exchanging their mutual experience in the divine visions, have seen an amazing conformity. What God had concealed from him, He revealed to the Gentile; and what He concealed from the Gentile, He revealed to him. The two visions came to be one integrated vision, intended to proclaim the exalted love of God to the whole humanity.

“Who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11.14).

St. Peter concentrated only on one thing: that all what occurred was through the Holy Spirit and God’s plan. That is why he did not refer to the words of the angel to Cornelius that his prayers have been heard and his alms are remembered in the sight of God, or to the devotion of the man and his fear of God, lest he should arouse their apprehensiveness, of how God would receive the worship of a Gentile, and how he would be described as someone devoted and fearing God.

As the Spirit has put Peter’s heart at ease to set forth working, He did the same to Cornelius, to confirm to him that what he would hear from St. Peter was a true divine call to enjoy salvation, for him and for all his household.

Our Lord Christ who said to the tax collector, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19.9), He Himself sent an angel to confirm to Cornelius that salvation has come to his house, through

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 24.

faith in the gospel of Christ. He, who presented salvation to the tax collector, has Himself presented salvation to the Gentiles.

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came upon them, as upon us at the beginning” (Acts 11.15).

The Lord Himself settled the controversy: The Holy Spirit has come upon the Gentiles, as He did upon those of circumcision on the day of the Pentecost. What the Jews had at the beginning became the right of the Gentiles as well. The Spirit did not wait for St. Peter to finish his speech with them, lest someone should assume that the Holy Spirit is a gift from the apostle. It is a free gift from God Himself.

“Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 11.16).

This is the third time for this exalted gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, the Giver of gifts, to be given to men:

- 1- The gift of the Holy Spirit to **those of circumcision** on the day of the Pentecost (Acts 2).
- 2- His gift to **the Samaritan** believers (Acts 8.17).
- 3- His gift to **the firstfruit of the Gentiles** (Acts 11.15).

It is probable that the gift that the Samaritan believers received has prepared to a certain extent St. Peter’s mind to accept the fact that the same gift could be given to the Gentiles.

Here, St. Peter remembered the promise of the Lord Christ before His ascension, “John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit”.

“If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11.17).

The end of the whole debate was a serious decision: Either to accept the work of God and His love to mankind, or to oppose and to refuse His will and plan. It is as though he was saying to them, "You should not look at my behavior as evaluating the situation, But as taking a serious decision concerning the very plan of God, either to accept or to reject it. As far as I am concerned, Shall I oppose the divine will? What authority do I have to receive or to reject the Gentiles into faith? If God is opening the gates of His church before the Gentiles, Can I close them before their faces?"

3- THE CONTENTION TURNING INTO A JOYFUL PRAISE

“When they heard these things they became silent, and they glorified God, saying, ‘then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (Acts 11.18).

St. Peter's speech confirmed the complete membership of the Gentiles in the Church of Christ; That neither the circumcision nor the literal keeping the law of Moses were prior conditions for salvation; And that there is no discernment between one food and another, or between one people and another. Yet, even though that would carry a destruction of the literal Jewish dogma, those present presented a praise of thanksgiving, glorifying God for the riches of His love for all mankind.

Although St. Peter's response was convincing to those of circumcision, it was up to a certain time, as the situation of the Gentiles being received into faith in the Church kept on causing serious problems later on.

He did not say that he commanded them to be baptized, but everything was going on according to exalted divine commands. The apostles were nothing but obedient tools for the Holy Spirit, the leader of that work.

In saying to the apostles, 'The Holy Spirit fell upon them as upon us', and not 'as upon you', it is as though he was saying, "I am one of you. I marvel for God's plan who does not discern between them and us; yet I, together with you, joyfully accept this divine love for all mankind."

4- THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

“Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only” (Acts 11.19).

This section starts dealing with a new stage in the extension of the Church from the Jewish society in Jerusalem, to the outer society, especially in Antioch. St. Luke has previously spoken about the entry of the Samaritans into the Church, Then of the conversion of a Gentile family in Caesarea. Now he is telling about the beginning of Christianity in Antioch, the main city in Syria, to become the Mother Church for preaching among the Gentiles in Asia and Europe.

St. Luke cared for the success of ministry in Antioch, as it would soon become the center of ministry of St. Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, from which he started his journeys, and to which he returned to start a new one.

The first persons who preached the gospel there were those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over St. Stephen, 5 or 6 years before. Thus God turned the wrath and violence of man into blessings for many and into glory to Him in several countries. The believers kept the commandment of the Lord Christ, that when persecuted, they should flee from one city to another. But as they did, they carried with them the living fellowship with God and the testimony to the gospel of Christ wherever they went. They were not overcome by affliction, or even by death, but by their love for mankind, to minister to them in Jesus Christ. When ministry became successful in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, they went even to beyond the boundaries of Canaan, to preach in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Syria. Yet they preached the word to no one but the Jews, leaving the Gentiles, either to become Jews, then Christians later on, or to stay as they were.

“But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11.20).

St. Luke previously mentioned the great affliction caused by the debate of St. Stephen before his martyrdom that drove the believers to scatter and to preach everywhere (Acts 8.4). Here he speaks about establishing the Church of Antioch. He starts by mentioning the role of those who scattered, who set forth toward the sea, going north passing through the coastal cities like Berytue (Beirut), Arados, Leodicea (not the one in Asia Minor), until they reached Antioch in Syria and then went by sea to Cyprus.

Antioch, a Syrian-Greek city, that embraced both the Syrian and the Hellenist culture, was located on the River Aurantes. It was considered as the third Roman city after Rome in the west, and Alexandria in the east. The seeds of Christianity began to be planted in it after the day of the Pentecost.

Some believers who came from Cyprus and from Cyrene (Libya) to Antioch took another course in preaching; they preached to the Hellenists in Antioch. Although there was a large Jewish congregation in Antioch, Antioch has been Gentile with a Greek culture.

One of the prominent Cypriots was St. Barnabas who “having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4.36-37).

And among the Cyrenians was Simon, who bore the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; and his sons were Alexander and Rufus, through whom Christianity spread to Antioch (Mark 15.21; Rom. 16.13).

Those were Jews who, because they spoke the Greek language, were counted as Greeks.

The word ‘Greeks’ here does not mean the Jews with Greek culture, but the Greeks of the Gentiles. In Antioch, there were two categories: One, constituting the Jews who came from Jerusalem and Judea and preached in the Synagogues of the Jews and to the Proselytes from the Gentiles; and another category constituting those Jews who came from Cyprus and Cyrene, who preached among the Gentile Greeks.

“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11.21).

Some interpret the phrase “*The hand of the Lord was with them*” as referring to the divine signs and miracles that supported their preaching (Mark 16.20). The Lord worked with and through them. But what is greater is that the Holy Spirit of God worked in the hearts of the listeners, to receive the word of the gospel and to respond to it. The Spirit of God inscribed the word in their hearts and opened their insight to realize its secrets.

The Church of Antioch stood between the Church of Jerusalem that concentrated on the Hebrews; and the Church of the Gentiles preached to by the apostle Paul that concentrated on the Gentiles. The Church of Antioch, on the other hand, concentrated on the devout Hellenists who feared the Lord, Jews who spoke the Greek tongue. Having had its traditional nature, it made great efforts to turn the Christians into Jews, and entered into great struggle with St. Paul and St. Barnabas, who preached among the Gentiles, that ended up in holding a counsel in Jerusalem to settle the controversy.

St Peter is considered the first Bishop of Antioch. He was apparently pro-Christian Jews, but in heart, he favored the Gentile Christians more, something that led St. Paul to criticize him.

5- ST. BARNABAS IN ANTIOCH

“The news of these things came to the ears of the Church of Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch” (Acts 11.22).

The Mother Church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to support the young Church in Antioch, as they previously did when they sent Peter and John to do the same thing for the new preaching work in Samaria (Acts 8.14-17).

Choosing Barnabas, and not any other apostle, reveals the wisdom of the apostles: Being a Greek-Cypriot, devout and filled with the Holy Spirit and faith, and previously ministered among the Gentiles, he would never enter into the disputes of the law and circumcision, which made him best

suiting to minister among the Greeks. Moreover, the Church of Jerusalem, having realized the growth of ministry among the Gentiles, feared to lose her connection to the Church of the Gentiles.

“When he came and had seen the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (Acts 11.23).

The Church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to encourage both the preachers and the believers in Antioch, and to reveal her joy for the work of God in their midst. The Church always rejoices in the success of the work of God, especially in the locations unexpected by her. There is nothing that brings joy to the heart of the Church like seeing the souls forsaking sin and getting attached to the Lord.

“To remain faithful to the Lord”: When man joins the Church, the devil chases him by temptations and afflictions, to uproot him from faith, and to captivate him in disbelief. That is why the task of the Church is to hold the believers fast in the Lord, in order to have with Him a fellowship that the forces of darkness cannot corrupt.

“With steadfast devotion”: that the believers would have a steadfast mind and a flaring heart, to abide to God’s plan toward them (Rom. 8.8; Eph. 1.11, 3.11; 2 Tim. 1.9, 3.10). A steadfast devotion refers to the clarity of goal and abidance to it, with no deviation or hesitation, that man continues faithful in his faith.

“For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord” (Acts 11.23).

Seeing the work of the divine grace in the life of people, his soul greatly rejoiced; his heart kindled; and he preached them and exhorted them to abide strongly to the Lord.

The word ‘Barnabas’ means (son of preaching). His heart, filled with joy, and carrying the spirit of strength, held him fast to support others with the words of grace.

❖ "And if there be any other things which in Scripture are called good, whether angel (To 5.21), or man (Ps. 37.23, 112.5), or servant (Sir. 7.21), or treasure (To 4.9; Luke 6.45), or a good heart (Ye. 8.28), or a good tree (2 Kings 3.19; Matt. 7.17-19), all these are so termed catachrestically, having in them an accidental, not an essential goodness"¹.

(Scholar Origen)

6- ST. BARNABAS SEEKING SAUL

“Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul” (Acts 11.25).

The Lord used him to hold fast those who were in, and to draw those who were out. He worked to edify souls, and to draw unbelievers. The secret of his success was:

1- He was a good man and the Holy God has pleasure in working through saints who respond to His Holy Spirit, with the spirit of love, meekness, humility, and sweetness.

¹ *De Principiis. 1.2.13.*

2- He was full of the Holy Spirit. He was not only loving and humble, but he was submitted to the leadership of the Spirit of God, who filled his inner man and granted him His fruition.

3- He was full of faith: He had full trust in the divine truth and the true promises of God. He did not depend upon his personal capabilities and talents, or upon his self righteousness and holiness, but upon the power and promises of God.

❖ "He came to the athletic wrestler, the general (fit to lead armies), the champion of single combat, the lion-I am at a loss for words, say what I will-the hunting-dog, killer of lions, bull of strength, lamp of brightness, mouth sufficing for a world" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Barnabas' success in ministry among the Gentiles motivated him to seek Saul, who was called to minister to the Gentiles, to work together. The successful minister always seeks someone to work with him, not seeking his own glory, but the edification of God's kingdom on earth.

"And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the Church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch" (Acts 11.26).

Although a whole year is considered a long time in the ministry of either St. Barnabas or St. Paul, they felt the importance of working in Antioch, to make it a strong center of spiritual radiation to minister to the Gentiles in Asia and in Europe.

Barnabas rejoiced to cross over the gates that separate between the region of Celicia to the north and Syria to the south, there he encountered with Saul and brought him back to Antioch, where they worked together for a whole year. Both of them were bound by a close friendship in the Lord, as both bore the same thought concerning their zeal and longing to preach among the Gentiles and not submitting to the deadly letter of the law. They worked together and when the ministry flared there, the two apostles felt the necessity of igniting the whole world with the fire of the Holy Spirit and the light of Christ.

In addition to St. Paul's care to establish new Churches in several locations, that rarely cost him more than one or two days, or a few weeks; He also cared for establishing work centers, where he spent a number of years, as he did in Ephesus where he stayed three years (Acts 20.31), and in Corinth where he stayed a year and a half (Acts 18.11).

St. Luke saw it important to record an important event, a landmark, that the believers were called 'Christians' for the first time in Antioch, being followers of Christ. By whom were they so called? Was it by their enemies as a matter of ridicule, or by the disciples themselves, as a kind of showing their pride in being referred to the Person of Jesus Christ and to demonstrate a Theological concept, that the Christian faith is a fellowship with the Lord Christ? Most probably, the Greek converts intended to carry

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 25.

the name of Christ as an indication of independence from the disciples in Jerusalem, whom they considered as a Jewish sect. The believers in Antioch, in their struggle with those of the circumcision, intended to get rid of the Jewish customs. Anyway, that title bore a special designation, that they were followers of Christ, with their own special features, feelings, teachings, and hope, even if they differ among themselves concerning nationality, language, or culture.

The word 'called' in the Greek origin did not imply just a title or name, but a commitment to do a fitting work. As he who serves to execute the law is called a 'judge', He who follows Christ and enjoys a fellowship with Him is called a 'Christian'.

It is often the case, that particular groups are called after the name of their leader: The Platonists were indebted to Plato for his teachings; and the Epicurians to Epicurus, etc. Whereas as far as the Lord Christ is concerned, the Christians are indebted, not only to His teachings, but to His Spirit dwelling in them, abiding in Him, and He in them. Christians enjoy fellowship with their Christ, being united with Him as a Head to the one body.

They were indeed previously called disciples, having been taught by Him, and walked according to His ways. They were also called 'saints', being proud of His righteousness and holiness and being like icons of Him. They were also called '**believers**', for believing in Him, And called '**His Church**', being His people among whom He dwells. They were called by their opponents the '**Nazarites**' as a form of ridicule to Jesus of Nazareth and His followers; '**Galilees**', having been unlearned people from Galilee; and '**Those of the Way**'; and probably also '**Christians**'. Anyway, we are proud to carry this name, which, in our sight is a glorified name and a gift granted to us by God. It came three times in the New Testament: here, as well as in (Acts 26.28; 1 Pet. 4.16).

Our realization that the name 'Jesus Christ' bears His might and represents His divine presence makes us treasure this title more.

- ❖ "You call me a Christian, as if this were a damning name to bear, I, for my part, avow that I am a Christian, and bear this name beloved of God, hoping to be serviceable to God"¹.
- ❖ "And about your laughing at me and calling me "Christian," you know not what you are saying. First, because that which is anointed is sweet and serviceable, and far from contemptible. For what ship can be serviceable and seaworthy, unless it be first caulked [anointed]? Or what castle or house is beautiful and serviceable when it has not been anointed? ... Wherefore we are called Christians on this account, because we are anointed with the oil of God"².

(Theophilus of Antioch)

7- Antioch supporting Jerusalem

¹ *Theophilus to Autolycus. 1.1.*

² *Theophilus to Autolycus. 1.12.*

“And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch” (Acts 11.27).

While St. Barnabas and St. Paul were in Antioch, prophets came from Jerusalem. Most probably the word ‘prophets’ designated teachers who preach future things and interpret heavenly secrets, not necessarily those who prophesy temporal future events. The Holy Spirit occasionally reveal to them certain future events that could touch the Church and the preaching, not to show off their knowledge, but for the edification of souls and to deal with certain troubles, as we can see in the prophecy of ‘Agabus’ about the great famine that was to happen throughout all the world. Those prophets, when they heard about the success of ministry in Antioch, felt a commitment to go there to support the saints Barnabas and Paul.

Here, St. Luke starts dealing with the subject of the relationship between the Church of Antioch and the Church of Jerusalem, following the famine.

“Prophets came from Jerusalem”: The book of Acts speaks of the presence of prophets in the Church of the New Testament (Acts 13.1, 15.32, 21.10), when there was no more prophecy in Israel, after the return from captivity in Babylon. In the first book of the Maccabees, it came: “They put the stones (of the broken altar of the sacrifice) in a fitting position, until a prophet comes and responds to them” (1 Mac. 1.46). “There was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them” (1 Mac. 9.27). “The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise” (1 Mac. 14.41). Prophecy in the New Testament is represented first in testifying to the Lord Christ by the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, in proclaiming the divine truth and in telling of future things for the edification of the kingdom of God.

Ambrosiaster comments on the words of the apostle Paul, “And God has appointed these in the Church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” (1 Cor. 12.28), saying that the apostle Paul put the apostles as heads of the Church. There are two kinds of prophets: those who prophesy the future, and those who interpret the holy books. The apostles are likewise prophets, as the higher rank embraces all what are lower. Even the wicked like Caiaphas has uttered prophecies through the power (authority) of his office, not out of any virtue in him (John 11.49-51).¹

“Then one of them, named Agabus stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar” (Acts 11.28).

Several Historians referred to that famine that happened during the second year of the reign of Claudius Caesar and lasted until the fourth year if not more.

God sent to the world the “Bread of life”, and even the Word of God Himself came incarnated to satisfy the souls. But having rejected Him, famine dwelt, as the land became barren. In the past, Joseph

¹ *Comm. On Paul’ Epistles 1 Cor. 12.28.*

prophesied a famine and showed the need to build storehouses for wheat to fulfill the multitudes during the seven years of the famine. But now, as Agabus proclaims the famine, there is an urgent need, not to build storehouses, but to flare the hearts with love and compassion for others, that would grant fulfillment both to the giver and the receiver. The rich together with the poor, both rejoice for the treasures of practical love, that will bless the land (Ps. 41.1-2).

Agabus was mentioned again in (Acts 21.10-11), when he prophesied to the apostle Paul what was going to happen to him on the hands of the Gentiles.

“**Throughout all the world**” sometimes refers to the whole world, known at that time, and other times used to mean all the region of Judea, or to most of a certain region.

“**Claudius Caesar**”: His reign started in the year 41 AD and lasted for 13 years, then died. He was poisoned by one of his wives, Agrippina, to give the throne to her son Nero. His reign was loaded with tribulations, together with famine and hunger, probably because of his persecutions that led to a disturbance of peace, beside corruption and a collapse of the economy of the land. During his reign, there were four famines mentioned by old authors, one of which was terribly severe and affected Judea, most probably the one referred to here.

1- The first famine in Rome: it happened in the first year or the second of the reign of Claudius. It was caused by the difficulty of importing provisions from abroad.

2- The second famine was particularly severe in Greece, that, according to Eusebius, happened during the ninth year of Claudius’ reign.

3- The third famine happened during the last years of his reign 51 AD, in Rome. It was referred to by Sotinus and Tacitus, who considered it as a divine chastisement.

4- The fourth famine happened particularly in Judea according to Eusebius; it was so severe that many died because of lack of food. Queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria to buy wheat and sent others to Cyprus to bring dried figs.

St. John Chrysostom says that the men of Antioch did not wait for the famine to happen, but took the initiation, and everyone sent to Jerusalem what he could afford.

The fathers often speak of the collection for the poor, as beneficial for the two parties: for the giver, as giving is nourishment to the soul that grants it growth and spiritual maturation; and also for the needy, as it fulfills their material needs.

This congregation gets a double benefit, as it benefits the saints mentioned (1 Cor. 16.1) and the poor people of the church¹.

(**Ambrosiaster**)

St. John Chrysostom moans because the Church in his time had not done what the people of Antioch did, although there has been a more serious famine, yet nobody cared. What was that famine? He says that there are two aspects of a famine, and two aspects of abundance. It is a severe famine, not

¹ *Comm. On Paul’s Epistles.*

for listening to the word of God, but for flourishing through giving alms. The poor in Judea and the rich in Antioch both benefited; actually the later benefited more. Now, we are here, poor and hungry. The poor are in need for the essentials; and we, in a famine, lead a luxurious life that lacks the mercy of God. Giving alms is an essential food as any, food by which the over-filling by wickedness is taken away. ... There is nothing more beautiful or healthier than the soul that flourishes by this food; it soars above any sickness, pest, indigestion, or corruption; nothing overcomes it. If somebody's body is made of diamond, no iron or anything else can harm him. It is the same with the soul that melds with the giving of alms, nothing can overcome it¹.

❖ "What more naked than that rich man who arrayed himself in purple? What poorer than Lazarus? Then which of them uttered the words of beggars? Which of them was in abundance? Say, if one should deck his house with abundance of tapestry hangings, and himself sit naked within, what was the benefit? So it is in the case of these women (who dress in luxurious clothes, not caring for the poor). Truly, the house of the soul, the body I mean, they hang round with plenty of garments: but the mistress of the house sits naked within. Lend me the eyes of the soul, and I will show you the soul's nakedness. For what is the garment of the soul? Virtue, of course. And what its nakedness? Vice. ... Let us put on the glory of Christ: let us array ourselves with that beauty, that both here we may be praised, and there attain unto the eternal good things, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost together, be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

It seems that the Evangelist St. Luke has been in Antioch at that time, as it came in the version named 'Beza Text': "He uttered his prophecy in our presence". It came in the tradition of the Church, and in the introduction to an interpretation of the gospel of Luke (170 AD), in the document against the heretic Marcion, that St. Luke was a citizen of Antioch in Syria. Both Eusebius of Caesarea³ and St. Jerome⁴ refer to this fact.

"Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea" (Acts 11.29).

All, taking the prophecy as a command from God, collected from everyone according to his ability. It is not said that the rich alone have contributed to giving to the poor; but everyone did, for all to practice the life of fellowship, based on love and unity.

"This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Paul" (Acts 11.30).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 25.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 25.

³ H.E. 3.4.

⁴ Illust. Men, 7. Preface in Comm. On Matthew.

Many scholars believe that that journey done by the two apostles for the ministry to the poor in Judea is the one referred to in (Gal. 2.1).

The word '**elders**' in Greek means (Old priests). This is the first time to refer to priests in the book of Acts.

It is obvious that Barnabas and Saul have sent that donation by the hands of the elders of the congregation, before the beginning of the famine, while the two apostles were kept to the ministry of the word (Acts 6.2).

The Church suffered material troubles, even in times other than famines, The Churches of the Gentiles cared for the poor of Jerusalem, and hence supported the Mother Church materially (1 Cor. 16.1; Gal. 2.10). The apostle Paul referred to that in his speech before Felix the Governor, "Now, after many years, I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation" (Acts 24.17).

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 11

LET ME REJOICE IN YOUR GIFT TO EVERY SOUL

- ❖ Grant me, by Your Holy Spirit, to share with you Your love for all mankind,
To long truly to see the whole world enjoying the fellowship of Your glory.
- ❖ Take the limited thought away from me,
That the solid letter would not kill me,
To rejoice with all the Church for the spreading of Your kingdom.
- ❖ Your Holy Spirit is amazing in His gifts,
Working incessantly in the life of many.
You gave wisdom to the apostle Peter to overcome his critics.
By wisdom, he lifted them above the letter,
And revealed to them Your amazing work among the Gentiles.
He turned their criticism and contention into praise of glory to You.
He did not seek to justify himself,
But sought to glorify You in Your love for all.
Instead of the bitterness of contention, they came to have the spirit of joy.
He did not speak to them from a position of authority,
Or debated with them as someone accused;
But in true love and humility, he proclaimed to them the secrets of Your love.
- ❖ To the apostle Barnabas, You gave a flaring zeal.
He did not seek what is his, but what is Yours.
He seriously worked to draw Saul to join him,
And for a whole year they ministered together in Antioch.
By their mutual love for You and for the souls,
Antioch came to be the great city of God.
It became a center radiating Your light on many nations.
- ❖ Joyfully, the believers referred themselves to You.
They counted themselves unworthy to be called Christians,
But mockingly, their opponents called them so, as ridicule.
The believers rejoiced as though in an unutterable glory.
And in ignorance, the opponents lived a corrupted life.
- ❖ The Gentile Antioch opened its heart to Jerusalem.
It presented, together with its love, donations to the poor saints.

It gave money, and received a fulfillment from the divine Giver.
While giving, it received from the Creator of heaven.
While loving, it tasted the exalted divine love.

CHAPTER 12

HEROD OR THE APOSTLE PETER?

The contention inside the Church of Jerusalem ended up to offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to God, Who opened the gates of faith to the Gentiles. The ministry in Antioch flourished by the hands of St. Barnabas and St. Paul; and Antioch became a support to Jerusalem for its material needs. Now, war came from outside, when Herod the king stretched out his hand and killed the apostle James. And thinking that he could also kill the rest of the apostles, he put Peter in prison, during the days of unleavened bread, to kill him after the feast. But the Lord saved Peter through the constant prayers offered for him by the Church; and an angel of the Lord struck the arrogant Herod dead.

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1- THE APOSTLE JAMES KILLED BY KING HEROD

Heaven moved to open the gates of faith before the Gentiles, for the whole world to enjoy salvation. The apostle Peter enjoyed a heavenly vision, to get him out of the Jewish literality and to let him go to preach Cornelius, a Gentile Centurion, together with his household. Saul of Tarsus enjoyed an encounter with the Lord Christ Himself, who made of him a chosen vessel to preach among the Gentiles. The devil, displeased with all that, provoked King Herod to stretch out his hand to kill the apostle James the Bishop of Jerusalem, intending to do the same to the rest of the apostles.

Since the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, we did not hear of any severe wave of persecution, by the religious leaders, against the saints in Jerusalem. Now a wave from another front appeared, from the civil authorities.

“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the Church” (Acts 12.1).

“Herod Agrippas”: the son of Aristobulus the grandson of Herod the Great from Mariammne, a Heshmonite princess¹. He was born in 11AD. He was sent to Rome with his mother to learn after the execution of his father Aristobulus in the year 7 AD. There he became a friend of certain individuals in the Imperial family, especially with Gais Caligula, the nephew of Emperor Tiberius. When Gais

¹ The Heshmonites is the family name of the Maccabees. They are named after one of their prominent figures

Caligula became Emperor in the year 47 AD, he granted Herod the provinces that were under the authority of Philips and Lysianus in northern Syria (Luke 3.1). He granted him as well the title of 'king', and added to him the provinces of Galilee and Peraeus.

After Gais Caligula was killed, Claudius Caesar became the Emperor in the year 41 AD, and added to King Herod Agrippas the province of Judea and the lands of Batania and Trachonitis, as well as Galilee and Samaria.

The Mishnah says that he managed to draw the feelings of the Jews to himself, when, in the feast of the tabernacles, in the seventh year, a Sabbath for the rest of the land (Lev. 25.1-7), he stood and read the statute of governing the kingdom (Deut. 17.14-20). And when he came to the verse, saying, "You may no set a foreigner (a king) over you" (Deut. 17.15), he wept loudly, because he belonged to an Edomite family – that of the Herodisians. Then, remembering that he also belonged to a Jewish Heshmonite Maccabee family, the people sympathetically cried out, 'Don't be disturbed! You are also our brother'. His reign spread to cover all the land that was governed by his grandfather Herod the Great.

Archelaus (Matt. 2.22), and Herod Antipas, who cut the head of John the Baptist (Matt. 14.1-12), were his uncles, and Herodea the dancer was his sister.

Herod stretched out his hand to harass some of the saints, mostly of the common people, to test the reaction of the Jews; and seeing it to be favorable, he dared to commit the crime of killing the apostle James with the sword.

❖ "Lo, a different sort of trial-and mark what I said in the beginning, how things are blended, how rest and trouble alternate in the whole texture of the history-not now the Jews, nor the Sanhedrin, but the king. Greater the power, the warfare more severe, the more it was done to obtain favor with the Jews. ... O excessive wickedness!"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword" (Acts 12.2).

The apostle St. James was the first martyr among the apostles. His pious life drew his guard to believe in the Lord Christ and to become a martyr together with him². (He is not James the son of Alpheus, called 'Little James', who also died a martyr during the reign of Nero, by the hand of Anan). The words of the Lord Christ to him and his brother John were realized, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized" (Mark 10.39). He was one of the prominent three pillars of the Church, "Peter, James, and John".

His flaring zeal to testify to the Lord Christ, risen from the dead, to preach the gospel of salvation and his unfailing shepherding work might have provoked Herod to kill him by the sword. The

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 26.

² Eusebius. H.E. 2.9.

Evangelist St. Luke did not mention the details of his martyrdom, as he did in the case of that of St. Stephen.

The Jews used to execute those condemned to die by one of four ways: stoning, burning, by the sword, or by hanging. Killing by the sword has been practiced by both the Jews and the Romans. It is referred to by the Talmud¹.

❖ "though he had numberless warnings in the case of both his grandfather and his father Herod, how the former in consequence of his putting the children to death suffered the greatest calamities, and the latter by slaying John raised up against himself a grievous war"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

2- THE APOSTLE PETER PUT IN PRISON

“And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the days of unleavened bread” (Acts 12.3).

St. James, the brother of St. John, was killed by the sword in the year 44 AD, the same year in which Herod died. Seeing that the Jews were pleased by the killing of the apostle James and intending to make his reign stronger through their support, he proceeded further to seize Peter also, during the days of the unleavened bread, as though to purify the Jewish nation from the leaven of evil and to give them the chance to celebrate the Passover with joy. But God did not allow him to execute his plan. Although God allowed for the martyrdom of the apostle James, the time was not yet ripe for that of the apostle Peter, who still had a mission before his martyrdom by the hand of Nero.

Shedding the blood of St. James did not satisfy the criminal nature of Herod, but enhanced his thirst for blood, so he started to plan a series of killing of the rest of the Church’s leaderships, beginning with St. Peter. This is the feature of all sins: There is no sin that realizes a fulfillment of the soul; but with the beginning of practicing sin, even in a preliminary way, it becomes its right to draw all the energies of man, to an incessant series of practices. And with every practice, sin confirms its right to have the authority over man’s heart and mind, to direct his will according to its will. Every sin brings man down, to deliver him to another sin and continues to tumble, unless God’s grace saves him by true repentance.

“So when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover” (Acts 12.4).

Because it was the days of unleavened bread, and the city was packed with those coming, not only from Judea, but from several countries as well, Herod feared that the foreign Jews who had some kind of freedom from the letter of the law would sympathize with Peter especially that he was planning to try him publicly before the people.

¹ *Sanhedr., Fol.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 26.*

For fear that some of the staff of the prison might help him to escape, Herod delivered Peter to four squads of soldiers to keep him. Yet, as strong as the orders for watching him were, the salvation was amazing.

- ❖ "For the servant of God had not got away, but stood firm without a thought of fear. The Church prayed for him, but the Apostle slept in prison, a proof that he was not in fear. An angel was sent to rouse him as he slept, by whom Peter was led forth out of prison, and escaped death for a time"¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the Church” (Acts 12.5).

What could the prison and the strong watching do? Peter was justified as a brave man who joyfully received affliction for the sake of the Lord. The Church enjoyed the fervent life of prayer, and heaven moved to work. The benefit was amazing to the account of the kingdom of God.

Feeling that Herod had a serious intention to kill him, the heart of the Church flared, not for fear of Peter’s death, but for the completion of his mission. Feeling that the battle was not between the king and St. Peter, as much as it was between the kingdom of Christ and that of the forces of darkness, the Church fervently prayed to God.

The Greek word means (flaring zeal), or (persistence). That is the strong weapon of the Church: the collective fervent and persistent prayer, especially that, together with faith in God’s work and His ability to save; it bears the fragrance of love for God and for one another.

- ❖ "It was the prayer of (filial) affection: it was for a father they asked, a father mild"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. John Chrysostom says that all prayed without entering into any debates or contentions. Although no one of them saw himself as worthy to pray for such a great apostle, love does not allow for such thoughts to come to their minds.

- ❖ When Daniel prayed, the mouths of lions were shut (Dan. 6) before the body and bones of that righteous man. ... His prayers also brought the captivity of Israel to an end after seventy years (Dan. 9.23). Every one of our early fathers carried the weapon of prayer to face and overcome afflictions and tribulations³.

(Father Ephrahat)

- ❖ We ought not to limit our prayers to certain hours of the day. The apostle instructs us to pray all the time (Eph. 6.18) with the Spirit and to keep persistently watchful. And he adds, "For your

¹ *Sermon against Auxentius. 12.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 26.*

³ *Aphrahat. Demonstration 4, on prayer, 9.*

supplications to be known to God”, and “continuing steadfastly in prayer” (Rom. 12.12), and, “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5.18, 19). Everywhere in his epistles, he strongly provokes us to continue praying, as he certainly knows that prayer is the weapon provided by God to Christians and a stronghold by which they become strong by God. Prayer does what you want according to the will of God. It issues commands on earth, then goes back to heaven¹.

(Father Martyrius)

It is fitting for us to refer to the obvious line in the gospel of St. Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles, which is prayer. The Evangelist St. Luke presents Jesus Christ as a Friend to all mankind, that friendship whose price our Christ paid by His blood on the cross, and for which we are committed to keep talking to Him. As examples we mention:

- During the Baptism of the Lord Christ: “While he **prayed**, the heaven was opened” (Luke 3.21).
- Before choosing the twelve disciples: “He went out to the mountain **to pray**, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6.12).
- In His transfiguration: “He went up on the mountain **to pray**, and as he prayed the appearance of His face was altered” (Luke 9.28-29).
- The Lord Christ presented three parables that dealt with *prayer* **The midnight** friend (Luke 11.5-13), the unjust judge and the widow (Luke 18.1-8) and the Pharisee and the tax-collector who went to the temple to pray (Luke 18.9-13).
- In His speech about the end of times, He ended it with saying, “Watch therefore, **and pray always that you may** be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21.36).

As to the Book of Acts, it is the book of the **Church, persistent on prayer:**

- “These all continued **with one accord in prayer and supplication**” (Acts 1.14).
- “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in **prayers**” (Acts 2.42).
- “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, ... **praising God**” (Acts 2.46-47).
- “**Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God**” (Acts 10.4).
- “Constant **prayer was offered** to God for him by the Church” (Acts 12.5).
- “**Many were gathered together praying**” (Acts 12.12).

3- THE APOSTLE PETER SAVED FROM PRISON

“And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping bound with two chains between two soldiers, and the guards before the door were keeping the prison” (Acts 12.6).

¹ Martyrius. *Book of Perfection*. 39-40.

According to the Roman tradition, a prisoner was usually bound by a chain on the wrist of his right hand, with its other end bound to the wrist of a soldier's left hand, but his other hand was left free. However, in the case of dangerous prisoners, he is bound with two chains between two soldiers, beside guards watching the door of his cell. In St. Peter's case, this precaution was recommended by the chief priest, as he previously did when he recommended sealing Jesus' tomb, lest His disciples come and steal his body.

That was how the forces of darkness felt their weakness and how they did their best to stop and to keep in check the work of God. Yet the apostle Peter was sleeping in peace, not preoccupied with what was to happen to him. Although he was one step away from death, he bore within himself the Grantor of resurrection and the Giver of exalted peace.

“Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison, and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise quickly! And his chains fell off his hands’” (Acts 12.7).

The Church was praying fervently and did not know that God has heard her prayers; that heaven has moved; and that an angel of the Lord caused heavenly light to shine in the dark prison cell. The angel of the Lord provoked Peter to hurry up, striking him with compassion on the side to wake him up and to rise quickly to enjoy the amazing work of God. “Shall not I avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily” (Luke 18.7-8).

The Lord put a spell on the two soldiers to sleep deeply, not to feel the angelic light, or the falling of the two chains from Peter's hands. The tight chains fell off his hands, as the chains of iron could not come in the way before God's command to liberate the captive. He, who sets the dead free from their tombs and grants them life, who loosens the bitter bonds of sin, It is not difficult for him to loosen the chains off the hands of His apostle, while letting them binding those of the guards.

The apostle in those moments enjoyed God's work, to grant freedom to his soul. Neither the iron locks, nor the armed guards could limit him to a cell, but went out free led by an angel of the Lord.

“Then the angel said to him, ‘Gird yourself and tie on your sandals’, and so he did. And he said to him, ‘Put on your garment and follow me’” (Acts 12.8).

The angel instructed him to gird himself, to tie on his sandals and to put on his garment, while the two guards were laying on his right and left sides with their hands bound in chains.

That was his first and last night in prison, and yet, in complete peace he took off his girdle, garment, and sandals, to sleep comfortably between the two guards, not preoccupied with anything in the world.

The angel instructed him to follow him, to remove before him the dense walls, the iron gates and locks, and to cross over from the prison, as though he was a spirit with no body, or an angel, not a man.

Indeed they become “like angels of God in heaven” (Matt. 22.30). St. Peter had magnificently experienced the deposit of Resurrection.

St. John Cassian¹ states in his work on the systems of cenobitic (community) life, that the Egyptian monks used to put on a girdle, as a symbol of a spiritual girdle and to be always ready for any task in the monastery, with nothing to hinder their movements. In that, they are like the apostle Peter who was instructed by the angel to girdle himself; and to the apostle Paul to whom the prophet Agabus said, “He who owns this belt will pass through tribulations in Jerusalem” (Acts 21.11).

“So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought that he was seeing a vision” (Acts 12.9).

St. Peter did not believe that what he was going through was real, but thought that he was seeing a vision. Whereas those in prison were overwhelmed by a dense darkness and saw nothing, or felt any movement in the quietness of the night.

“When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him” (Acts 12.10).

This description of the route they took until they were out of the prison conforms to the citadel of Antonia. Were the guards awake, but unable to see the angel or St. Peter, Or a spell fell upon them and they went into a deep sleep, not feeling even the opening of the huge outer iron gate that opened to them of its own accord, by a divine power?

Once St. Peter breathed the aroma of freedom and became one street far from the prison, there was no more need for an angel to accompany him any further, so the angel departed from him. God gives a visible angelic help to believers according to their needs. Then they have to strive on their own, supported by God’s care, accompanied by the angel invisibly.

“And when Peter had come to himself, he said, ‘Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectations of the Jewish people’” (Acts 12.11).

St. Peter came to himself, as though he has experienced a state of divine trance, during which he enjoyed an exalted vision and an amazing heavenly work. Then the apostle praised God from his heart, glorifying his Savior who delivered him from the hand of Herod, as though he was uttering the words of Nebuchadnezzar, “Blessed be the Lord of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, Who sent his Angel and delivered His servants who trusted Him” (Dan. 3.28); the word of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, “Blessed be the Lord who has delivered you out of the hand of Pharaoh, and who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians” (Exod. 18.10); and those of the priest Zechariah, “Blessed is the Lord,

¹ *De institutis caeoborum. 1.1.8.*

God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people ... that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us” (Luke 1.68-71).

What all of those enjoyed presents a living portrait of God’s interventions along the history of the Church, as well as in the life of every believer, publicly or secretly.

“From all the expectations of the Jewish people”: The Jews who assembled to celebrate the Passover were expecting Herod’s present for them, the killing of St. Peter. Yet the hand of God intervened to deliver him.

Some scholars believe that the deliverance of Peter from prison, his inner praise and the assembly of the Church were all connected to the Passover. And all happened in the last day of the festivities. In the Madras, concerning the night of the people’s exodus from the land of Egypt (Exod. 12.42), it came that it was a night of watching, during which God used to do marvels with His saints: Like what He did to His people in the days of Moses. During that night, the Lord saved King Hezekiah and Daniel from the den. In that night also Christ will demonstrate His power and Elijah too (in the second coming of Christ). The Passover in the minds of the Jews is always connected to God’s amazing acts of deliverance in the life of the Church along the years, and in the life of every believer, sanctified to the Lord.

They also believe that it is a night of praise and joy by the people and men of God, and praises of thanksgiving to God the Redeemer. In it, Joshua praised God when he conquered the five Canaanite kings; Deborah and Barak when they conquered Sisra; Hezekiah when God delivered him from the siege by Senechrib; the three young men when they were saved from the fire; Daniel from the lions; and Esther and Mordechai when God delivered His people from the evil plot of Haman to wipe them out. It is as though the salvation works of God along the years were always connected to the sacrifice of the Passover, to the great salvation by the cross and its coronation by the resurrection.

4- ST. PETER IN THE UPPER ROOM

“So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, *the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying*” (Acts 12.12).

St. Peter went to the upper room to tell them about God’s amazing work with him and the exalted care for His Church.

The iron gate of the prison was opened to him of its own accord, And yet he stood before that of the Church knocking, while the Church unfortunately doubted that it was him indeed and said that it was “His angel”, (as the believers assumed that there is a guardian angel for every believer).

Amid that marvelous spiritual atmosphere of prayer, Peter stood to tell them how he experienced the deposit of resurrection; how God sends His angels to release those in prison and shines with a heavenly light on them; and while forsaking the forces of darkness chained inside the prison, He opens the doors before the believers.

- ❖ "Not for this was the night made, that we should sleep all through it and be idle. To this bear witness the artisans, the carriers, and the merchants (to this), the Church of God rising up in the midst of the night. Rise you up also, and behold the quire of the stars, the deep silence, the profound repose: contemplate with awe the order (oikonomian) of your Master's household. Then is your soul purer: it is lighter, and subtler, and soaring disengaged: the darkness itself and the profound silence are sufficient to lead you to compunction. ...

It (sleep) is the image of death, the image of the end of all things. If you (look out of window and) lean over into the street, you will not hear even a sound: if you look into the house, you will see all lying as it were in a tomb. All this is enough to arouse the soul, and lead it to reflect on the end of all things. ... He (God) is more moved by prayers in the night, when you make the time for rest a time for mourning (repentance). Remember what words that king uttered, "I am weary with my groaning, all night I make my bed swim, I drench my couch with my tears" (Ps. 6.6)"¹.

- ❖ "Let the house be a Church, consisting of men and women. For do not think because you are the only man, or because she is the only woman there, that this is any hindrance. He says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18.20). Where Christ is in the midst, there is a great multitude. Where Christ is, there must be Angels, Archangels also and the other Powers must be there. Then you are not alone, seeing you have Him Who is Lord of all. Hear again the prophet also saying, "Whoever does the will of God is better than thousands" (Sir. 16.3). Nothing weaker than a multitude of unrighteous men, nothing stronger than one man who lives according to the law of God"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ The words "I get up in the middle of the night" are not without significance, as in that hour the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed; the chains of Peter, Paul and Silas were loosened in prison; and "At midnight, the Bridegroom is coming" (Matt. 25.6)³.

(Father Cassiodorus)

"And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer" (Acts 12.13).

The outer gate was most probably far from the house, as the large houses at that time were usually surrounded by a yard with walls and a corridor leading from the outer gate and the inner door.

"When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate" (Acts 12.14).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 26.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 26.

³ Cassiodorus. Expositions of the Psalms. 118.20. He is one of the founders of monasticism in the west, about (485-540 AD).

Some see in this incident a portrait of a shadow of the Passover of Christ, His passion and resurrection, as He desires that the Church would enjoy the fellowship of His passion and would experience the joy of His Passover, namely, His resurrection. The apostle in prison, was as though buried in the tomb together with the Lord Christ, was surrounded by guards and tightly closed gates, like when the Lord Christ was in His tomb surrounded by guards and a large stone was rolled against its door which was also sealed. As the angel of the Lord appeared to Peter, so also angels were there inside the tomb of the Lord.

And as Peter did not perish, but got back to the people to proclaim the glory of God; so also the body of the Lord Christ did not see corruption, but arose alive to proclaim His presence among His people.

And like Rhoda (meaning a rose) who came to recognize Peter's voice and hastened to extend the good news to the Church, the Marys came to the tomb, encountered with the Lord Christ risen from the dead, heard His voice and hastened to preach resurrection.

And as they said to her "You are beside yourself", even the apostles and the disciples did not believe what the Marys said about the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 28.7-8).

"But they said to her, 'You are beside yourself'. Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, 'It is his angel'" (Acts 12.15).

The Jews believe that angels protect and help the righteous, and that two angels: one good and the other evil accompany man on his way back home from the Synagogue, on the Sabbath evening¹.

This teaching concerning the guardian angel appears in the early Christian writings: It is mentioned in **Barnabas**,² in *The Shepherd* by **Hermas**,³ and in the works of **St. Clement of Alexandria**⁴ and **Origen**,⁵ and has some basis in the Holy Book (Gen. 48.16; Tob. 3.25; Matt. 18.10; Acts 12.15).

- According to the Lord Christ Himself, the angels of those little ones behold the face of the heavenly Father.
- In the book of Acts, it came that the people inside said to the maid, concerning the one knocking at the door, that it is his angel.
- The apostle Paul advised women to have their head covered for the angels' sake.
- The saying of the Psalmist, "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34.7).

¹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia, Angelology.*

² *Pseudo-Barn. 18.1.*

³ *Vis. 5.1-4.*

⁴ *Ecl. 41.48.*

⁵ *Hom. On Num. 11.4; see also 20.3.*

- The saying of Jacob the son of Isaac that the angel of the Lord used to nourish him and to lead him in his youth.

We should believe that angels who are ministers to the Lord and guards designated by Him are present with the man who prays, to join him in what he seeks. Actually the angel designated to each of us, even to the little ones among us, who always behold the face of the Father Creator, is praying together with us and supports us as much as possible in what we seek.

- ❖ "That as each believer, although the humblest in the Church, is said to be attended by an angel, who is declared by the Savior always to behold the face of God the Father"¹.
- ❖ We have to admit that the human soul is under the subjection of a guardian angel as a father to it².
- ❖ When man accepts faith, Christ, who redeemed him by His blood from the evil one, entrusts him to a holy angel, who, according to the Savior, because of his purity, beholds the face of God the Father³.
- ❖ That the evil spirits would find no place in the human soul, the wisdom of God and His care saw it fitting to provide the little ones, those who are but little sucklings in Christ, and those who are defenseless against the temptation of the devil and the attacks of the evil spirits, with angels and heroic guards, designated by Him as guides and mentors (1 Cor. 3.1; Eph. 6.11; Gal. 4.2)⁴.
- ❖ Being aware of the free will of every man, God cared to ordain for every one an angel according to his worthiness, to pray for his sake. ...Concerning him who has this or that characteristic, God would say, 'Let us send a guardian angel to work with him on his salvation, starting from a designated time, and staying with him to a certain time'. And for another, of a higher status, he would say, 'I will send to him another angel of a higher rank'. and for a third one who, after dedicating himself to exalted teaching, was weakened and returned to material things, He would say, 'I will deprive him of his strong helper. By his departure of him – according to what he deserves – he would be taken over by a certain evil power, that would benefit from his weakness, to draw him – if he shows readiness – to commit this or that sin⁵.
- ❖ Every one is moved by two angels: An evil one who exhorts him to do evil, and a good one who exhorts him to do good. ... When we have a good thought in our mind, it is no doubt the good angel who talks to us. But if we get evil thoughts in our heart, it is the evil one who talks to us⁶.

(The scholar Origen)

¹ *De Principiis*. 2.20.7.

² *Comm. in Matt.* 13.5.

³ *Comm. in Matt.* 13.28.

⁴ *Comm. on the Song of Songs*. Book 2.3 (ACW).

⁵ *on Prayer*. 6.4 (ACW).

⁶ *De Principiis*. 3.2.4; Boniface Ramsey. *Beginning to Read the Fathers*, Paulist Press, 1985, p. 12.

The Fathers of the fourth century believed in such dogma. According to St. Basil, an angel is dedicated to guard each believer like an army, if he does not drive him away by sin¹.

- ❖ "For Holy Scripture bears witness that two angels, a good and a bad one, cling to each one of us. And of the good ones the Savior says, "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18.19), and this also: "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34.7). Moreover this also which is said in the Acts of the Apostles, of Peter, that "It is his angel."²

(Abbot Serenus)

"Now Peter continued knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished" (Acts 12.16).

The iron gate of the prison opened of its own accord, when the situation was critical, but as Peter was already rescued, he was then committed to keep knocking until they opened the door for him. In case of affliction, God's care intervenes to help at the right moment; but in the time of joy, man is allowed to stand and wait, until a friend opens the door for him.

"But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Go tell these things to James and to the brethren'. And he departed and went to another place" (Acts 12.17).

When they saw him, a great chaos and noise prevailed, together with joy and rejoicing, every one asking the other, "What is going on?" That is why he motioned them with his hand to keep silent, started to declare to them how the Lord brought him out of the prison, and asked them to go and tell James (most probably the little James, who was the Bishop of Jerusalem), and to the brethren (most probably his fellow apostles).

5- A GREAT STIR AMONG THE GUARDS

"Then, as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter. But when Herod had searched for him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Caesarea, and stayed there" (Acts 12.18-19).

"He examined the guards": Herod intended to know whether the guards have been slothful, or there was treason or bribery. St. John Chrysostom believed that Herod got furious, assuming that the guards have mocked him, as the Magi did to his grandfather, when they did not return to him as they promised, after they worshiped the little Child Jesus.

¹ Hom. On Ps. 33.6.

² St. John Cassian. Conferences. 8.17.

Assuming that the guards were slothful, he commanded to put them to death; yet, having departed from Judea to Caesarea, where the angel of the Lord struck him to death (Acts 12.23), we do not know if that sentence of death on the guards was ever brought into effect.

6- THE ANGEL OF THE LORD STRIKING HEROD DEAD

“Now Herod had been angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, but they came to him with one accord, and having made Blastus the king’s chamberlain their friend, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food by the king’s country” (Acts 12.20).

Herod Agrippas I threatened to cut the food supplies from Tyre and Sidon, because the people of those two cities made the king angry for some reasons that St. Luke did not mention. They came asking for peace and forgiveness, with a help from Blastus the king’s chamberlain, who was very close to his heart. Josephus told the same story in detail that conformed to what came in this book.

“So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12.21-22).

He shamefully died on the spot, not only for persecuting Peter, but also for accepting that vain glory, believing that he was indeed worthy of being worshipped as a god. It was as well a divine quick lesson to those, who flattered him by claiming that he was a god, with the hope that they might return to God with repentance.

God allowed this to reveal the Person of Jesus Christ. If that king who did not utter a single word, but in his arrogance, the people shouted that his voice was the voice of a god and not of a man, died on the spot, ...For Jesus Christ, who has many times proclaimed His equality to God the Father, who raised Him from the dead, ... it is impossible to be considered a Blasphemer, when He proclaims His Godhead.

“He was eaten by worms and died”: The Holy Book often gives this description for those who die instantly as a sign of God’s wrath, like Antiochus the fourth (2 Mac. 9.9), Herod the Great,¹ Judas Iscariot (According to Pabius, quoted by Olinarius), Galerius,² and Julian the heathen³.

“But the word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12.24).

While Herod Agrippas was plotting against the Church, God was watching over His word. Every time there has been affliction and shedding of the blood of martyrs, the arm of God was proclaimed and his kingdom grew on earth.

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 7.6.5.

² Eusebius. H.E. 8.16.

³ Theodoret. H.E. 3.9

The gate of the temple was closed before the face of the believers, for the Gentiles to open their gates and become the holy temple of God, dwelt by the Spirit of the Lord.

The Evangelist St. Luke mentioned nothing about what happened between the death of Herod and the beginning of the first preaching journey by the apostle Paul, together with Barnabas and Mark. That period was about two years. Herod died in 44 AD, while that journey started in the year 46 AD.

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark” (Acts 12.25).

“John whose surname was Mark”: The apostle St. Mark was the nephew of St. Barnabas (1 Cor. 4.10). It seems that the close friends Barnabas and Paul stayed, while in Jerusalem, in the house of John Mark, where the disciples used to assemble.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 12

HOW MISERABLE IS HEROD OF EVERY AGE

- ❖ What an idiot, O Herod the Great!
You thought that you could catch Jesus, by killing the children of Bethlehem.
You destroyed yourself and lost everything.
And how miserable is Herod your son, the murderer of St. John the Baptist,
Who thought he would realize happiness by getting rid of him!
But his life turned into a hell of terror.
And what an idiot was Herod your grandson,
Who, to please those who crucified Jesus, intended to rid of all His apostles!
There is a Herod in every age, opposing the kingdom of light,
Assuming that he could shut it in,
But it is him, who gets corrupted and loses his kingdom.
- ❖ What has Herod done?
He assumed that he killed James, whose soul rejoiced to depart.
He assumed that he terrified Peter, who was justified before God and people.
The prison with all its strongholds testifies to its collapse before God.
Peter was delivered from the hands of the guards with all their might.
Heaven moved and sent the angel of the Lord to minister to Peter.
The Church in affliction turned into an assembly of fervent and strong prayer.
- ❖ Herod believed the vain flattering of the people of Tyre and Sidon.
He thought that he was a god, so he turned into a meal for the worms.
Herod died and the Church set forth to continue her mission.

*From the Commentaries and Contemplations
Of the Early Church Fathers*

THE BOOK OF ACTS

PART 2

(Chapter 13 to 28)

BY

HEG. TADROS Y. MALATY

St. George Church, Sporting

THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

- 1- From **Antioch- Syria**, to **Seleucia – a port in Syria** (3.1-4)
- 2- sailed with his party to **Salamis** in the island of Cyprus (13.4)
- 3- Went to **Paphus** in the island of Cyprus (13.5-12). His name changed to Paul.
- 4- To **Perga Pamphylia** in Asia Minor (13.13), John Mark's return to Jerusalem
- 5- To **Antioch Pisidia** (13.14), delivered a sermon included in the book (13.16-41)
- 6- To **Iconium**, capital of Lycaonia (13.50-51)
- 7- To **Lystra** in Lycaonia (14.5-6), where Paul was stoned (14.8-9).
- 8- To **Derba** in Lycaonia (14.20)
- 9- **Return** via **Lystra** (14.21), **Lycaonia**, **Antioch Pesidea** (14.21), and **Perga** Pamphylia, where he previously established churches (14.21-23)
- 10- To **Atalia** Pamphylia (14.25)
- 11- To **Antioch- Syria**. (14.26-28)

CHAPTER 13

THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

Having grown in Antioch, the Church became a center for the ministry of St. Paul and St. Barnabas and their party, where the Church started to set forth to testify to the Lord Christ at that time. The Church of Antioch became like a mother to ministry to the Church of the Gentiles in many countries.

1- Antioch, a center for the work of preaching	1
2- Barnabas and Saul separated for the work of preaching	2 – 3
3- Beginning of the first trip	4 – 5
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7- The Jews stirring up persecution against the two apostles	50 – 52

1- ANTIOCH, A CENTER FOR THE WORK OF PREACHING

“Now in the church that was at Antioch, there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who has been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul” (Acts 13.1).

One of the blessings of the persecution raised by the Jews against the church in Jerusalem, after the stoning of St. Stephen, was that many have set forth to Antioch. Those of Jewish origin preached the word there, only to the Jews (Acts 11.19); whereas, those of Hellenist culture, those from Cyprus and Cyrene, preached it to the Greeks there “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11.21).

The ministry of the two apostles: Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus continued there for a whole year kindling the hearts of many for ministry. The church so flared with the Spirit. Therefore, the soul of Paul (Saul of Tarsus) had relief in making Antioch the center of his ministry, from it he started his missionary journeys, and to it he returned.

St. Luke says that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11.26). Although the church embraced those of circumcision and those of un-circumcision, but because of its growth, the unbelievers realized that it cannot be considered anymore a sect of Judaism, but an independent religion, even though it depends upon the prophecies of the Old Testament and holds fast to the books of the

Torah and counts the fathers of the Jews and their prophets as their fathers and prophets and God's promises and covenants as their own. The world started to realize that; That is why King Agrippa says to St. Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (Acts 26.28).

The Evangelist St. Luke presents a living portrait of the activity of the church and its flourishing in Antioch. Prophets and teachers were ministering there; he mentioned a list of five names, with Barnabas on its top, having been the oldest in faith, beside his flaring zeal that drew Saul of Tarsus to minister with him¹.

The **prophets** who came from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 11.28) were visitors wandering to minister to the name of the Lord; whereas, those mentioned here were permanent members of the church. The role of a prophet in the New Testament was to speak in the name of the Holy Spirit; whereas, that of the teacher was to interpret what is said by the Holy Spirit in the Holy Book and what the prophet utters by the Spirit. The goal of both was for the believers to enjoy the presence of the Lord Christ, the Teacher, who perpetually dwells in His church, to live in Him, and He in her.

Simeon who was called Niger: Simeon is a Jewish name, and the title '**Niger**' is Latin, on account of his dark complexion. He most probably was Simon the Cyrenian, father of Alexander and Rophus (Mark 15.21).

Lucius of Cyrene: previously spoken of (Acts 11.21). He is not the one mentioned in (Rom. 16.21). He was one of the Hellenist proselytes, who had an active role in the church of Antioch, together with those who came from Cyprus. Some people thought that Lucius and Luke are the one and the same person, because 'Lucius' is the Latin version of the Greek word 'Luke'; yet, several scholars rejected this view, especially that the name 'Luke' was so common, that the Evangelist did not have to mention it in its Greek version.

Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch: Manaen is the lighter pronunciation of the Hebrew name 'Menahem', meaning the (comforter). Herod was Antipas the son of Herod the Great, to whom Pilate sent the Lord Christ to be tried, who reigned over Galilee and Peraeus, as a Tetrarch, between the years 4 BC and 39 AD.

Manaen, the pious prophet of Antioch, is most probably one of the spiritual Asinians. He was brought up in the palace of Herod the Great, together with his son Antipas. He, according to Eusebius², prophesied to Herod the Great, that he would be a king. He was revered by Herod the Great, and to him was referred the acquaintance of St. Luke with Herod and his family, and that group of prophets, teachers, and the prominent members of the church of Antioch. It is strange that the son of Herod the Great, the killer of John the Baptist has been educated and brought up together with Manaen, the pious prophet and teacher.

¹ Igino Giordani. *St. Paul, Apostle and Martyr. Translated by C. Maranzana, 1961: 25.*

² Eusebius. *H.E. 15.10.5.*

Saul is mentioned at the end of the list of the prophets and teachers, as he, at that time, did not reach up to their stature and rank, according to the seniority in the church.

2- BARNABAS AND SAUL SEPARATED FOR THE WORK OF PREACHING

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘now separate for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work I have called them’ (Acts 13.2).

The missionary journeys of the apostle Paul started by the proclamation of the Holy Spirit, not to Saul, or to Barnabas, but to the church assembled together in the spirit of prayer and fasting. The word ‘minister’ in Greek came meaning celebrate the Liturgy (Liturgy), namely, practice the liturgy of the Eucharist. It refers to the public unpaid ministry, for honoring the king. In this context, it refers to the ministry of prayer by offering thanksgiving and praise in the celebration of the divine sacrifice.

“The Holy Spirit said” Most probably through one of the prophets gathering for prayer and fasting, who seriously dedicated their hearts to ministry and testimony.

“Separate” Means the dedication to the work of the Holy Spirit, the leader of the movement of testimony to Jesus Christ. What is amazing is that the Spirit said, **“Separate for Me”**, and not **“for the Lord Jesus”**, as He and the Only-begotten Son are one in essence with the same authority and power; and the preaching is to the account of the Holy Trinity.

The call came personally by name, to open the first way to preaching to the Gentile world.

- ❖ "But the Holy Spirit is not pronounced by the tongue; but He is a Living Spirit, who gives wisdom of speech, Himself speaking and discoursing. ... Do you see the Spirit living, separating, calling, and with authority sending forth?"¹.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

In a sermon by St. **John Chrysostom** on (1 Tim. 1.1), he clarifies that it is the Holy Spirit who said, “Separate for Me Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13.1). While it was the Lord Christ who called and sent him, saying, “Depart, for I will send you far to the Gentiles” (Acts 22.21). In some other place, He says, “You must be brought before Caesar” (Acts 27.24). And the apostle counts all those commands as issued from God the Father. ... Here **St. John Chrysostom** confirms the unity of work of the Holy Trinity².

In the introduction, the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church is well noticed, being the true Leader who offers her Himself and grants her the divine capabilities, to become the icon of her heavenly Groom, the Lord Christ.

- ❖ ““The Spirit searches all things” (1 Cor. 2.10), “He will teach you all things” (John 14.26), “He blows where (He) wishes, and where (He) goes” (John 3.8), “Guides” (Ps. 142), “Speaks” (Acts 13.2), “Sends” (Acts 13.4), “Separates” (Acts 13.2), ... “Inspires” (John 16), “Brings to remembrance”

¹ Lect. Catech. 16.13-14.

² Cf. Hom. On 1Tim. Hom. 1.1.

(John 14.26), “Gives life” (John 6.63), or rather is the very Light and Life; That makes Temples (1 Cor. 3.16), “Deifies us”¹ (1 Cor. 3.16), “Guides you into all truth” (John 16.13) so as even to anticipate Baptism (Acts 10.47), yet after Baptism to be sought as a separate gift; ... distributes the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.11), And “Gives some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4.11) ”².

(St. Gregory Nazianzen)

“Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13.3).

St. John Chrysostom says that Saul was anointed in Antioch where he was ministering³.

St. Luke presents the first rite of anointment in the church. The call came first from the Holy Spirit, after praying, fasting and a true longing for the growth of ministry and the testimony to the Lord Christ. The Holy Spirit designated the names, being the One who searches the hearts; then the laying of hands came in harmony with the will of the Holy Spirit. The role of the church is to realize this will, for all to live in the fellowship and unity of the Spirit. Here is a living portrait of the anointment by laying the hands, after the Holy Spirit calls certain persons to preaching work, through the Liturgy of the Eucharist and practicing a special fasting.

The anointment was consummated while they were fasting. Fasting has occupied a special position in the life of the early church, being a living sign that refers to the preoccupation of the church with the heavenly banquet and that she practices her daily life, of eating, drinking and sleeping, for the necessity, not for any physical lust or enjoyment.

❖ ”Let us seek meats to nourish, not things to ruin us; seek meats for food, not occasions of diseases, of diseases both of soul and body: seek food which has comfort, not luxury which is full of discomfort”⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

3- The Beginning OF THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

“So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus” (Acts 13.4).

Here, the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul starts:

Seleucia was on the coast of Phoenicia facing Cyprus, the famous port of Antioch, also called Pieria. It was 16 miles east of Antioch, and 5 miles north of where the river Orentus flows. It was

¹ The fathers do not interpret the term "deify" that man becomes God; but he enjoys superior characteristics given to him by the Divine grace.

² Oration 31, On the Holy Spirit, 29.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 27.

⁴ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 27.

established by Seleucius Necatur, the first of the Seleucian kings in the year 301 BC. When they landed in Cyprus, they also landed at the city facing it on the eastern coast, the city of Salamis.

It is amazing how Saul the Pharisee would have surely kept himself from going to Cyprus, that the poems were written describing its corruption, having been the favorite island of the goddess Venus, And now here is Saul the Christian, called to set forth to confront every corruption in it and to set, together with its people, a temple for the Holy Spirit of God.

- ❖ As though he was flying, St. Paul traveled on land and sea, in Greece, in the Barbarian regions and all over every country under heaven. His journeys were never in vain, as wherever he went, he uprooted the thorns of sins, planted the seeds of piety everywhere, wiped the wrong away, introduced the truth to people, transformed them into heavenly creatures And above everything, from devils to angels¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

They did not stay long in Seleucia, as its people have already benefited much from the ministry in Antioch where the two saints Paul and Barnabas stayed a whole year.

“And when they arrived in Salamis they preached the word of God in the Synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant” (Acts 13.5).

Salamis is a Greek city on the eastern coast of Cyprus. It was the capital, the center of the government and the leading center of commerce in the eastern section of the island; whereas, Paphos was the capital of the west and of more importance. Salamis was the goal of the Jews, with several Synagogues. In St. Paul's preaching journeys, he always had in his heart to go first to the synagogues and to start with the Jews in his preaching of the gospel of Christ, although his eyes were always concentrated on the Gentiles who happen to be there, who were known as those fearing God, or the 'devout'.

“They had John as their assistant”: Some believe that the term ‘assistant’ here refers to his duty of baptizing the believers; whereas, others believe that it refers to the ministry of teaching the Catechumens.

Having St. John Mark as a companion provided the two saints with a rich source of the accurate information that came in the Book of Acts, as the first meetings of the early church in Jerusalem were held in the upper room of his mother's house (Acts 12.12).

4- Bar-Jesus opposing the work of preaching

“Now when they had gone through the island to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew whose name was Bar-Jesus” (Acts 13.6).

¹ De Laudibus S. Pauli, Hom. 5 PG 50.474.

Paphos: was the capital of western Cyprus, where the Greeks gathered. The old Paphos was 7 miles south-east of the new one, and in both of them, they only worshipped the Greek goddess Paphian, also known as Aphrodite and Venus, the goddess of beauty and love.

Bar-Jesus: His name also means ‘Elymas’ the sorcerer, as he claimed to know the unknown. He was most probably an Arab Jew, who kept the name that refers to his claimed talent, knowledge and authority.

“Who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabus and Saul, and sought to hear the word of God” (Acts 13.7).

Sergius Paulus the Proconsul: Referring to the official records of Rome, his name was mentioned as ‘The Guardian of the Tiber’ –a river in Italy -, that led some to believe that, after ending his term as the governor of the Tiber, he was transferred to Cyprus and that he was of Roman origin.

Having been a learned man and a Roman philosopher, he found in the Jews scholars in the numerous synagogues of Cyprus his chance to increase his knowledge of the Jewish religion and of God. From whence came his friendship with Elymas the sorcerer, by whose sorcery he was deceived.

Hearing about the arrival of Barnabas and Paul and their exalted teachings, the Proconsul sought to hear them, something that provoked Elymas the sorcerer against them. As the Proconsul was a wise man, with a heart kindling with the need for true and constructive knowledge caring for his own salvation, he did not need long talks, but sought the two apostles to hear from them the word of God. He did not see yet any miracle or sign done by the two apostles, but he was drawn by their teachings. But with the fierce opposition by Elymas the sorcerer, the apostle had to strike him with blindness, in order to open up his insight and that of the Proconsul to the secrets of God, to get in touch with the true light, instead of the darkness in which the sorcerer was living and to which he was drawing the Proconsul.

“But Elymas the sorcerer (for so his name is translated) withstood them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (Acts 13.8).

He was also called ‘Magus’, although he did not belong to the Magi, the astrologers, but was a deceitful sorcerer and a false prophet, with no relationship to God.

“Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him” (Acts 13.9).

In the old days, a person usually carried three names: the first called ‘Praenomen’; the second called ‘Nomen’; and the third called ‘Logomen’, the Surname or the Nickname in English, that designates the person.

Saul was the original name; then the alternative name ‘Paul’ was added to it. **St. John Chrysostom** believes that the new name was given to him through laying the hand, but he was called Paul only after his encounter with the governor Lucius Sergius Paul. **St. Jerome** believes that the name Paul was given to Saul as a memorandum of the governor's acceptance of faith. Lightfoot believes that

Saul was given that name on the day of his circumcision, as it was the custom of the Jews, that he used among the Hebrews; whereas, he used the name Paul among the Gentiles¹.

St. Augustine² believes that Saul was named after Saul the arrogant king, as a reference to his self esteem. But later on, he chose to be called ‘Paul’, meaning (the least), to give us an example in humility. “For I am the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15.9).

❖ Why is the one used to be called ‘Saul’ in the Book of Acts is now called ‘Paul’? In the Holy Book, there are names of several men and women in the Old Testament changed: for example, Abram changed to Abraham (Gen. 17.5); Sarai changed to Sarah (Gen. 17.15); and Jacob changed to Israel (Gen. 32.28, 35.10). In the New Testament as well, Simon changed to Peter (Mark 3.16); the sons of Zebedee were called ‘Boanerges, that is (sons of thunder) (Mark 3.17), yet that was according to a divine command, that did not happen in Paul’s case. Some believe that the apostle adopted the name of the governor of Cyprus, who accepted the Christian faith (Acts 3.4-12), as a reference of his spiritual conquest over Governor Paul, according to the old custom of some rulers who used to add to their names, the names of those they conquered, like Parthicus, referring to the conquest over the Parthians and Gothicus, referring to the conquest over the Goths.

Such view should not be disregarded altogether, although there are not many similar cases in the Holy Book. So another solution should be sought. As a matter of fact, there are in the Holy Books many persons with two or more different names: Solomon the prophet who was called ‘Jedidiah’ (2 Sam. 12.25); Zedekiah who was called ‘Mataniah’ (2 kings 24.17); Uzziah who was called ‘Azariah’ (2 kings 15.32); and many others in the books of Judges, Samuel, and kings. Even in the gospels, there are several examples of that custom, as for example Levi who was called ‘Matthew’ (Luke 5.27) and Lebbaeus whose surname was ‘Thaddaeus (Matt. 10.3). It is obvious that the authors of the gospels did not mention the names of the apostles falsely, but it was the old custom for a person to carry two or more names. That applies to Paul, who was called ‘Saul’, the name given to him by his father, while preaching among his own people. But when he wrote statutes and commandments to the Greeks and other Gentiles, he was called ‘Paul’³.

(Scholar Origen)

“And said, ‘O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord” (Acts 13.10).

“O son of the devil”: He is not Bar-Jesus, namely, (son of Jesus), but (son of the devil), as he practiced the works of his father. The word ‘Devil’ means the (deceitful); and the word ‘Satan’ means the (adversary) or the (Opponent). He is calling the sorcerer by the name he chose through his behavior.

¹ I. Giordani. *St. Paul, Apostle and Martyr*. p. 26.

² *Sermons on N.T. Lessons*, 27.3.

³ *Comm. On the Epistle of the Romans (1.1)*.

Having perverted the righteousness of God, namely, the Light and walked by the spirit of darkness, he got a verdict of blindness, so that he would realize his inner blindness and darkness, in the hope that he would confess and repent, longing to the true light and the true knowledge, without deceit. Having refused to enjoy the rays of the sun of righteousness, he was deprived of seeing the regular sun.

St. Luke, as a physician, describes how the eyes of the sorcerer were covered by mist, that utterly interfered with the reception of light by his eyes.

“And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind not seeing the sun for a time’, and immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (Acts 13.11).

- ❖ ““And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you”: It was not vengeance then, but healing: for it is as though he said: "It is not I that do it, but the hand of God." Mark how unassuming! No "light," as in the case of Paul, "shone round about him." "You shall be blind" he says, "not seeing the Sun for a time" that he may give him opportunity for repentance: for we nowhere find them wishing to be made conspicuous by the more stern (exercise of their authority), even though it was against enemies that this was put forth: in respect of those of their own body (they used severity), and with good reason, but in dealing with those without, not so; that (the obedience of faith) might not seem to be matter of compulsion and fear" ¹.
- ❖ "It was the sign by which he was himself converted, and by this he would fain convert this man. As also that expression, "for a time," puts it not as an act of punishing, but as meant for his conversion: had it been for punishment, he would have made him lastingly blind, but now it is not so, but "for a time" (and this), that he may gain the proconsul" ².
- ❖ "But, oh that love of rule! Oh, that lust of vainglory! how it does overturn and ruin everything; makes people stand up against their own, against each other's salvation; renders them blind indeed, and dark, insomuch that they have even to seek for some to lead them by the hand!" ³.
- ❖ "How then might we be rid of it? Think of those who (for the sake of glory) have spent countless sums, and now are none the better for it: think of the dead, what glory they got, and (now) this glory is nowhere abiding, but all perished and come to nothing: think how it is only a name, and has nothing real in it. ... Let us flee this passion. To one thing alone let us look, to the praise which is from God, to the being accepted of Him, to the commendation from our common Master; that, having passed through our present life virtuously, we may obtain the promised blessings together with them

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 28.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 28.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 28.

that love Him, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ “What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4.21)? By the rod, St. Paul means the power of the Lord’s Spirit that he used against Elymas the sorcerer².

(Severian, Bishop of Gabala)

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13.12).

According to historical records, the proconsul Sergius Paulus was baptized together with his family and in the following generation, some of his family members became Christians, like his daughter and her son Kaios Caristianus Fronto, who was a member of a famous family in Antioch Pisidia.

5- A SERMON IN ANTIOCH PISIDIA

“Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia, and John departing from them, returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13.13).

- ❖ "But observe, how they do not linger there, as (they might have been tempted to do) now that the proconsul was a believer, nor are enervated by being courted and honored, but immediately keep on with their work, and set out for the country on the opposite coast"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

They set sail north to the costs of Asia Minor facing northern Cyprus, the province of Pamphylia.

Some believe that here the true character of Barnabas the pious preacher became prominent. When the apostle Paul received an exalted grace, he gave him priority, although he was older in age and senior in faith and ministry, he considered himself as one of Paul’s party, not the leader. He joyfully chose for himself the last place, when he saw the grace and talents that God granted to the apostle Paul.

Perga was the capital of the province of Pamphylia. Because it is not a port, they landed in the port of Atalia, the port of Perga, known nowadays as Antalia, and from it they set forth to Perga, 12 miles away.

Pamphylia was Between Tarsus and the sea coast in Asia Minor, bordered on its west side by Lycia and on its east by Cilicia. Between the years 43 BC and 68 AD, it used to be called the province of Pamphylia Cilicia.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 28.

² Severian of Gabala. Pauline Comm. From the Greek Church.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 28.

Some believe that the apostle Paul was infected with Malaria (a thorn in the flesh). And some believe that because St. Mark was sick, he insisted on returning to Jerusalem. And because they set sail from the easternmost reach of Cyprus to its westernmost reach, about 400 miles across a rough and difficult terrain, among a strange kind of people, opposed by even the Jews, the young Mark could not bear the effort. Yet he came to travel equally difficult terrain between Libya and Egypt and walked until his sandals were torn at Alexandria, for the sake of testimony to the truth, and preaching the gospel of Christ.

“But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down” (Acts 13.14).

Here, he is telling about the two apostles, Barnabas and Paul, because in the Greek language, there are no grammatical rules for the dual (two persons).

They crossed over the mountain series of Tarsus that separate between Perga and Antioch, that became the capital of the Greater Pisidia, hence called ‘Antioch Pisidia’. It was the most modern city, a military center, located on a high plateau (3600 feet above sea level). Emperor Augustus transformed it into a Roman colony, and called it ‘Colonial Caesarea’. The apostle Paul cared much for the entry of faith into the Roman colonies, like Olestra, Philippe, and Corinth in Greece.

Those colonies were densely dwelt by the Jews and hence had a great number of synagogues. In Antioch Pisidia, the Jews could establish a sort of independent colony for themselves.

“And after the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the Synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on’” (Acts 13.15).

“After the reading of the law and the prophets”: The Jews used to divide the holy books into three divisions: The law, including the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses); the Prophets, the books of Joshua, Judges, the two books of Samuel, the first and second books of kings, and all the prophets with the exception of the book of Daniel; and the third division, called the Hagiographer (**the holy writings**), that embraces: Job, the Psalms, the Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, the Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the first and second Chronicles. This last division was called the ‘**Psalms**’, as the Book of Psalms was the first of its books.

Reading the law has been a very old tradition, then some of the prophets were added to it. After Antioch Epiphanies burnt the law and banned its reading, the Jews chose certain parts of the prophets, which they saw very close to the law, to be read instead of the law. And when they resumed reading the law, they kept on reading the prophets together with the law.

The phrase that came here refers to the chosen parts of the law and the prophets to be read in synagogues, counting the reading of the part as though all the books were read (Matt. 5.17; Luke 16.29). The third division was not being read in the synagogues¹.

¹ James N. Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*. N.J., 1972: 443.

Entering into the synagogue on a Sabbath day, they sat down in the row of the Rabbis, with the intention of hinting to the rulers of the synagogue that they were capable of preaching.

The order of prayers in the Synagogues during the first Christian century was as follows:

- ❖ Reading of the candles, namely, “Listen O Israel, the Lord your God is One God”
- ❖ A prayer by the chief of the synagogue
- ❖ A reading in the law, beside a reading in the prophets, if it was a Sabbath or a feast.
- ❖ A sermon given by someone capable in the synagogue, chosen by the rulers of the synagogue.

The rulers of the synagogue: In the New Testament, it comes in the pleural tense, as it is in the present text; and it also came in the singular tense, as for example in (Mark 5.35-36, 38; Luke 8.41, 49). This is explained by some, that in cities where there was a huge Jewish congregation, there were more than one ruler of the Synagogue; whereas, in small congregations, there was only one ruler. The ruler of a synagogue used to occupy the third position after the high priest and the chief priest, supported by a testimony from the Sanhedrin that he enjoys the qualifications required for that position. He used to be responsible for the supervision of everything concerning the worship. Some believe that the rulers of the local synagogues represented the Sanhedrin¹.

“Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, ‘Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen” (Acts 13.16).

The apostle Paul used to have the priority in talking, probably because of his talent and ability to preach.

The Lord Christ used to preach in the temple while sitting (Matt. 26.25; Luke 4.20); whereas, the apostles most probably did that while standing.

The apostle Paul here addresses the Jews, the Gentile proselytes, and those called devout, who always received the word of salvation more readily than the Jews themselves.

Fr. Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus believes that those who came to the law from the Gentiles were called ‘those who fear God’².

“The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He brought them out of it” (Acts 13.17).

St. Paul started his sermon by commending them as those who fear God, calling the God of all mankind “their Father”, as though He was their own, demonstrating God’s goodness to them.

¹ James N. Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*. N.J, p. 443-444.

² *Comment. On Ps. 22.*

The apostle Paul used in his talks to the Jews to start with a short reference to the work of God with the people of Israel, in order to draw them to the word, feeling that he is faithful in caring for the unity of the people and for keeping straight the faith provided to the fathers.

This sermon concentrated on choosing Israel from the nations, for the Messiah to come from it, He whom the fathers and the prophets longed to see, And on the fact that the history of God's people with all its details was nothing but a preparation for His coming.

He started by choosing the fathers, then moved to God's support for the people in the land of Egypt, lifting up their heads in their land of sojourn; and finally, having fallen in bondage and forced labor, He, with an uplifted arm, brought them out of it (Exod. 6.2, 136.11).

It is to be noticed that he did not refer to the virtues of their fathers, but concentrated on God's role in choosing them, ordaining their affairs, and providing them with prophecies. It is God's work, who sent His only-begotten Son to save them.

“Now for about forty years, He put up with their ways in the wilderness” (Acts 13.18).

St. Paul quoted from the book of Deuteronomy (1.31), how Israel in the wilderness was simulated to a troublesome kid, whose father cared for him carrying him on his arms.

“And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their lands to them by allotment” (Acts 13.19).

Having brought them into the Promised Land, He destroyed for their sake seven nations (Deut. 7.1) and distributed their lands among their tribes by allotment.

“After that He gave them judges for about four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet” (Acts 13.20).

This figure (about 450 years) conforms with the estimation of the Historian Josephus, who counts 592 years from the exodus of the people of Israel to the building of the temple,¹ which are: 40 years in the wilderness + 25 years, the time of Joshua, according to Josephus' record,² + 45 years of Judges +40 years of the reign of Saul + 40 years the reign of David (1 kings 2.11) + 4 years of Solomon's preparations for building the temple = 599 years. The difference of seven years led Paul to say “**about**”.

“And afterward they asked for a king, so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years” (Acts 13.21).

St. Paul gives 40 years as an estimation of the duration of Saul's rein (conforming to that of the Historian Josephus in his sixth book, xiv.9), Yet Josephus gave another estimation of 20 years for Saul'

¹ *Antiq. 8.1; 10.8.5.*

² *Antiq. 6.2.9.*

reign¹. To explain that controversy, some believe that Josephus here talks about Saul's reign after his complete independence, after the death of the prophet Samuel.

“And when he had removed him, he raised up for them David as a king, to whom also he gave testimony and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will do all my will’” (Acts 13.22).

He rejected Saul because his heart was not straightforward, and set David, who was a man after His own heart and who did all His will.

St. Paul moves from choosing David as a king, to setting a divine promise of an eternal kingdom for the Son of David, according to what came in (Ps. 89.19.37), to consummate the divine salvation. What God presented to Israel through David the king was a shadow of what the Son of David presents to the world. Thus, the apostle Paul brought them over from the era of the fathers up to the coming of the eternal King, the Savior of the world. He directed the sight of his listeners to that Shepherd, of whom the prophets spoke (Exod. 34.23-24).

- ❖ "Now by the heart is denoted the desire, to which David was well-pleasing through the uprightness of his character"².
- ❖ "He (David) did not avenge himself upon his foes by war, he did not oppose force of arms to those that laid wait for him, but after the pattern of the Lord, Whose name and Whose meekness alike he foreshadowed, when he was betrayed he entreated (God), when he was in danger he sang psalms, when he incurred hatred he rejoiced; and for tills cause he was found a man after God's own heart"³.

(Hilary bishop of Poitiers)

“From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus” (Acts 13.23).

- ❖ "Observe how he twines (the thread of) his discourse (alternately) from things present, from the prophets. Thus, “From this man's seed, according to the promise”. The name of David was dear to them; well then, is it not (a thing to be desired) that a son of his, he says, should be their king? - Then he adduces John: then again the prophets, where he says, "***By condemning they fulfilled,***" and gain, "All that was written:" then the Apostles as witnesses of the Resurrection: then David bearing witness. For neither the Old Testament proofs seemed so cogent when taken by themselves as they are in this way, nor yet the latter testimonies apart from the former: wherefore he makes them mutually confirm each other"⁴.

¹ *Antiq. 10.8.4.*

² *on the Trinity. 12.9.*

³ *On Ps. 53 (54), 1.*

⁴ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 29.*

(St. John Chrysostom)

“After John has first preached, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel” (Acts 13.24).

In order that his listeners would not doubt that Jesus Christ is the Savior Son of David, he quoted the testimony of John the Baptist who revealed His person, that he came to prepare the way for Him, and that John was not worthy to loose His feet. Among his audience were probably some people who heard of John the Baptist, encountered him, or believed in him as a true prophet.

“And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘Who do you think I am? I am not He, but behold, there comes one after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose. Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent’ (Acts 13.25, 26).

St. Paul incites the feelings of the devout Jews by saying, ***“Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham”***, He brilliantly binds their sonhood to Abraham to the realization of the promise through them. What he tells them is a realization of the divine promise to their father that he so long anticipated and rejoiced.

“To you the word of salvation has been sent”: In the versions of Alexandria, Sinai, and the Vatican, it came as “To us”, adding himself to them, to enjoy together with them the realization of the promise, as it is a right for all the sons of Abraham. The apostle came to them carrying the word of salvation, to enjoy it together with them.

“For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, or even the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath have fulfilled them in condemning Him” (Acts 13.27).

“They did not know Him”, or according to some, “they failed to know Him”. If they failed to realize that salvation, they are without excuse, as they have the books of the prophets in their hands, read every Sabbath in the synagogues. They should have recognized the Savior. On the other hand, their opposition to Him fulfilled the prophecies.

❖ "On all occasions we find them (the apostles) making a great point of showing this, that the blessing is peculiarly theirs, that they may not flee (from Christ), as thinking they had nothing to do with Him, because they had crucified Him." ***“Because they knew Him not,”*** he says: so that the sin was one of ignorance. See how he gently makes an apology even on behalf of those (crucifiers). And not only this: but he adds also, that thus it must be. And how so? ***“By condemning Him, they fulfilled the voices of the prophets”***¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 29.

“And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that he should be put to death” (Acts 13.28).

So as not to assume that those who crucified Him had an excuse, that they **did not know Him**, the apostle Paul confirms that although the prophets kept incessantly crying out to them to recognize Him, they did not listen to them. On another hand, “although they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death”. If the prophecies have been fulfilled in Him, yet that does not justify what they did, but provides them with a chance to reconsider their position and to return to Him in repentance.

Pilate the Gentile, who was not aware of the prophecies, testified against them, by finding no cause for death in Him (John 19.4, 6); whereas, they, who should have preached Him, asked instead that he should be put to death (John 19.7).

“When they have fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree, and laid Him in a tomb” (Acts 13.29).

Those who sought His death (John 19.31) took Him down. And if someone should think that it was Joseph of Ramah and Necedemus who did that, they were members of the Sanhedrin, as though they were representing it.

“Laid Him in a tomb”: In this there was a certain evidence of His true death. The death and burial of the Lord Christ represent an integral part of the Creed of faith, inseparable from His crucifixion and resurrection. The apostle Paul delivered those facts bound together for the fulfillment of salvation, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scripture” (1 Cor. 15.3).

“But God raised Him from the dead” (Acts 13.30).

The Jews condemned Him to death, But God the Father raised Him from the dead. That resurrection is the definite proof that He is the Son of the Holy Father (Rom. 1.2-4).

“He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people” (Acts 13.31).

His apparitions after His resurrection are strong evidences and living testimony to His resurrection. Those who lived with Him and loved Him, having seen Him dead and buried, enjoyed the joy of His resurrection, to testify to Him, that the joy of all His believers would be complete (1 John 1.3-4).

“And we declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers” (Acts 13.32).

After this historical Theological parade, St. Paul moved to the actual presence, As that divine promise is presented to every listener, that, if he believed, he would enjoy the resurrection of Christ in

his life. The promise that God set since the time of the fathers and along the generations had been fulfilled, for the present generation to enjoy.

“God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has risen up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You’” (Acts 13.33).

When something like scales fell from the eyes of Saul of Tarsus, he arose and got baptized and started preaching what he has seen concerning Christ: ***“That He is the Son of God”*** (Acts 9.18-20). This dogma is the subject of the preaching of the apostle Paul, confirmed by His resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1.1-4). His sonhood to God the Father was connected to all events of salvation: In His incarnation, the angel said, “He will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1.35); In His Baptism, the Father said, “You are My beloved Son, In you I am well pleased” (Luke 3.21-22); In His transfiguration, the Father said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3.17); and in His resurrection, the apostle says, “And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1.4).

His resurrection clearly and practically confirmed what the angel testified on the day of His birth; what God the Father publicly proclaimed on the day of His baptism and to His disciples on the day of His transfiguration. This resurrection is not a strange thing for the people of God, as the prophet David has previously revealed in his psalms.

This eternal sonhood touches our life and our salvation, enjoying in the only-begotten Son raised from the dead, the grace of sonhood, through the work of His Holy Spirit, Who has His role in all the events of salvation.

“And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: ‘I will give You the sure mercies of David’” (Acts 13.34).

Having been raised from the dead on the third day, no corruption has come to Him, as testified by the prophet David, and through the actual facts, He would never die again, and would see no corruption. Lazarus was raised from the dead by the command of our Lord Christ, but he eventually died and saw corruption.

The Lord will never return to the tomb as a dead, where death reigns, as death has no authority over Him, after He accepted it once through His own will for our sake.

“Therefore He also said in another psalm: ‘You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption’” (Acts 123.35).

This apostolic teaching concentrated on the resurrection of the Lord Christ, fulfilling (Ps. 16.9-11). This is what the apostle Peter proclaimed on the day of the Pentecost and what the apostle Paul presents here. This teaching is set upon the speech of the Lord of Glory Jesus with the two disciples who were heading to Emmuas (Luke 24.26-27).

“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption” (Acts 13.26).

The apostle confirms to the Jews that what the prophet David uttered was not realized in his person, as he died and his tomb is set there, to testify to that. What he said concerns the anticipated Messiah that was practically realized in the Person of Jesus.

“But He whom God raised up saw no corruption. Therefore, let it be known to you, brethren, that through this man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 13.37-38).

What was not realized in the person of the prophet David has been realized in the Person of the Son of David, who alone is capable of setting a new covenant and granting the forgiveness of sins. Although David was a good man of God, the secret of his goodness was God’s grace on him. He was incapable of enjoying glory and of giving glory to the sons of his nation.

Through the counsel of God, David enjoyed the kingdom, so also did his sons, But they failed to keep the kingdom intact, because of the corruption that infiltrated into the royal household, as well as into the people. There was an urgent need for “the Son of David”, the Forgiver of sins and Savior of souls from corruption, to set the perpetual spiritual kingdom of David.

“And by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses” (Acts 13.39).

If the Lord Christ was crucified for our sins, the resurrection confirmed the acceptance of the sacrifice, for us to gain the forgiveness and to enjoy the justification of Christ, a justification that the law could not give to anyone.

By the resurrection, the divine reconciliation has been realized; and the Holy Spirit of God dwelt in the church and became her leader. That is why the church, through the apostles of Christ, got the breath of the Spirit, to hear the Messianic promise: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20.23).

The resurrection revealed the truth of the unique sacrifice of Christ, that it is a living, active sacrifice, capable of abolishing sin and destructing death. Although it was realized through history, it leads the believers to what is beyond history, works perpetually and brings us over to eternity.

❖ "He who was buried forgives sins, yea, more than the Law (has power to do). And (observe), he does not say, from which you would not but, ***“from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses”***¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 30.

“Beware therefore, lest what had been spoken in the prophets come upon you: Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish, For I work a work in your days, a work which you by no means believe, though one were to declare it to you” (Acts 13.40-41).

The apostle quotes that serious prophetic warning uttered by the prophet (Hab. 1.5), in about the year 600 BC, on the tongue of God: That if the people persisted on rebellion, the horrible nation of the Chaldeans would destroy Israel and all the nations around it. This was realized, when the kingdom of Assyria captivated Israel; and having not benefited from the lesson, Judah was captivated by the kingdom of Babylon and both were joined in captivity. God described the rulers of His people, slothful in truth and rebellious, as “**scornful**” (Isa. 28.14) and as “**mockers**” (Isa. 28.22). And here He calls those who reject the Lord Christ, and oppose His salvation work, as being “**despisers**”, who do not care for the catastrophe to dwell upon them as it did over Israel and Judah, in the old days, through the allowance of God, “For I will work a work in your days, which you would not believe, though it were told you” (Hab. 1.5).

The amazing and strange work of God bears two meanings: on one hand, the slothful fall under the divine wrath, and who can bear it? On the other hand, the amazing and strange work of God has been realized through the incarnation of the divine Word, for man’s sake, His willing acceptance of the cross, and His resurrection, to grant man the power of His resurrection. ... Things that the slothful cannot believe, as they do not enjoy the grace of faith.

By this warning, the apostle Paul ended his sermon, that they should not be slothful in believing in the Lord Christ the Savior of the world. He has indeed allowed the Assyrians and the Babylonians to captivate the rebellious of His people and allowed them to fall into the captivity of him, whom they accepted to be a father to them – the devil. He would not draw them by force to faith; but rejecting the Sun of righteousness, they fall under the bitterness of darkness.

6- HEADING TO THE GENTILES

“And when the Jews went out of the Synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath” (Acts 13.42).

In those Synagogues, the Jews had the priority to enter and exit. That is why the Jews went out first; whereas, the Proselytes from the Gentiles begged Paul to come back the next Sabbath, to give them more of those joyful evangelic news.

The hearts of some Jews did not move to receive the word of salvation. They only came to practice the formalities of worship to ease their conscience; whereas, many of the Proselytes from the Gentiles have opened their hearts to enjoy the joyful word of God. And as the prophet says, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your word was to me, the joy and rejoicing of my heart” (Jer. 15.16).

Believing in Jesus according to the Jews was a proclamation of the failure of the Mosaic Law to justify and to forgive sins. The hearts of the Jews everywhere were aflame with longing for the

mountains of Judah, the enjoyment of Jerusalem the city of God and His temple. Those kept quiet when they heard the words of the apostle Paul. His words were indeed convincing and supported by prophecies; and his eyes were aflame with the fire of the appealing Spirit. Yet, he was uttering a new thing, with daring that they were not used to hear. They heard that they were captives to a dangerous enemy and in need of enjoying an inner freedom; that they were sinners and in need of a Divine Savior. It is a serious accusation that they did not expect a Jew to dare say it, to seek the setting of a new kingdom for Israel and to justify the work of a crucified.

The Jews rejected that serious speech. Yet the word of God would not be in vain, but would draw the hearts which are keen on their salvation and bring them over to the joy of the kingdom. This is the work of the word with those faithful in seeking the truth; whereas, the wicked would say together with the Thessalonians: "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (Acts 17.6); and with those Ephesians: "Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people" (Acts 19.26).

"Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13.43).

The word "broken up" bears the meaning of forcibly evacuating the Synagogue, almost driving everyone out. The rulers of the Synagogue, feeling the probable serious effect of Paul's words over the members, hastened to end the session. Yet those who were touched by the preaching of the gospel, of the Jews and the Gentiles, surrounded the two apostles, with their hearts flaring with the love of the gospel and the enjoyment of the knowledge of the divine truth.

Some believe that the word 'proselyte' here does not necessarily mean Gentiles converted to Judaism and were circumcised, but some of them were influenced by the Jews, believed in the One God and rejected the pagan worship with all its abominations, yet without getting circumcised. The Jews allowed them to attend the meetings and partake of the worship, but felt superiority over them.

"And the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God" (Acts 13.44).

It is obvious that those who joined the two apostles were mostly proselytes; whereas, the Jews have rejected the word and even opposed it. Almost the whole city came together on the next Sabbath to hear the word of God.

"And when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 13.45).

The Jews could not stand that attitude; they were filled with envy, and counted it as their duty to cry out together with the Jews of Jerusalem: "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" disregarding what Pilate said,

“I find no fault in Him at all”. If the multitudes in Jerusalem insisted on crucifying Jesus the Just, the multitude of Jews here insisted on crucifying His name. They could not stand preaching His name.

Besides that multitude which reveals the success of the mission of the two apostles and consequently the failure of those in the Synagogue; they counted St. Paul's speech as an insult directed against the Mosaic Law before the proselytes and a deprivation of the Jews as a unique nation in its worship of God, of its privileges. Moreover, the words of the apostle called for the equality between the Jews and the Gentiles, something that the Jewish mentality could not accept.

Saul of Tarsus was previously an opponent to the gospel truth and a blasphemer; and now the multitudes of the Jews “*contradicting and blaspheming, are opposing the things spoken by Paul*”. St. Paul looked at them with compassion, seeing that they were falling into what he has formerly done, saying, “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, and an insolent man, but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1.13). He was crying out in his heart: ‘When will those obtain mercy, as I did? When will the scales fall off their eyes, to see together with me what I see of the splendor of the Sun of righteousness?’

“Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said. ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you reject it, and judge yourself unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles’” (Acts 13.46).

Here, the apostle Paul proclaims his preaching system, having put in his heart, since he enjoyed the Sacrament of Enlightenment, to begin everywhere preaching the joyful news to the Jews, being the legal heirs of the divine promises; and from whom the prophets and the Messiah Himself emerged; Then after that he would set forth to the Gentiles beside the few Jews who accept the faith. By this the apostle praise together with Simon the elder, carrying in his heart the infant Jesus, saying, “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation which **You have prepared before the face of all peoples**, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel” (Luke 2.29-32).

St. John Chrysostom believes that the apostle Paul did not say, ‘We forsake you’, but said, “**We turn to the Gentiles**”, as though he leaves the door of hope open before them; in case they were ready to receive the word, he would return to preach them. Even in his rebuke, he was gentle¹.

In the praise of Simon the elder (Luke 2.29-32), he started by the Gentiles, then followed them by Israel, as many of the Gentiles together with few of the Jews, responded to the work of the Lord Christ. Yet the Lord Christ came first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles, having said to the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4.22).

And as the apostle Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek” (Rom. 1.16),

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 30.

“Through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11.11), “But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he took his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood is upon your own heads, I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles” (Acts 18.6).

- ❖ "The true passing over then into Babylon, which was then prefigured in the time of Jeremiah, took place in the spiritual dispensation of the time of the Lord's Incarnation. But what does Jeremiah say of these Babylonians, to those who were passing over to them? “For in its peace, you will have peace” (Jer. 29.7 LXX). When Israel then passed over also into Babylon by Christ and the Apostles, that is, when the Gospel came unto the Gentiles, they have received the peace of Christ, and have left off persecuting the Christians”¹.
- ❖ "See then, the tree (the Jews) has withered away; and Christ has been removed unto the Gentiles, the mountain into the sea”².

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Since you rejected Christ, and did not prepare a place fitting for setting the altar of the Lord on it, He would set it on the land of the Gentiles, that is, in the hearts of all the people. That is why the apostle says, “For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Cor. 3.17)³.
- ❖ ‘Gehzi’ may symbolize the Jewish people. They were infected with the leprosy of sin, as the Gentiles got rid of it. Finally, the miserable Jews proclaimed this during the passion of Christ, when they said, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt. 27.25). They were then worthy to be covered with the leprosy of sin, when they, with wicked lips, cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him” (John 19.15). Leprosy got into them, when grace crossed over to us. ... When the teaching of the apostles crossed over to the Gentiles, leprosy got into the miserable Jews⁴.

(Fr. Caesarius, Bishop of Arles)

- ❖ Thus, it is obvious that the natural order of things should be as follows: The Jews were supposed to enter first and then those of the Gentiles; but as the Jews did not believe, this order got reversed, Because of their disbelief and fall, those came first.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "For this also did Jeremiah prophesy, that the Lord commanded them to go into Babylon: and whatever other prophets told the people not to go into Babylon, them he reprov'd as false prophets (Jer. 27.14-15). ... Jeremiah then on the part of God threatened those who would not go into Babylon, whereas to them who should go he promised rest there, and a sort of happiness in the cultivation of

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 1.14*

² *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 39.2.*

³ *Sermon 122.1.*

⁴ *Sermon 129.3.*

their vines, and planting of their gardens, and the abundance of their fruits. How then do the people of Israel, not now in figure but in verity, pass over unto Babylon? Whence came the Apostles? Were they not of the nation of the Jews? Whence came Paul himself? For he says, "For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom. 11.1). Many of the Jews then believed in the Lord; from them were the Apostles chosen; of them were the more than five hundred brethren, to whom it was vouchsafed to see the Lord after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15.6); of them were the hundred and twenty in the house, when the Holy Ghost came down (Acts 1.15).

But what does the Apostle say in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Jews refused the word of truth? "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13.46). The true passing over then into Babylon, which was then prefigured in the time of Jeremiah, took place in the spiritual dispensation of the time of the Lord's Incarnation. But what does Jeremiah say of these Babylonians, to those who were passing over to them? "For in their peace shall be your peace" (Jer. 29.7). ... That now in the secure quiet of peace, the Churches might be built up, and peoples planted in the garden of God, and that all nations might bring forth fruit in faith, and hope, and love, which is in Christ"¹.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ Notice with me what was written about that people: "I had put her away, and given her a certificate of divorce" (Jer. 3.8). God has divorced that people and given it a certificate of divorce. In the Law of Moses, it came that the woman who displeases her husband, because of her unfitting behavior, would take the certificate of her divorce and go; and the man who forsook her is allowed to take another woman.

Now observe, those who received a certificate of divorce ... had been forsaken for the same reason.

Where are the prophets among them?

Where are the signs among them (Ps. 74.9)?

Where are God's proclamations?

Where are the rites, the temple and the sacrifices?

They had been driven away and given the certificate of divorce. Now, we – Judah – returned to the Lord. We are Judah, As the Savior came from the tree of Judah, as it was proclaimed (Heb. 7.14)².

- ❖ Now the situation is reversed, ... as it is said to those from Israel: " 'You shall call Me "My Father", and not turn away from Me' Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel'" (Jer. 3.19, 20). When this was said from the

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 1.14.*

² *Hom. On Jeremiah. Hom. 4.2.*

beginning concerning Israel; and the people of Israel heard that they walked wickedly and forgot their holy God (Jer. 3.21 LXX). Then the Holy Spirit put the word before us, we, who were from the pagan nations, and said to us, “Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding” (Jer. 3.22). “For we ourselves who were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another, but when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly” Tit. 3.3-5)¹.

(Scholar Origen)

- ❖ God's work did not stop because of the disbelief of the Jews, as He is the eternal life for His believers, which He promised to grant it to those who believe in Christ. Those who did not believe have deprived themselves of the reward, without harming the rest. By saying this, the apostle Paul commends the believing Jews, as it was not their fault that many of their own race rejected the faith².

(Ambrosiaster)

- ❖ Those who did not believe could not stand in the way of His blessings³.

(Fr. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

“For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have set You to be a light to the Gentiles, that You should be for salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13.47).

The goal of the persistent quotations by the apostle Paul from the prophets is to confirm that what he preached is not something new, but has its roots in the law and the prophets. The ordination of the gospel has its foundation in the Old Testament.

The apostle Paul quoted this verse from the prophet Isaiah: “I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49.6). The Lord Christ came as the ‘Light of the world’ (John 8.12). He shone in the hearts of His disciples, and set them ‘A light to the world’ (Matt. 5.14). They do not bear their own light, but the flame of Christ inside them, to shine in the midst of the darkness of the pagan world.

The prophecy revealed the Person of Christ, that He is the Light and the Savior, who shines on the depths, to grant wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of the secrets of God’s love that embraces all mankind, **to the ends of the earth**, not limited to a particular people or generation.

“Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13.48).

¹ Hom. On Jeremiah. Hom. 5.1

² Comm. On Paul’s Epistles (Rom. 3.3).

³ Interpretation of Rom. (3.3).

Having presented prophetic testimonies from the Old Testament that was in their hands, they could not oppose his reason, but they were filled with jealousy and rage and started to oppose and blaspheme with no reason. Whereas, the Gentiles “*were glad and glorified the word of the Lord*” and received faith.

The Gentiles realized that they were in God’s mind, subject of His love since the old days, and that what the apostle reveals represents a divine plan that God revealed to His prophets in the days of the law, when the Jews assumed that they, and not any one else, were the subject of God’s care and salvation. What was realized then was a consummation of the divine promises. These joyful promises became an offense to the Jews and a source of Joy to the Gentiles.

The word ‘*appointed*’ here, in Greek, means (Written), as the names of the true believers are written in heaven (Luke 10.20). The first to use this way was the prophet Moses who said, “If you forgive their sin – but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written” (Exod. 32.32). Our names were written in the book of life, not to commit us to salvation, or as some assume that it is a kind of compulsory judgment, But God wrote them through His previous knowledge since the foundation of the world. “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8.29).

“And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region” (Acts 13.49).

By ‘the region’, he means the whole province of Galatia (Acts 16.6).

The word ‘spread’ reveals that the testimony or the preaching of the gospel was not confined to the two apostles Paul and Barnabas, but the hearts of believers flared for the preaching work among their relatives and friends; everyone arose to testify to the gospel of Christ.

7- THE JEWS STIRRING UP PERSECUTION AGAINST THE TWO APOSTLES

“But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region” (Acts 13.50).

As it was not possible for the Jews to ban the two apostles from testifying to the Lord Christ in a Gentile city, governed by the Roman State, they resorted to women who converted to the Jewish faith and some Jewish proselytes, to stir up persecution against the two apostles. The Jews worked secretly and managed to expel them.

As the devout Jewish women had their prominent position in ministry, the Jews who were against Paul and Barnabas provoked them, beside some chief men of the city, to persecute them. Those devout women among the Jews had no such role in Antioch Pisidia, but in the majority of Jewish societies in and out of Jerusalem. That situation was probably inherited by the Church, as in the days of the Lord Christ, women carried out the responsibility of serving and spending on Him and had an honorable stand during the crucifixion, the burial and the resurrection, by which they preceded the apostles and the disciples.

“But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium” (Acts 13.51).

Being expelled, they obeyed the commandment of the Lord: “And whoever will not receive you and hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for that city” (Matt. 10.14-15).

Iconium, in the days of the apostle Paul, was the capital of Liconia, affiliated to the region of Frigia, the Turkish city of Konia, 20 miles far from the Mediterranean coast.

“And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13.52).

It is wonderful, that whenever there is affliction, the Holy Spirit would fill the souls of believers with heavenly joy. Every movement of persecution is accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter of the souls and the hearts.

❖ "The teachers were suffering persecution, and the disciples rejoiced"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 30.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 13

YOUR HOLY SPIRIT IS THE GUIDE OF MY JOURNEY

- ❖ As Jerusalem, the city of God, was stirred up against Your church;
Your people set forth to preach among the Gentiles.
Antioch became the great city of God.
There, Your fiery Spirit flared the hearts of many.
Barnabas and Paul set forth to work diligently in Your vine.
- ❖ Your Holy Spirit chose Barnabas and Saul,
And separated them to work among the Gentiles.
He is the One, who searches the hearts,
And the Grantor of the word and the Truth,
The Drawer of souls, to enjoy the riches of Your grace.
By the silent Spirit, Your church managed,
To gain the wisdom of the Spirit, and chose faithful ministers.
- ❖ The two set forth, accompanied by John Mark.
They flew to a unique preaching journey. They were like angels of God.
They transformed men into angels.
They forced their way into Cyprus, the beloved city of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty,
To set in it children beloved by God.
Instead of corruption, the island transformed into holiness.
- ❖ Let the arrogant Saul of Tarsus inside me die,
And set in me Paul the humble,
The least among all.
You raise the humble and bring down the dignified.
- ❖ Grant me, O Lord, the spirit of St. Paul and let me enjoy his wisdom,
To consummate Your plan in me.
- ❖ Let the devil oppose me with all his hosts.
You are the Sun of righteousness, before whom the darkness cannot stand.
Your divine hand destroys every evil,
And reveals every blindness of insight,
In order to settle kingdom of light,
And to shine with Your light on the souls that the enemy captivated by his darkness.

❖ Let Your Holy Spirit grant me wisdom,
So as not to utter my own words,
But testify to Your amazing works.

CHAPTER 14

CONSUMMATION OF THE FIRST PREACHING JOURNEY

In The previous chapter, St. Luke presented a magnificent portrait of the work of God all along the first preaching journey, together with a flood of tribulations from the Jews, that the apostle declared that he was heading to the Gentiles. The most important of those blessings are: The faith of the governor Sergius Paulus in Paphos; the many Jews and proselytes who followed Paul and Barnabas, that almost the whole city assembled together the next Sabbath to hear the two apostles; the spreading of the word of God in Pisidia; and the filling of the disciples with joy and the Holy Spirit. Now St. Luke presents the consummation of that journey, demonstrating the exalted work of God wherever the two apostles went.

1- A great multitude in Iconium accepting the faith	1
2- Division in the city	2 - 5
3- Calling them gods in Lystra	6 - 18
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1- A GREAT MULTITUDE IN ICONIUM ACCEPTING THE FAITH

“Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14.1).

As usual, the two apostles started their preaching in the Jewish synagogue. There they stayed a long time until a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed.

The report here came very concise, as St. Luke did not tell how those great multitudes of Jews and Greeks came to believe, or referred to the works of the two apostles, or to the names of the persons who accepted the faith. He was not preoccupied with the life story of the two apostles, of the early church, or of setting centers of ministry in every city, but with confirming the amazing work of God in drawing souls, despite the fierce opposition against the preachers and the church everywhere. The two apostles did not shake or got confused because of that opposition, but they preached more strongly and did not forsake their position, except for necessity, for the sake of the safety of the local church and for the continuation of work. And whenever they left a city, they fled to another, not to hide or take rest of the opposition, but to work and preach with boldness and strength.

Most probably, that concise report came naturally, as what happened in Iconium was only similar to what previously happened in Antioch Pisidia:

a- The subject of talk in the synagogues of the two cities was most probably similar, that there was no need of repetition.

b- In the two cities, some of the Jews and the proselytes accepted the faith and wished to hear more from the apostle.

c- In the cities, the opposition of the Jews increased with the growth of the new church and with the entry of some into faith.

Finally, as the past experience of the two apostles concerning the opposition of the Jews did not touch their feelings toward their salvation, they insisted here also on entering together into the synagogue of the Jews, to present the word of salvation.

2- A Schism IN THE CITY

“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (Acts 14.2).

The unbelieving Jews, on their side, persisted on their opposition to poison the minds of the newly converted Jews, that the two apostles prolonged their stay to strengthen the believers. Affliction and opposition motivated the apostles to work more.

“Stirred and poisoned”, through teaching them perverted principles to corrupt their belief and persuading them not to respond to the grace of God. That is the work of the devil along all generations, to lead the people astray, to poison their minds by the wrong principles and destructive philosophies of the ancient serpent to faith in the Savior and to let them doubt the love of God and His salvation work.

In the previous cities, the opposition against the two apostles was to prevent them from preaching, but here, they worked on the multitudes that accepted the faith and were directed to the gospel, to corrupt their faith.

“Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (Acts 14.3).

On God’s side, He supported His apostles by signs and wonders by their hands. Whenever the oppositions grew stronger, God is transfigured by His grace and by doing signs in His name. He supports His gospel by granting His grace and talents to His church.

The living minister sees in the opposition signs of the sound way, when he feels that he is partaking of the cross of his Christ, walking together with Him along the way to Calvary and going through the true narrow road. The opposition for the witness to Christ does not cause failure or regret for his work, but grants him a new experience for the word of God’s grace and a tasting of the resurrection in the preaching work.

Here St. Luke refers to the fact that proclaiming the Lord was followed by doing signs and wonders by their hands. God Does not work where there is fear or terror, but supports the hearts leaning on Him in living faith. That is why He warns those working in His vineyard against fear, as He did when

He commanded Joshua on the day he started his leadership, saying, “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage do not be afraid, or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1.9).

The more the devil introduced his poison through his followers to corrupt the minds of the believers and their life, the longer the apostles stayed. Although they did not withdraw from the battle, they did not depend upon their human experience or their eloquence, but on the riches of God’s grace, as God Himself “**bore witness to the word of His grace**”; He was working in, by, and with them.

Our gospel is “*the word of God’s grace*”, to whom no one can testify except the Lord Christ Himself, working in His ministers.

“But the multitude of the city was divided: part sided with the Jews, and part with the apostles” (Acts 14.4).

A schism happened in the city: some accepted the gospel of Christ; and others opposed the truth of the gospel. And as the Lord Christ Himself said, “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on, five in one house will be divided, three against two, and two against three” (Luke 12.51, 52). The cause of this division is not the opposition of the believers against the unbelievers, to commit them to faith by force, but the hatred of the unbelievers for the Truth and their opposition to the church of Christ for no reason, except that the darkness cannot stand before light.

And as **the scholar Tertullian** wrote to the Emperor that the world hates the church, but the church loves the world and ministers to it. The believers flood love from their new nature, and the unbelievers hold fast to their hatred that comes from within them.

“And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them” (Acts 14.5).

Having been unsuccessful in poisoning the minds of believers, the Jews resorted to violence and had to join forces with the unbelieving Gentiles to stir up the rulers and leaderships against the apostles as trouble-makers.

This is the story of the world in every generation, when the opposing enemies join forces to destroy the church of Christ. The Jews and the Gentiles forgot the animosity between them and provoked the rulers to stone the two apostles.

3- CALLING THEM GODS IN LYSTRA

“They became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region” (Acts 14.6).

A schism happened in the city: Some sided with the Jews, the opponents of the Truth; and others sided with the two apostles. And the devil, as usual, could make an alliance between the opposing religious leaderships, and the people rejecting the faith, beside the political leaderships. The religious and the civil leaderships agreed to jump upon the two apostles as preys and to stone them. It seems that the decision was issued in the Sanhedrin and was certified by the authorities. But God allowed for revealing the plot and the two apostles could flee to the city of Lycaonia Lystra.

The two apostles did not flee from the field, or gave the back to the divine work, but, for the sake of the peace of the church in Lycaonia, and not out of fear of death, they fled to Lystra and Derbe.

“And they were preaching the gospel there” (Acts 14.7).

In the book of ‘Apocripha’, (Acts of St. Paul), it came that When Onesiphorus came out of Lycaonia to receive St. Paul, he saw Paul approaching, in a size tending to be small, with two close eyebrows, a bent nose, a head giving the impression of courage and strength, and bent legs, somewhat full body, and filled with grace; sometimes appeared as an angel, and sometimes as a man.

“They fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia”: Some believe that Paul circumcised Timothy in Lystra that was probably his hometown; whereas, Derbe was the city of Gais the beloved.

“And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother’s womb, who had never walked” (Acts 14.8).

St. Luke tells about one of the signs done by the hand of the apostle Paul, healing a cripple from his mother’s womb. He probably chose this sign to confirm that St. Paul was not less than St. Peter and St. John, who did the same at the gate called the beautiful in the temple (Acts 3).

He gave three confirmations for the sake of unbelievers: He was a cripple in both his legs, from his mother’s womb, and he never walked. As to the simple believers, it does not need confirmations. When the Lord Christ spoke to the Samaritan woman, he said to her, “Woman, believe Me” (John 4.21) and she did.

As he never walked, healing was definitely a miraculous work.

“This man heard Paul speaking. Paul observing him intently, and seeing that he had faith to be healed” (Acts 14.9).

How did St. Paul know that that cripple had faith to be healed? By Spirit, he felt how serious he cared for His salvation and the healing of his soul; and how his heart kindled when he heard about the love of God.

❖ Faith comprehends what the human mind cannot realize.

- ❖ Great is faith, yet it is useless if devoid of love.
- ❖ Faith is committed to precede comprehension, for comprehension to be a part of faith.
- ❖ We can touch Him who sits in heaven, by our faith, not by our hands.

(St. Augustine)

“Said with a loud voice, ‘Stand up straight on your feet’. And he leaped and walked” (Acts 14.10).

The lame man here was not a beggar, but a man who cared for the salvation of his soul. He was seriously and intently listening to the apostle.

Having felt that the man sought the salvation of his soul, he presented to him the divine gift: “Stand up straight”, for his soul to enjoy the resurrection from the dead, to enjoy the light given to him by Christ (Eph. 5.14), and the healing of his body. As to leaping, it refers to the inner joy of his heart.

“Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men’” (Acts 14.11).

In the past, the pagans had a belief that the gods used to visit humans in the likeness of men. Among those people, there was a certain belief that Zeus (Jupiter), and Hermes (Mercury), once appeared in Phrighia, to a married couple called Philemon and Baucis, And someone called Lycaon gave them hospitality, and hence that province was called ‘Lycaonia’¹.

“And Barnabas they called ‘Zeus’, and Paul, ‘Hermes’, because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14.12).

As the multitude was screaming in the Lycaonian language, believing that the gods Zeus and Hermes have come down to them in the likeness of men, the two apostles most probably did not understand them.

The scholar W. M. Calder discovered in excavations near Lystra, statues of Hermes and Zeus by persons with Lycaonian names.

Zeus is Jupiter of the Romans, and Osiris of the Egyptians, the major god among the assembly of Greek gods. He has a temple in Lystra. Barnabas was called ‘Zeus’, because of his great and handsome looks.

Hermes was called (Mercury) by the Greeks, the son of Jupiter from Maia. He was the messenger of all gods, god of eloquence and logic. It was believed that these two gods traveled together. Paul was called ‘Hermes’, on account of his eloquence, and that he accompanied Zeus².

¹ James N, Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, N.J, p. 444.

² James N, Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, N.J, p.444.

“Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes” (Acts 14.13).

The multitudes, assuming that they were so lucky that two gods descended from heaven to visit them in their lower world, committed the priest of Zeus to go and bring from the stables of the temple, oxen to sacrifice to them.

The temple of Zeus was in front of the city, next to the gates, to guard the city against intruders. The priest and the worshippers used to put garlands of interwoven wool around the necks of the sacrifices offered to the gods; whereas, they used to put garlands of flowers around the necks of the gods.

They used to build temples for their gods in different locations of the city, set their portraits on the gates, and decorate the gods, the sacrifices offered, as well as the prominent and the beloved guests to the temples, by garlands of tree leaves and flowers around their necks¹.

How strange, that when the true Word of God came to our world, nobody moved to offer Him a sacrifice. He did not request anything for Himself, but came to offer Himself a sacrifice for their sake.

“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitudes, crying out” (Acts 14.14).

St. Luke puts Barnabas’ name before Paul’s, probably because the multitudes there gave greater dignity to Barnabas, assuming that he was the god Zeus, with his more respectable features, and thought of Paul as Hermes, god of eloquence and logic, and the speaker in Zeus’ name.

It was not possible for the two apostles to keep quiet and to disregard the reverence offered to them through ignorance. Their dignity as apostles of the Lord was enough for them. They could not accept taking His glory for themselves.

Tearing the clothes here refers to the testimony that the behavior and words spoken by the multitudes constituted blasphemy against the true God. The same thing was done by the chief priest when he assumed that Jesus blasphemed when He said, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14.62).

“And saying, Men, why are you doing these things, we are also men, (mortals) like you, and preach to you that you should turn from these vain things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them” (Acts 14.15).

The two apostles were terrified by what they saw, and tore their clothes as a sign of rejection of that blasphemy and as a testimony against those who did it (Mark 14.63). **St. Ephraim the Syrian** believes that by tearing their clothes, they tried to stop the multitudes from sacrificing the oxen for their sake.

¹ Freeman. p. 444.

The two apostles did not only reject that tendency of deifying them and confirmed that they were just humans, but they also confirmed that they are sinners and “*mortals like you*”. A marvelous portrait of ministers who, not do not only put themselves above those ministered, or consider themselves more righteous, but present themselves as sinners, in need of salvation just like them. The apostle Paul is not ashamed to call himself “the foremost of sinners” (1 Tim. 1.15), as by this, he draws the sinners to him, to enjoy together the Savior of the sinners.

- ❖ "What absurdity, therefore, is there, if Jesus, desiring to manifest to the human race the power which He possesses to heal souls, should have selected notorious and wicked men, and should have raised them to such a degree of moral excellence, that they, became a pattern of the purest virtue to all who were converted by their instrumentality to the Gospel of Christ?"¹.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ When you think of yourself as a sinner, and you indeed are, this is no humility. But when someone who does great things does not feel himself a great man, this is the real humility. When someone like Paul can say, “For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this” (1 Cor. 4.4), and, “That Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of who I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1.15), Such a man is indeed humble, who glorifies the works, yet sees himself as the least².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ How could he be the foremost (amongst sinners)? Were there not many sinners, Jews and otherwise, before him? So why should he say “the foremost among them?? I.E. the worst, and the most wicked? ... To know the reason, remember Saul. Was not he the one who stoned St. Stephen with one hand, and stood guard on the clothes of those who stoned him? Was not he the one who persecuted the church everywhere? As he was counted as the foremost persecutor, there was nobody more evil than him³.

(St. Augustine)

Thus, the apostles could restrain the multitude from sacrificing to them, and turn their sight to the rich grace of God that works in the life of sinners who come to the Savior, in the spirit of humility.

- ❖ "Let us imitate them: let us think nothing our own, seeing even faith itself is not our own, but more God's (than ours). “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2.8). Then let us not think great things of ourselves, nor be puffed up, being as we are, men, dust and ashes, smoke and shadow”⁴.

¹ *against Celsus. 1.63.*

² *on the Incomprehensible Nature of God. 5.6.*

³ *Sermon 175.6-7.*

⁴ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 30.*

- ❖ "“Do not be haughty, but fear” (Rom. 11.20). Do not lessen your virtue by boastfulness. Would you do something truly great? Never let a surmise of your attainments as great enter your mind. But you are a virgin. So were those in (the Gospel) virgins, but they got no benefit from their virginity, because of their cruelty and inhumanity (Matt. 25.12.) Nothing like humility: this is mother, and root, and nurse, and foundation, and bond of all good things: without this we are abominable, and execrable, and polluted. For say-let there be some man raising the dead, and healing the lame, and cleansing the lepers, but with proud self-complacency: than this there can be nothing more execrable, nothing more impious, nothing more detestable. Account nothing to be of yourself. Do you have utterance and grace of teaching? Do not for this account yourself to have something more than other men. For this cause especially you have to be humbled, because you have been vouchsafed more abundant gifts”¹.
- ❖ He referred everything to the King and Teacher, even his actions. He did not refer to himself the glory of God. ... In another place, he said, “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 3.13)².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“*We are mortals like you*”: We are not gods that you sacrifice to us.

“The vain things” refer to pagan worship in which there is no truth but vanity. This reveals that the preaching of Paul and Barnabas in that city concentrated on turning the pagan Gentiles away from those vain things, and returning to God, who created heaven and earth, the living God who grants life.

Fr. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, comments on what the two apostles Paul and Barnabas did, when they presented the truth to the Gentiles and rejected the evil of worshipping them as gods, saying that through the holy apostles, who preached the truth to the Gentiles, divine teachings were introduced to them. And receiving them, they got rid of their evil and ignorant worship. Paul and Barnabas restrained the people of Lycaonia from sacrificing to them, crying out in their faces: “*Men, why are doing these things? We also mortal men like you, and preach to you that you should turn from these vain things*” (Acts 14.15)³.

“*Who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways*” (Acts 14.16).

The word “allowed” here, refers to giving them all freedom. On another hand, he presented to them every proof of His existence, love, and care; yet He did not commit them to worship Him. Their mere existence so far is out of His longsuffering on them and on their fathers, as He did not destroyed them for their shameful diversion. But now, He has come proclaiming the gospel of salvation, that they

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 30.

² Hom. On 1Tim. Hom. 3.

³ on Ps. 9.

may return to Him and worship Him as is fitting to Him and to them as God's creation and subject of His exalted love.

To interpret what happened in Lystra, Adam Clark quotes a legend by **Ovid**,¹ in which, Jupiter, when it came to his knowledge how corrupt humanity became, decided to come down by himself to the earth to wipe it out. He came to the province of Lycaonia in a human form, and dwelt in the palace of Lycaon, where the multitudes came to worship him. Lycaon doubted his deity and mockingly intended to ridicule him. When ambassadors from the state of Molossian came to worship him, Lycaon slayed one of them, cooked a part of his body, grilled the rest, and put them before Jupiter. Then the god got furious at that insult, that he turned that evil king into a wolf and burnt down his palace. From that time, that province is called by the name of Lycaonia.

The simple multitudes thought that Jupiter came back to visit the city and proclaimed his exalted (divine) presence by healing the lame from his mother's womb and through other signs done by Paul and Barnabas. And fearing that Jupiter might count them as slothful in presenting the dignity fitting to his high status, they committed the priest to bring oxen and sacrifice them to Barnabas and Paul.

The apostle Paul believes that the fall of the Gentiles into idol worship before his coming was due to that they were passing through times of ignorance (Acts 17.30).

Talking to pagans who did not realize God's love and did not rejoice in Him, as their pleasure was concentrated on food and drink, he proclaimed to them that even that food is from the almighty God, as well as the pleasure and joy.

❖ "God by His own Word gave the Universe the Order it has, in order that since He is by nature invisible, men might be enabled to know Him at any rate by His works For often the artist even when not seen is known by his works"².

(Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

“Nevertheless, He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14.17).

Nature itself is the best witness to God's love and care for man. He offered him rain from heaven and gave him the different fruitful seasons, to provide him with food, beside granting him the inner joy and pleasure, without which his soul would be destroyed.

The apostles concentrated in their preaching on the gift of inner joy, or the joy of the Spirit that fills the heart and gives it the true life.

❖ As there is no marriage in heaven (Matt. 22.30), there is no food or drink as well. But there is rather righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit. That is why the apostle Paul exhorts us to concentrate on

¹ *Metam.*, l. ivy 211-239.

² *Contra Gentes.* 3.35.1.

these things, realizing that gaining them here on earth, we take them with us when we go to the heavenly kingdom. He exhorts us to seek the righteousness and peace and the like from the Holy Spirit, as food and drink in the kingdom of heaven¹.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ By ‘gladness’, people mean lifting the mind above the things which warrants rejoicing; whereas, the ‘pleasure’ is extremely and indecently lifting it².

(St. Jerome)

“And with these sayings, they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them” (Acts 14.18).

It is obvious that the multitudes were so agitated that the apostles exerted much effort to restrain them from sacrificing to them.

4- PROVOCATION AGAINST PAUL AND STONING HIM

“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there, and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (Acts 14.19).

Those, who intended to kill the two apostles in Iconium and drove them out of Antioch Pisidia, came to Lystra to provoke the multitudes to get rid of them.

Those who intended to sacrifice to them as gods were themselves who stoned Paul. This is what the minister should expect. He should not be disturbed if he is attacked or persecuted by those who previously commended him. Those who praised the Lord Christ, saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” were themselves who cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him”. Those who offered Him a sacrifice of praise intended to offer Him as a sacrifice.

They stood around him, to make sure that he was dead, then left him and went away. It was not possible for death to catch up with him, even when he was stoned, as long as he still had an unfinished mission.

- ❖ "Those enemies wounded him with stones: there is a wounding with words, even worse than stones. What then must we do? The same that he did: he did not hate those who cast stones at him, but after they had dragged him out, he entered again into their city, to be a benefactor to those who had done him such wrongs. If you also endure him who harshly insults you, and has done you wrongs, then you have too been stoned. Do not say, "I have done him no injury." For what injury had Paul done, that he should be stoned? He was announcing a Kingdom, he was bringing men away from error, and

¹ Commentary on Rom. 14.17.

² Ep. to Gal. 3.5.22.

bringing them to God: benefits these, worthy of crowns, worthy of a thousand good things-not of stones"¹.

- ❖ "In the very city in which they received this reverence, in the same were they thus terribly ill treated"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

5- MORE DISCIPLES IN DERBE

“However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe” (Acts 14.20).

Some believe that stoning the apostle Paul left its scars on his body that made him boast in the Lord, saying, “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 6.17).

It was said that, having been stoned, his spirit was taken up into the third heaven and enjoyed glories,” which is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Cor. 12.4).

They stoned and dragged him out of the city, thinking that he was dead. Yet he was surrounded by the disciples. He rose up and went into the city, and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. How could that be? The disciples must have prayed, and God responded by revealing His power. Although he did not die; yet being stoned and dragged out of the city, he must have needed several months to recover. To rise up instantly and go, then depart on the next day, was not something natural, but must be an exalted work of God. No wonder that he praised God, saying, “Who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us, in whom we trust that He will deliver us” (2 Cor. 1.10).

6- A RETURN TO STRENGTHEN THE CHURCHES

“And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch” (Acts 14.21).

It was not possible for the stones to affect the thoughts of Paul and Barnabas and to destroy their zeal to save even those who stoned them. After they set forth for some time to Derbe to preach, they returned to Lystra, where Paul was stoned, and to Iconium and Antioch Pisidia, where those who provoked the multitudes to stone him were. They loved all, and their love was the secret of the strength of their preaching. The apostle Paul put love on the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, because it is the gift of the Spirit.

- ❖ What should occupy the head of the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, if not love? Without love, the other virtues could not be counted as such; and From love every goodness is born³.

(St. Jerome)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 31.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 31.

³ Ep. To Gal. 3.5.22.

Through his love for many, Paul was stoned; and in the midst of his temptation, God honored him, as death did not conquer him, or temptation destroyed him.

❖ Paul could be delivered to death, yet he could never be conquered¹.

(Pontiff Gregory the Great)

❖ Temptations draw God's mercies to the soul, the same way the wind draws rain. The heavy rain can destroy the new weak plant, but some mild wind can dry it out and make it strong. So are the mild temptations with the soul. ... The prophet says, "Lord, in trouble they have visited you" (Isa. 26.16)².

(Father Dorotheus, Bishop of Gaza)

"Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God'" (Acts 14.22).

The faith of the two apostles Paul and Barnabas and their amazing love for ministry is demonstrated by their return to the cities from where they were driven out, and where there were many opponents. They returned to strengthen the souls of the disciples, disregarding death, but by the power of the Spirit challenging it. They did not only bear the tribulations of Christ, but they were actually heading their way. The apostle Paul expressed his desire to die for the sake of Christ, in his farewell epistle to his disciple Timothy: "This is a faithful saying, 'For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. ... If we endure, we shall also reign with Him'" (2 Tim. 2.11).

❖ "Persecutions succeeded to persecutions: wars, fightings, stonings. These things, not less than the miracles, both made them more illustrious, and prepared for them a greater rejoicing. The Scripture nowhere says that they returned rejoicing because they had done miracles, but (it does say), that "they rejoiced, that they were counted worthy to suffer shame in His name" (Acts 5.41). And this they were taught of Christ, saying, "Do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you" (Luke 10.20.) For the joy indeed and without alloy is this, to suffer aught for Christ's sake"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ "Therefore no one can receive a reward, unless he has striven lawfully; nor is the victory a glorious one, unless the contest also has been toilsome"⁴.

(St. Ambrose)

❖ You are committed to fight the devil every day under the leadership of Christ. Yet, you should not seek the reward during the battle, which is kept for you in the kingdom. During the battle, it is not

¹ *Morality 1.31. Ch. 15 PG 76.610.*

² *Discourses, 13.*

³ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 31*

⁴ *Duties of the Clergy. 1.15.*

fitting for you to expect what is kept for you when you conquer, but you should rather concentrate your mind on the words of the apostle: “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3.12), and, “We must by many tribulations, enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14.22)¹.

- ❖ We should not seek the joy (the comfort) in this world, as although the true joy can be prepared here, yet it cannot be obtained here. During the journey, you should not seek what is kept for you in your home. We should live in a way by which we are qualified to return to our main home with joy, where we shall find, longing to see us, and welcome us, those who preceded us of patriarchs, prophets, and apostles. There we shall find our fellow citizens, the angels in the heavenly Jerusalem, together with Christ the King of that city, waiting for us with open arms of love. If we cast away the devil and get filled with good work, we can then return to them. You know, brethren, that all travelers are anxious while on their way, but if they rid themselves of worrying about their home, they will feel great joy when they reach it with great prophet. So are we, beloved brethren. We prepare ourselves for joy, when we are qualified to go to Christ. At the same time, let us here rejoice, but only in hope, to acquire later on the true joy².
- ❖ In order to introduce St. James as pure gold in the coming judgment, Our God first removed from him all the wrinkles of sin (through many tribulations), so that the other witness would find him without anything to burn³.
- ❖ As long as man wishes to consummate the work of the devil, he would not feel him opposing him. But if man forsakes him, drinks from the rock, chooses to follow Christ, and refuses to prefer him to Christ, he is committed to bear the animosity of the devil. Whoever unites with Christ is committed to prepare himself for the battle, not for the pleasures, as “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3.12)⁴.
- ❖ We have to know and to understand, beloved brethren, that tribulations will never depart from Christians as long as they live in this body. ... May nobody promise himself with what the gospel has not, As long as, with the approach of the end of this world – according to the gospel – “Lawlessness will abound, and love of many will grow cold” (Matt. 24.12). ... We should prepare ourselves, not only for repentance, but also for patience⁵.

¹ *Fr. Caesarius of Arles. Sermons, 215.3.*

² *Sermon 215.4.*

³ *Sermon 91.4.*

⁴ *Sermon 103.3.*

⁵ *Sermon 154.1.*

- ❖ If we first strive in this world through the consummation of good works, we, being rewarded by God, shall reach the kingdom¹.
- ❖ Indeed when we seek God in truth, we shall suffer from the haughtiness of the wicked, as they do not worship Christ by the same way they were preached².

(Fr. Caesarius Bishop of Arles)

- ❖ Suffering is a true bond, a support for a greater love, and a basis for perfection and spiritual goodness. Let us listen to the words: “When you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing” (Sir. 2.1). Once more, Christ says, “In the world you will have tribulations, but be of good cheer” (John 16.33). Everywhere you shall see suffering commended; and everywhere, suffering will be accepted as something necessary for us. In the world, nobody will gain a crown without suffering, unless he commits himself to a special system of eating, practicing, and watching. So how much more would this be for him who is in this battle?³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "we are men, your life in the midst of temptation's snares is, beset with the greatest possible dangers"⁴.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ As the world should go through the winter before the spring with its abundance of flowers, so it is fitting for man to go through numerous temptations before the inheritance of eternal life. And according to the apostle Paul: “By numerous tribulations, we enter the kingdom of God”. Temptations come in one of three ways: seduction, attraction, and acceptance. The devil seduces; the body is attracted; and the mind accepts⁵.

(St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers)

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14.23).

God allowed for the two apostles to pass through great tribulations, for the edification and spiritual growth of the church. Returning to the cities where they were persecuted, they were looked upon by the believers with higher appreciation and greater dignity, that they found no difficulty to choose priests to minister in the churches there, especially that their selection was not through issuing apostolic commands, but through the fellowship of the whole congregation in fasting and prayers.

¹ Sermon 162.1.

² Sermon 182.4.

³ Catena.

⁴ Letters, 250.

⁵ Introductory Tractate on James.

The souls of the two apostles found comfort in the ordination of priests, and they commended the whole congregation in every city, not to the hands of the priests, but to the Lord, the true Shepherd ministering to His church, keeping it, and caring for all its needs.

As all were new in faith, and it was difficult to choose the ones good for ministry, they were selected by the spirit of fasting and praying, depending upon the work of the Holy Spirit.

“And after they have passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia” (Acts 14.24-25).

They returned through the same route they took, to visit the churches and the believers, until they came to the port of Attalia (Nowadays Antalia), the only city they did not visit on their coming, and in which they did not preach.

7- A JOYFUL REPORT IN ANTIOCH

“From there they went down to Antioch where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed” (Acts 14.26).

By returning to Antioch, the first preaching Journey of the two apostles: St. Paul and St. Barnabas was completed, which, as some believe, took three months, and as others believe, a whole year.

“And when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that they had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples” (Acts 14.27-28).

Returning to the church, the two Ambassadors presented a report of the amazing grace of God which forced its way through the pagan cities, to shine with the divine light on regions where corruption has long prevailed, along with the pagan worship.

The news of the return of the two apostles spread in Antioch, and the whole congregation came to the church to hear the most amazing story: that the Gentiles have accepted the faith; new churches have been established; and new priests have been ordained.

It seems that the apostle Paul stayed a whole year in Antioch preaching and teaching.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 14

YOU ARE THE BEGINNING AND YOU ARE THE END

- ❖ With the beginning of the journeys of the apostle Paul, You were the beginning:
And on the way, You were the Way;
And up to the end, You have carried him through.
You were the secret of his success all along the way.
Through You, the apostle carried many as though on the wings of the Spirit.
- ❖ The apostle faced a persistent opposition.
And with every opposition, his heart grew stronger and more courageous.
He counted the sufferings as the way to conquest.
And in every tribulation, he enjoyed Your spacious heart.
His faith in You increased;
 And Your grace has never forsaken him.
He got an abundant uncountable crop.
- ❖ The Jews joined forces with the Gentiles to oppose Your apostles.
And those who were bitter enemies to one another cooperated to destroy Your church.
The enemies reconciled to join forces to oppose the Truth.
- ❖ Let all the forces of darkness unite against You.
In the midst of the battle, Your amazing power is transfigured.
Many signs and miracles, both apparent and hidden were done.
No one could hinder Your divine work.
With every opposition, Your rich grace is transfigured.
- ❖ Transfigure in us alone.
And to You, let every glory be presented, O Savior of the world.
To You alone, sacrifices of praise are presented.
To You alone, every dignity is presented.
Let Your ministers be invisible, for You to glorify in them.
- ❖ Several emperors and great figures referred Your deity to themselves.
In their haughtiness, they sought Your glory, a glory for themselves;
Whereas, Your ministers did not bear to hear a word of glory;
Or any dignity of Yours, to be referred to them.
Their glory is that You glorify in them, as well as in others;

And their dignity is that all present dignity to You.

- ❖ In an amazing humility, the apostle Paul says
That he is immortal like them;
That he is the foremost among sinners;
In order to embrace by his loving heart every soul to You,
O, Savior of sinners.

THE SECOND PREACHING JOURNEY OF ST. PAUL (Acts 15.40-18.22)

- 1- From Antioch to **Lystra** (Acts 15.40). St Timothy joined St. Paul and St. Silas in Lystra.
- 2- From Lystra to **Troas** (Acts 16.6-8).
- 3- From Troas to **Philippi** (Acts 16.11-12), where Lydia converted (Acts 16.13-15), Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16.24).
- 4- From Philippi to **Thessalonica** (acts (Acts 16.40 – 17.1), the mob assault Jason's house (Acts 17.5).
- 5- From Thessalonica to **Berea** (Acts 17.10).
- 6- From Berea to **Athens** (Acts 17.14-15), There he delivered a sermon on the Mount of Areopagus (Acts 17.22).
- 7- From Athens to **Corinth** (Acts 18.1). Beating of Sosthenes (Acts 18.17).
- 8- From Corinth to **Ephesus** (Acts 18.18-19). His sermon (Acts 18.19).
- 9- From Ephesus to **Jerusalem** (Acts 18.21-22).
- 10- From Jerusalem to **Antioch** (Acts 18.22).

TWO PROBLEMS IN ANTIOCH

Before starting the second preaching journey, two things happened, although sad, yet they contributed in the growth of the church.

1- In spite of being sick and physically weak, St. Paul insisted on preaching with great zeal. As he wrote to them: “You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject ... for I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me” (Gal. 4.13-15). As many Gentiles accepted the Christian faith, the fanatic Jews sought that they should first pass through Judaism, before gaining the Christian Baptism and the church fellowship. Such movement was called Judaizing, as they sought from the Christians, either proselyte Jews or Gentiles, to keep the Mosaic law; whereas both Jews and Proselytes, who were connected to other cultures, especially the Greek, did not consider that a necessity; For example, Philo the Jew from Alexandria, who believed that it is enough to practice the statutes of worship by the spiritual, not by the literal sense.

When St. Peter suddenly came to Antioch, he rejoiced because of the success of the ministry, and shared with those converted their food; but when certain people came from Jerusalem, he retreated for fear of offending them. This behavior led the apostle Paul to withstand him openly (Gal. 2.11-16), (which we have already dealt with in our commentary on the epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians).

The church of the Old Testament faced the same problem. When the Jews came out of Egypt, many others joined the Jewish religion, and forsook the idol worship (Exod. 12.38), and they had to be circumcised. In several countries, the Jews had their influence, When some of the Gentiles accepted the Christian faith, there have been for them a certain rite concerning their circumcision, gaining Baptism, and training them on the Jewish rites, Those, called proselytes, seriously caring for their salvation, when they heard the preaching of the gospel, accepted it.

That problem grew so big, that there was need to hold the first apostolic church council in the year 47 AD, to discuss the issues pertaining to the joining of the Gentiles to the Christian faith.

2- A dispute happened between the apostle Paul and the apostle Barnabas, when the apostle Paul insisted that they should not take with them the apostle John Mark, who had left them in the middle of the way in Perga Pamphilia, probably because of illness. This dispute ended up that Barnabas took Mark and set forth to Cyprus; whereas Paul took Silas and set forth on his second preaching journey (Acts 15.40).

CHAPTER 15

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

Some estimate the interval between the previous visit by the apostles Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, and the one mentioned in this chapter, to be about five years. They came, not out of great longing to be in the city of God, to worship in the temple, and to recall the memory of their fathers; but they came carrying a great crop of the Gentiles who accepted the faith, and the churches that were established in several cities. They also came to seek a collective decision concerning the Gentiles converted to faith.

1- A call to Judaizing in Antioch	1
2- Paul and Barnabas going up to Jerusalem	2 -- 5
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10- The beginning of the second preaching journey	40 – 41

1- A CALL TO JUDAIZING IN ANTIOCH

“And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15.1).

Since the church set forth, the enemy fought her from the outside as well as from the inside. From the outside there were persecutions; and from the inside were dissensions and diversion from the truth.

The entrance of the Gentiles into the Christian faith in great numbers in many countries agitated the Christians from Jewish origin. After they had constituted the majority as members of the church, they became a minority before the Gentile proselytes. This, according to them, represented a danger against keeping the law. As it was not possible to stop that divine current, they entered into disputes, that the Gentiles had first to Judaize; I.E., should be circumcised and literally keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15.1).

Those who believed in the literality of the law, even after accepting the Christian faith, constituted a strong front opposing the apostle Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles, who sought to free the gentiles from that literality. This front persisted until the last moments of his life. In his last journey, the

apostles said to him, “You see brother, how many myriads of Jew there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law” (Acts 21.20).

It is noteworthy that St. Peter, when the Holy Spirit called him to preach in the house of Cornelius the Gentile, did not commit him to be circumcised; but the Holy Ghost dwelt upon him and those who were with him and they were baptized. He would sit and eat with the Gentiles, but when he heard that some people came from Jerusalem, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision (Gal. 2.12).

His abstention of eating with the Gentiles before those of the circumcision, although he did not say it publicly, is an actual proclamation of their unworthiness to be equal to them, unless they first be circumcised and pledge to literally keep the law. This thought spread in several countries, especially in Galatia, and reached as far as Rome; and the church was almost divided into a church of the Gentiles and a church of the circumcision. St. Paul dealt with that in his epistle to the Romans. It was one of the factors that caused contentions in the church of Corinth, that some claimed to be of Paul, while others claimed to be of Cephas (1 Cor. 1.12).

Such a contention is not something new, but it was there among the Jews before Christianity. Dr. Whitby noticed what came in a work by the historian Eusebius,¹ that when Izates, the son of Helen the queen of Adiabine, converted to Judaism, Ananias proclaimed that this can be realized without the need for circumcision, Whereas Eleazar counted his remaining uncircumcised as great evil.

Josephus, in his autobiography, mentions that when two prominent personalities among the Gentiles resorted to him when they intended to get converted to Judaism, some of the zealous Jews insisted that they should be circumcised, while he himself tried to persuade them otherwise. That dispute persisted along the generations, even after the onset of Christianity. The zealous Jews refer their persistence on keeping the Mosaic rites to the following:

- 1- They are divine statutes that are irreversible.
- 2- The Lord Christ came to consummate not to destroy the law.

Those thought that it was not possible to enjoy salvation without following the law literally, especially the circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, the feasts, and the statutes of purification, without which man would eternally go to hell. Whereas the moderate, although not denying those facts, yet believed that they do not contradict with realizing the spiritual circumcision of the senses, and practicing the rites with constructive spiritual thought, not with the deadly letter. They believe that the goal of the law is to lead us to our Lord Jesus Christ who justifies those who believe in Him. Therefore, going back to the literality of the law is a retreat and diversion from the goal of the law itself.

2-PAUL AND BARNABAS GOING UP TO JERUSALEM

¹ *Antiq.* 20.38-45.

“Therefore when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question”(Acts 15.2).

That was the third visit by St. Paul to Jerusalem mentioned in his epistle to the Galatians (2.1) that came 14 years after his first visit.

The first visit: it was three years after the Lord Christ appeared to him. He then ministered in Arabia. It ended up by his escape from Damascus, let down through the wall in a large basket. He came to Jerusalem, where he met the apostle Peter, and stayed with him fifteen days, during which he saw none of the other apostles, except James, the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1.18-19). That was before the year 40 AD. He got away with difficulty from a plot to kill him.

The second visit: in the year 44AD, when he came with a delegation from Antioch to present help to the poor of Judea during the famine, after which he hastened to go back (Acts 11.30, 12.25).

The third visit: in the year 49 or 50 AD, He came carrying the joyful fruit of preaching, and to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice for the exalted work of God. Then, he got the vow of fellowship from the three pillars in Jerusalem: Peter, James the Lord’s brother called the righteous, and John the beloved (Gal. 2.6-10). They have realized that God entrusted Peter on the gospel of circumcision, and Paul on that of the Gentiles.

As there happened a contention concerning judaizing the Gentiles before being accepted into Christian faith, and because that issue was of vital importance, the apostle Paul felt that much of the energy of the church is wasted in dissension and disputes instead of the preoccupation with preaching among the Gentiles, and that it caused an offense before those who accepted the faith. As that issue took a collective tendency, there was great need for a firm collective apostolic decision.

St. John Chrysostom believes that this contention ended up into the benefit of the church.

❖ "Let us not then be offended on account of the heretics. For look, here at the very outset of the preaching, how many offences there were: I do not speak of those which arose from them that were without; for these were nothing: but of the offences which were within. ... Let us not then be disturbed, if certain are offended, but let us thank God even for this, because it makes us more approved. ... A man is no such great lover of the truth, only for holding to it when there is none to lead him astray from it: to hold fast to the truth when many are drawing him away, this makes the proved man. ... **But since offences do come, they are no hurt, to these, but even a benefit:** just as the persecutors unwillingly benefit the Martyrs by dragging them to martyrdom, and yet they are not driven to this by God; just so is it here. Let us not look (only at this), that men are offended: this very thing is itself a proof of the excellence of the doctrine-that many stimulate and counterfeit it"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 33.

Why was Jerusalem chosen as the site of the apostolic council?

1- The Christians at that time, most probably, looked at Jerusalem as the source of church authority, as there, the events of salvation have been realized; and from it, seeds of ministry and preaching have set forth to the whole world. The church of Jerusalem is considered as the mother church, even by the Christians of Gentile origin.

2- As Jerusalem embraced the majority of the apostles and disciples of experience, and as many apostles used to go everywhere preaching, then return to Jerusalem as the center, it was the best site for taking decision on anything under dispute, in particular, the issue of the Gentile proselytes.

3- As the great majority of the converts were of Jewish origin, it was preferable to take the decisions in Jerusalem, to avoid any future opposition, in case they were taken in a Gentile church.

4- As some of the Christians of Jewish origin felt a kind of discomfort because of the opening of ministry to the Gentiles, they had to realize the extent of joy of the apostles as a whole for God's work among the Gentiles.

“So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren” (Acts 15.3).

The apostles Paul and Barnabas, and certain others with them, went up to Jerusalem to attend an apostolic council. On their way, they passed through Phoenicia (Lebanon) and Samaria, where they talked about the work of God among the Gentiles; and those regions were full of open-minded Jews; they rejoiced greatly for the salvation of the Gentiles and their acceptance of the faith.

St. Paul and those who were with him, having been rejoicing in spirit for the exalted work of God and the salvation of many, on their way to Jerusalem, intended to share their spiritual joy with the churches. The Christian is a source of joy for all those around him, always giving the good tidings, to let believers experience the deposit of heaven.

“And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all things that God had done with them” (Acts 15.4).

The church in Jerusalem received that delegation with pleasure; and all listened to the work of God among the Gentiles. Amid that jubilant atmosphere of friendship and love, St. Paul and St. Barnabas and those with them reported all things that God had done with them. They did not boast their efforts, or talked about their wisdom and faculties, but the whole discourse was about the excellent grace of God.

“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses’” (Acts 15.5).

The leadership of the church was undoubtedly cornered between their joy for the spreading of ministry in the world, and their fear from the wrath of the bigot Jews, especially that the church of the Gentiles was spreading and extending with a quick rate.

Some believe that the Pharisees accepted the Christian faith to confirm their principle and dogma in the resurrection against the Sadducees; but it was not possible for some of them to forsake their commitment to the literality of the law. After accepting the Christian faith, they kept the old leaven.

3- THE FIRST CHURCH COUNCIL

“So the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter” (Acts 15.6).

The apostles came together with the presbyters to consider the matter with the spirit of love and humility. The apostles did not intend to take decisions away from the priests of the church.

4- THE APOSTLE PETER ADDRESSING THE COUNCIL

“And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe’ (Acts 15.7).

This council is considered a marvelous example of church conventions, where no one monopolizes the decision, but an equal chance was given to discuss the two points of view openly and frankly, in an atmosphere of love. The decisions were not hastily taken, but after ‘much dispute’. Paul and Barnabas represented the liberal thinking; whereas some believers of the sect of the Pharisees represented the conservative side.

St. Peter, on one side, represented the church of the circumcision, and was so known for keeping the law, that he was expected by some to oppose St. Paul the apostle of the Gentiles, and who on another side, was the one called upon by the Holy Spirit to preach in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile Centurion, about ten years ago; hence, he says, "**a good while ago**". That was the last reference to St. Peter in the book of Acts, as though St. Luke, after parading the work of God in his work, preparing the atmosphere for the ministry among the Gentiles, completed the Book by covering the great role that was taken by the apostle of the Gentiles to preach, reaching even to Rome, the capital of the known world at that time.

Some believe that the role played by St. Paul, when he rebuked St. Peter and withstood him publicly for withdrawing from sharing meals with Christians from Gentile origin, had its effectiveness (Gal. 2.11). St. Peter refers to the work of God with him when He called him to accept the Gentile Cornelius into faith, and to baptize him together with all his household. Here St. Peter marvels, how something that was already decided be discussed again! Although he is not the apostle to the Gentiles, yet God has called him early to minister to them "**a good while ago**". What they were discussing then had come to his mind; and the answer came from heaven, when he saw the sheet and heard the command to eat without saying that something is common or unclean.

St. Peter was wondering, "I have preached to the first Gentile through a call from God Himself, and no one protested against receiving him and those with him into faith without being circumcised. So why are you protesting now against those preached by the apostle Paul?"

Many scholars believe that although the apostle Peter was known for his flaring zeal toward ministry, and the salvation of all: Jews as well as Gentiles, yet there was no indication that he was the head of the council. He did not open or close it, but it went through much disputes with no reference to the names of the speakers, or to the details of the discussions. St. Peter could have spoken, because he was the eldest of those present, and because he was used to taking part in discussions (Acts 2.14, 3.6, 12), beside being with experience, having passed through that same situation with Cornelius. Finally, many Christians of Jewish origin used to look up at him as someone who keeps the law, having been the apostle of the circumcised. So they were ready to listen to him in this concern. He was never accused like the apostle Paul, of being liberal in that concern.

“So God who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us” (Acts 15.8).

God, Who searches the hearts and knows their secrets, knows thoroughly whether those Gentiles have returned to Him faithfully and honestly or not; And having granted them His Holy Spirit on the same level He did to the Jews, what objection can man present?

“And made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15.9).

This very concise phrase came as an internal revolution by the Holy Spirit Himself, to introduce a new concept for the salvation, which exalts above the letter, penetrates the soul, and reigns upon the heart. It is the practical living faith in Jesus Christ the Savior.

The council was held to discuss the situation of the converted Gentiles concerning the Mosaic Law. And here, St. Peter reveals the liberation from the letter of the law, not only as far as the Gentiles are concerned, but also for every believer, even if he is of Jewish origin.

St. Peter proclaims that he is not presenting a personal view, but the testimony of the Holy Spirit Himself, granted to the Gentiles by God the Father who searches the hearts, and that God made no distinction between a Jew and a Gentile in giving the gift of the Holy Spirit. ***“As he did to us”***, without the need for conducting a special rite of the law, ***“made no distinction between us and them”***.

The dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles is a practical proclamation of God’s verdict concerning the Gentiles, that they returned to Him faithfully and held fast to faith in Him. By His dwelling, God welcomes the Gentiles to share with the Jews the same faith with no partiality or distinction. Why then were they put aside from the Jews, who thought that they were holier than them (Isa. 56.5)?

“The Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body” (Eph. 3.6), fellows in the membership in the body of the Lord Christ, where there is no circumcision or uncircumcision.

They were not circumcised, and did not literally consummate the Mosaic Law, Nevertheless God revealed that keeping these customs is not an important condition for Him to accept man, and to enjoy fellowship with Him. God did not give the Jews any privileges over the Gentiles, but justified and sanctified all, and granted them His gifts on equal terms.

“Purifying their hearts by faith”: What the law could not do in the life of the Jews, having been unable to purify the hidden hearts and consciences, have been realized by the faith in Christ by both the Jews and Gentiles. The purification of their hearts is a practical testimony that they did not need to be committed to the customs concerning the Mosaic Law.

- ❖ "That Baptism also which is conferred once for all, cleanses by faith. And the Apostle Peter thus speaks in his Epistle, “In the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight souls, were saved through water” And then he added, "Not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3.20-21). This answer 'of a good conscience' did the Pharisees despise, and washed "that which was without;" within they continued full of pollution" ¹.
- ❖ "For who would not care for, and diligently seek the means of purifying that eye whereby he may see Him whom he longs after with an entire affection? The Divine record has expressly mentioned this when it says "purifying their hearts by faith" (9). The faith of God then purifies the heart, the pure heart sees God. ... Let us then make a distinction in our faith, and not be content to believe. This is no such faith as purifies the heart. "Purifying their hearts," it is said, "by faith." But by what, and what kind of faith, save that which the Apostle Paul defines when he says, "Faith which works by love" (Gal. 5.6). That faith distinguishes us from the faith of devils, and from the infamous and abandoned conduct of men; ... and which hopes for what God promises. Nothing is more exact or perfect than this definition. There are then in faith these three things. He in whom that faith is which works by love, must necessarily hope for that which God promises. Hope therefore is the associate of faith. For hope is necessary as long as we see not what we believe, lest perhaps through not seeing, and by despairing to see, we fail. That we do not see makes us sad; but that we hope we shall see comforts us. Hope than is here, and she is the associate of faith. And then charity also, by which we long, and strive to attain, and glow with desire, and hunger and thirst" ².

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ The Gentiles also believe in Him to be justified, as there is no distinction as far as faith is concerned between a Jew and a Gentile. Where there is neither circumcision or uncircumcision, they both become one in Christ³.

(Ambrosiaster)

“Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15.10)

¹ *Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 56 .1.*

² *Sermon on N.T. lessons, 3.11.*

³ *Comm. On Paul's Epistles (Rom. 4.7).*

Firmly, St. Peter rebukes the teachers who put aside the essence, namely, purifying the heart by faith to enjoy the divine presence, and preoccupy themselves with following literal customs which are unable to penetrate the heart to cleanse it. He strongly rebukes those who commit the Gentiles to the Mosaic Law. His speech came to imply the liberation of even the Jew from the literality of the law, as it is a yoke that no one is able to bear.

If God purifies their hearts by faith, without committing them to the Mosaic law, why then do they surpass God Himself and test Him by applying such pressure on the Gentiles, and by committing them to what God Himself did not seek from them? If God has accepted them, as they are, through faith, why should they put God to anger by seeking things He has forsaken, because they were a shadow of some fact that has been already consummated; and hence the shadow is of no more significance.

Comparing between the literal commitments of the law and the grace of faith, the apostle counts the first as a heavy yoke; whereas the second is the freedom of the glory of God's children. The first was called by the apostle Paul as "a yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5.1), as the yoke is a symbol of bondage (1 Tim. 6.1), of grief (Lam. 3.27), of transgression (Lam. 1.14), and of affliction.

The yoke of the law blocks the freedom of faith, the freedom of the glory of God's children. Christ came to redeem the captives, and to bring the good news of freedom (Neh. 5.8).

St. Peter frankly revealed the bemoaning that he felt concerning the burden of the literality of the law on his own neck, of those around him, as well as those of his fathers. The Lord Christ came to lift from us the unbearable yoke of the literality of the law, to grant us His easy and light yoke (Matt. 11.30). His yoke presented even the righteousness which is in the law, blameless (Phil. 3.6), having completed it to our account. The cross revealed the difference between the yoke of the law and that of Christ in the person of the right-hand robber. The law condemned him to the worst forms of death; Yet as he looked with faith to the Lord, and his faith led him to a simple action: the testimony to Him in the midst of the riot of the crucifiers (Luke 23.47), he enjoyed the yoke of Christ: "Today, you will be with me in paradise".

St. Peter asked us to show compassion to others, and not to be like those who "bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matt. 23.4).

❖ As the law brought grief to the Israelites, as admitted by them, and as revealed by the apostles, they rebuked those who sought to bring back those who believed in Christ to practice the rites of the law.

The Savior Himself taught, crying out, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11.28). He says that those who are under the law labored and were heavy-hearted. He called Himself gentle; that is not an attribute of the law. The apostle Paul says, "Anyone who rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Heb. 10.28).

The Lord says, “Woe to you also, you lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (Luke 11.46)¹.

- ❖ The law was bitter, as its punishment was death, and about that Paul testified: “Anyone who rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Heb. 10.28). It was bitter, unacceptable, and unbearable to the fathers (Acts 15.10). And as the waters of Marah was bitter (Exod. 15.23), but were made sweet by the cross. ...Now, as the shadow changed to spiritual contemplation, we see by the eyes of the mind the secret of Christ that was hidden in the symbols of the law, Despite the bitterness of the law, it became no more as such later on².

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ It seems to me that the Holy Spirit in His turn exhorts the believers to say these words: “Let us break their bonds in pieces, and cast away their cords from us” (PS. 2.3), and take upon ourselves the easy and light yoke of the Lord. That is his call: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11.29-30). Now, the law itself is called a yoke by the holy apostles. The inspired Peter says in the book of Acts: “Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” ... Let us keep our hearts from desiring to submit to them (the chains). Let us cast away from us the yoke of the law. Let us not give any chance to the symbol, unless we understand it spiritually. Let the shadow be counted worthless, unless it reveals the secret of Christ³.

(Father Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ The apostles were banned from having two tunics, as only one is enough for them – the inner tunic. They do not want the outer one, but seek what is up there. Jesus allowed them to have one tunic, the inner one⁴.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ God does what the law can not do, That is why we reject the literal Jewish customs, on account that they do not concern us, as it is impossible that God may have made them to satisfy the needs of the gentiles; whereas we joyfully accept the Jewish prophecies that concern us⁵.

(Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea)

“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (Acts 15.11).

¹ *Comm. On St. Luke. hom. 85.*

² *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 60.*

³ *On Ps. 2.*

⁴ *Hom. on Leviticus. 3.5.*

⁵ *Proof of the Gospel. 1.7.*

While the Jewish teachers proclaimed that the circumcision is essential for salvation, St. Peter here reveals that the matter is utterly not so: the Gentiles enjoy salvation on the same level of those of circumcision I.E., the circumcision is of no benefit, as far as the Gentiles are concerned; he should concentrate his eyes on the grace of the Lord Christ for salvation.

St. Peter revealed what is beyond the faith in the Lord Christ, namely, the divine grace that draws man and supports him to enjoy salvation. This free grace is presented to all who seek it: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3.28).

- ❖ He says "***Because you are saved by grace***", so that the greatness granted to you would not make you haughty. ... Even faith is not from us, because if Christ did not come, and did not call us, how could we believe? ... Faith is a gift from God, not through work. You may ask, "Is faith enough for our salvation?" No! ...
- ❖ Confess that you are saved by grace, to feel that God is the Creditor. ... If we refer our good works to God, the reward for our humility would be greater than for the works themselves.
- ❖ If the grace does not expect something from us, it would be poured abundantly in all souls, but as it does, it dwells in some and not in others. It also does not appear in others, as God first stipulates the prior choice¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

5-A SPEECH BY PAUL AND BARNABAS

"Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15.12).

St. Peter presented his ministry in the house of Cornelius as a living example for the work of the Holy Spirit who does not seek the circumcision of the Gentiles who believe. Whereas St. Paul and St. Barnabas presented the exalted works of God, His signs and miracles, for the sake of drawing many Gentiles in several countries.

The multitude (pleethos) kept quiet to listen to a report of God's work among the Gentiles. Although the apostles and the priests had the leadership of the council, yet the multitude attending had fellowship and role in it.

St. Luke did not mention the details of their discussions, because the book of Acts is mainly written to tell about the exalted work of God, the signs and miracles done among the Gentiles, and how they enjoyed the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the same level as the Jews, and even more, because the Jews have often shut their hearts before Him.

¹ *De Gompunct. PG 47.408.*

St. Peter appealed to God, the giver of the Holy Spirit with no discrimination and the granter of the divine grace to all, as He is the one who called the gentiles and obliged St. Peter to preach the Gospel to them against his own will. Who then can protest?

It was up to St. Peter, the apostle of circumcision, to take that role of defense, as the bigots could not have received it from St. Paul or St. Barnabas.

Now it was the turn of St. Paul and St. Barnabas, after St. Peter paved the way for them, to present a practical testimony of the signs and miracles, done through them.

❖ "For that I (St. Paul) have accomplished the purpose for which I was sent, and that my words are not mere boast, the miracles, and the obedience of the Gentiles show. ... See how violently he tries to show that the whole is God's doing, and nothing his own" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ The signs differ from the miracles in that the signs are wonders that refer to future things, whereas the miracles are mere wonders that happen².

(The scholar Origen)

6- THE APOSTLE JAMES' CONCLUDING SPEECH

"And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, 'Men and brethren, listen to me'" (Acts 15.13).

He was probably the last one of the family of the Lord Christ according to the flesh who believed in Him, and he appeared to him personally after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15.7). He was known as 'James the righteous' even among the Jews, having been known for his wisdom and strict keeping of the law and Jewish rites before he believed in the Lord Christ. Then after believing, he had special reverence among the converted Jews who remained keeping the letter of the Law of Moses.

It seems that St. James has already heard from St. Paul and St. Barnabas about God's work among the Gentiles; and during the council he did not interrupt them, but let them say all what was in their heart until they had become silent.

He spoke with the spirit of brotherhood in love and respect for those present: *"Men and brethren"*.

"Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name" (Acts 15.14).

Referring to St. Peter's speech, he mentioned his Jewish name 'Simon', to find better acceptance among the bigot Jews.

"And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written" (Acts 15.15).

¹ Hom. On Rom. hom. 29.

² Comm. On Rom. 15.19.

Thus, St. James said the last decisive word, not referring to the vision seen by St. Peter, or to the signs and miracles spoken of by both St. Paul and St. Barnabas; but he referred to the words of the prophets, as that testimony no Jew could oppose. What was happening was not something new to them, but was already seen by the prophets by the Spirit of prophecy. They prophesied about the call to the Gentiles (Rom. 10.19); and the devout Jews proclaimed that the Messiah is coming “as light to bring revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2.32).

“After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up” (Acts 15.16).

Here, St. James mentioned a prophecy which seemed vague and difficult for the Jews to interpret.

When the Jews rebelled against God, and did not care for their salvation, God talked to the prophets as though He has deserted His people, or as a husband who divorced His wife. Now He says, “***I will return***”, proclaiming His presence among His people to reign on their hearts, and to proclaim His kingdom in them. And He used to say, “Return to Me, says the Lord of Hosts, and I will return to you”.

St. James quoted the Septuagint version of the text that prophesied about the fall of the tabernacle of David, through the division of the kingdom into the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah, and their fall under captivity. That tabernacle was not set, even after the return from captivity, as Israel was under the occupation of the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. The tabernacle of David was not rebuilt except by the coming of the Son of David, who set the church of the New Testament instead of that of the Old Testament, inviting to its membership all the nations. The Lord Christ has wiped out by His blood and His resurrection the disgrace of the people, and gave them the unity of the Spirit, the heart, and the thought, to set the church, the new Israel; that built what was destroyed, and brought glory instead of shame. The secret of the glory is the acceptance of faith by the Gentiles, and their unity with the baptized Jews in their acceptance of the name of the Lord.

The sign of forsaking His people, who rejected the divine presence, was the fall down of the tabernacle, allowing the Gentiles to take over the Ark of Testimony, as it happened in the days of King Saul, or the devastation of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. And the sign of His returning to them was the return of the Ark of Testimony, or rebuilding the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

It is clear that what came here of the prophecy does not bear the literal meaning but the symbolic, as the prophet is presenting the divine promise after the palace of David and the temple were built, and still he says, “I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down”, referring to the fall of the kingdom of David, and the setting of the spiritual kingdom of the Son of David in the heart of every believer, and among the believers, as a holy church and a royal people.

“So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things” (Acts 15.17).

Here, the divine promise conforms, on the tongue of the prophet, the entrance of the Gentiles into the enjoyment of the privileges of the children of God.

By the “rest of mankind”, He means the non-Jews, namely the Gentiles, in the Hebrew version “Edom”, that refers to (mankind) or to (humanity).

“Known to God from eternity, are all His works” (Acts 15.18).

What is happening is the realization of an eternal plan by God concerning the salvation of the whole world.

St. James quoted the prophecy of the prophet Amos in the eighth century BC, which connects between the glory of Israel and the call of the Gentiles to faith: “‘On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name’, says the Lord who does this thing” (Amos 9.11, 12). This glorified work, namely, setting up the tabernacle of David which has fallen down, to embrace inside it both the Jews and the Gentiles together as one people, represents a divine plan known by God since eternity. It is not man’s work, but the amazing works of God.

“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15.19).

The Greek word meaning “I judge” is a legal term used by a judge issuing his verdict.

“We should not trouble”: Faith is not a heavy yoke by which a person is committed; but it is a divine gift that brings to a soul comfort and inner peace.

St. James, as the chairman of the council, issued the final decision, after which there was no place for further discussion; then the session of the council was adjourned.

“But we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15.20).

The council presented four commendations that touch the behavior, to which a Gentile entering the faith is committed, which are:

1- **Abstaining from things polluted by idols**, like eating meat, and drinking wine, offered as sacrifices to the idols, as they are unclean in the sight of the Jew, who considered it as a kind of fellowship in the pagan worship, and rejected it altogether. That does not imply that this meat is unclean in itself, but because it was intended by the pagans to be part of the worship. A believer should abstain from eating it, even if he in good conscience considers all creation as clean, yet, because of his love for his brother with a weak conscience, he should abstain from eating it, if he knows that it was offered to the idols. The apostle Paul dealt with this point in more detail in (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8.1).

2- **Abstaining from sexual immorality**, as many of the pagans were known for sexual immorality, as the priestesses practiced adultery to please the gods, as fund raising for the temple of the

idol, and as a kind of worship in the feasts of the gods. Those practices were well known all over the world, shamelessly done, as there was no law among the pagans to ban it. That is why, Christianity had to take an obvious and clear stand to confront them.

3- **Abstaining from eating strangled beasts or birds**, counted as unclean dead bodies (Gen. 9; Lev. 17).

4- **Abstaining from drinking blood**: a consummation of the previous commandment, as blood is counted as the life in which is the soul (Leviticus 17.11). It was the custom among some of the pagans when they avenge against someone, to kill him then to drink his blood. Drinking blood was well known among the Gentiles, during offering sacrifices, setting covenants, and festivities.

Some may wonder why the council did not refer to abstaining from other sins and crimes like stealing, and murder, beside abstaining from idol worship, eating strangled things, drinking blood, and practicing sexual immoralities. The scholar Origen believes that the council referred only to what the Gentiles considered as allowed, and not banned by their civil or criminal laws. God's intention was for those crimes to be punished by the judges in the world, and not by the representatives of the church. The church regards the judges and the rulers of this world as ministers of God who punish the wicked¹.

❖ "And concerning food let these be your ordinances, since in regard to meats also many stumble. For some deal indifferently with things offered to idols, while others discipline themselves, but condemn those that eat: and in different ways men's souls are defiled in the matter of meats, from ignorance of the useful reasons for eating and not eating. For we fast by abstaining from wine and flesh, not because we abhor them as abominations, but because we look for our reward; that having scorned things sensible, we may enjoy a spiritual and intellectual feast; and that having now sown in tears we may reap in joy in the world to come (Ps. 126.5). ...

Guard your soul safely, lest at any time you eat of things offered to idols: for concerning meats of this kind, not only I at this time, but before now Apostles also, and James the bishop of this Church, have had earnest care: and the Apostles and Elders write a Catholic epistle to all the Gentiles, that they should abstain first from things offered to idols, and then from blood also and from things strangled (Acts 15.20-29). For many men being of savage nature, and living like dogs, both lap up blood in imitation of the manner of the fiercest beasts, and greedily devour things strangled. But you, the servant of Christ, in eating observe to eat with reverence"².

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

“For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15.21).

¹ *Commentary on Rom. 13.4.*

² *Catec. Lect. 4.27-28.*

Some believe that St. James confirms that, because the previous commandments are committing, as they touch the spiritual life of the Jew, and because they are supported by the books of the law, always read in the synagogues wherever they are, It is fitting for the believer to bear the same features, that do not concern a rite of worship, as much as spiritual behavior.

7- A DELEGATION TO ANTIOCH

“Then it pleased the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren” (Acts 15.22).

Fifteen years ago, Saul of Tarsus set forth from Jerusalem, carrying letters of recommendation from the chief priests to persecute the church of Christ, and to confiscate the wealth of the Christians and to kill them. Today, he sets forth from Jerusalem, together with Barnabas, Barsabas, and Silas, carrying letters of recommendation from the apostles to be compassionate to the believers of the Gentiles who return to the church of Christ, to relieve them from the literality of the law.

The apostles and the elders agreed on sending a faithful delegation of Judas Barsabas and Silas, to relay the view of the church, together with a message written by the apostles, most probably in Greek. This delegation was to accompany the apostles Paul and Barnabas and the others. By this decision, the church gave St. Paul and St. Barnabas the chance to preach and teach among the Gentiles freely, without wasting time in endless disputes.

“With the whole church”: A marvelous fellowship between the church and the congregation, even in taking essential decisions that touch the life and future of the church.

“Leading men among the brethren”: of the leaders or elders of the congregation, with influence and experience in the church.

“They wrote this letter by them: ‘The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia’” (Acts 15.23).

The Spirit of fraternity and unity prevailed upon the church. The church of Jerusalem writes to her sisters in Syria and Cilicia, with the Spirit of mutual respect. The message was not sent by a certain apostle like St. Peter or St. James the Bishop of Jerusalem, as one of authority, but came from the apostles, the priests, together with the elders (the brethren).

The church did not know the individual authority, whatever the holiness or the position of the leader may be. Thus, the basis that the Roman papacy is to be based upon the seniority of St. Peter has no significance, as St. Peter has never got nor coveted that seniority. Equally, St. James, as the Bishop of Jerusalem, has not occupied that position. What preoccupied the minds of all was the Spirit of unity in humility for the sake of God’s glory alone, and the edification of the (Catholic) church.

“Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’ – to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15.24).

Firmly and with a spirit of truth, they rebuked those who taught that the newly converted Christians should be judaized I.E., should be circumcised, keeping the law and Jewish customs. It seems that those people have referred that teaching to the apostles, who were committed to reveal their deceit, and to clarify the attitude of the church.

They considered that those people have separated themselves from the church of Christ, and became no more referred to her. They made the believers lose their inner peace, and caused them disturbance of mind.

“Unsettling your souls”: robbing you of the peace of mind. The Greek word means collecting the pottery used in a house for throwing it away. The word is used referring to thieves, robbers and enemies who steal properties. Here, it is used to refer to those who cause confusion and disturbance of mind, and deprive the mind of peace.

“It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul: men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15.25-26).

This is a living testimony from the church, that the two apostles have risked their lives for the sake of the kingdom of God and the preaching of the word.

“We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth” (Acts 15.27).

Together with the two apostles Barnabas and Paul, who preach the Gentiles, and a letter from the council of the apostles held in Jerusalem, they sent two delegates, Judas and Silas, to answer all their questions by the word of mouth.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Acts 15.28).

Here we see the faith of those present in the leadership of the Holy Spirit of the apostolic council, and of the church, according to the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 18.18 – 20; John 14.26).

❖ "The apostles also said: ***“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us”*** (Acts 15.28). And when they say, 'it seemed good', they point out not only the Worker of the grace, but also the Author of the carrying out of that which was commanded"¹.

(St. Ambrose)

¹ On the Holy Spirit. 2.13.144.

“That you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15.29).

The council began its work under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and St. Peter started his address by clarifying that he is not presenting his personal opinion, but what the Holy Spirit has committed him, when He commanded Him to preach in the house of Cornelius the Gentile. And here, the council is stating that its decision is issued based upon the view of the Holy Spirit, who works in the life of the apostles, and of those who respond to Him. The apostles felt that the session of the council was under the shadow of the Holy Spirit and His leadership.

❖ "As though they were providing for infant children, they gave them milk to drink, not solid food. (1 Cor. 3.2). Nor did they lay down rules for continence, nor hint at virginity, nor urge to fasting, nor repeat the directions given in the Gospel to the Apostles, not to have two tunics, nor scrip, nor money in their girdles, nor staff in their hand, nor shoes on their feet (Matt. 10.10; Luke 10.5). And they certainly did not bid them, if they wished to be perfect, go and sell all that they had and give to the poor, and come and follow Him (Matt. 19.21) " ¹.

(St. Jerome)

“You will do well”: you will do what is true and right.

“Farewell”: an expression that bears the meaning of “Be sound and strong”.

8- COMFORT IN ANTIOCH

“So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch, and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement” (Acts 15.30-31).

This apostolic letter gave the multitudes joy and comfort, as on the one hand, it put an end to the inner disputes, and probably to the disturbance of mind in the one individual, between his own wish to enjoy the freedom of glory of the children of God, and his fear of being counted as a breaker of the Mosaic law, that he received from God. And on the other hand, the believers of Gentile origin felt that the church had spacious mind, and cared for the Spirit, not for the deadly letter, with true love, as the church in Jerusalem with its leadership has felt the great burden of the yoke, that the teachers, calling for Judaizing, intended to put on their necks.

That letter came, not in the form of a verdict issued by a court, or by someone of authority, but, together with the spirit of firmness, bore touches of true and faithful love, radiating a joyful Spirit.

“Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them” (Acts 15.32).

¹ Against Jovinianus. Book 1.34.

Judas and Silas were prophets, namely, preachers of future things and of eternal life; they had the talent of saying words attractive to souls. It seems that Paul and Barnabas gave them the chance to talk to the congregation and the leadership, to answer their questions, so that the two apostles Paul and Barnabas should not be accused of being liberals, who do not care for the law.

“And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles” (Acts 15.33).

They were not in a hurry, but stayed for a time, not only to convince the Jewish believers to abstain from committing those from the Gentiles to bear the yoke of the law, but to minister to the people, and to edify them spiritually. They mixed the Theological thought with the practical spiritual life.

Having succeeded in their mission, and as the church got filled with peace, they returned to Jerusalem to convey the good news to the apostles.

“However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there” (Acts 15.34).

This phrase did not come in many of the old versions, especially the Coptic, the Syrian, and the Arabic, as it came in the Vulgate, “It seemed good to Silas to remain there, whereas Judas returned alone to Jerusalem”.

“Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (Acts 15.35).

❖ "They did not simply tarry in Antioch, but taught. What did they "teach," and what "preach" (evangelize)? They both (taught) those that were already believers, and (evangelized) those that were not yet such"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

We do not know how long the two apostles St. Paul and St. Barnabas remained in Antioch. Some believe that during that period, the dispute between St. Peter and St. Paul, mentioned in (Gal. 2.11-12, happened.

9- A CONTENTION BETWEEN PAUL AND BARNABAS

“Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing’” (Acts 15.36).

The success of the ministry of St. Paul and St. Barnabas in Antioch, and the atmosphere of peace that prevailed, did not curtail the interest and care of St. Paul for his brethren whom he and St. Barnabas have taught and preached. He longed to water what he planted, and visit them. The feeling of responsibility to preach among the Gentiles did not forsake him. He intended to set forth on a new

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.

preaching journey, despite his awareness of the troubles and tribulations that used to confront him during his journeys.

Despite the exalted paternal position of the apostle Paul, especially in the cities where he set churches, counting himself as though he had given birth to them in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, he used to call all the members of the church: Bishops, Priests, and congregation, as “our brethren”.

He asked Barnabas to go with him to the churches where they taught and preached, “To see how they are doing”, to visit the churches, to share their joy and comfort by the Holy Spirit, as well as their sufferings and tribulations, to practice the fellowship of practical love.

“Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work” (Acts 15.37-38).

It seems that the departure of St. Mark during the first preaching Journey (Acts 13.23) was against the consent of St. Paul and St. Barnabas. St. Paul objected to take him with them, whatever the reasons of his departure had been. He FOUND no excuse for whoever withdraws from ministry.

“Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus” (Acts 15.39).

St. Paul insisted on not taking St. Mark with them, probably to give a lesson to the ministers, that whoever withdraws from ministry would not be easily received in it again. As they could not reach an accord, the solution to their contention proved to be a blessing to the church, as St. Paul and St. Silas set forth on a second preaching journey; whereas St. Barnabas and St. Mark set forth on another preaching journey. The dispute turned, not into an attack on the other side, but into setting forth to work, every team to its destination, for all to work with the spirit of love, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit of God, who transfers even the difference of opinion into growth and edification of the church.

Some see in this contention an example of human weakness that happens even among the spiritual apostles, yet it should not be an excuse for disputes and acute conflicts.

Here, we realize that, although it is not a strange thing for difference of opinion to happen even among the wise apostles, yet hatred should never infiltrate into the heart of any of them; and nobody should ever withdraw from work, or despise the work of another. The unity of heart, of spirit, or of mind, should not be shaken, as long as all minister to the One Christ, in one faith, enlightened by the light of the Holy Spirit, the Grantor of love.

It is well noticed that St. Paul and St. Barnabas did not have any dispute when they encountered afflictions from unbelievers, and when they faced bitter persecutions, but they did in times of peace, although the Spirit of God turned it into edification.

Finally, that dispute did not last long, but eventually St. Mark became a helper to St. Paul in his ministry, as he testified in his farewell epistle (2 Tim. 4.11).

- ❖ "The point to be considered, is not that they differed in their opinions, but that they accommodated themselves the one to the other (seeing), that thus it was a greater good their being parted: and the matter took a pretext from this what then? Did they withdraw in enmity? God forbid! In fact you see after this Barnabas receiving many encomiums from Paul in the Epistles. There was "sharp contention," it says, not enmity nor quarrelling. The contention availed so far as to part them. "And Barnabas took Mark," etc. And with reason: for what each supposed to be profitable, he did not forego thereafter, because of the fellowship with the other. Nay, it seems to me that the parting took place advisedly, and that they said one to another "As I wish not, and you wish, therefore that we may not fight, let us distribute the places." So that in fact they did this, altogether yielding each to the other: for Barnabas wished Paul's plan to stand, therefore withdrew; on the other hand, Paul wished the other's plan to stand, therefore he withdrew"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.*

10- THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND PREACHING JOURNEY

“But Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God” (Acts 15.40).

❖ "Beautiful, therefore, is the union between old and young. The one to give witness, the other to give comfort; the one to give guidance, the other to give pleasure. I pass by Lot, who when young clung to Abraham, as he was setting out (Gen. 12.5). For some perhaps might say this arose rather owing to their relationship than from any voluntary action on his part. And what are we to say of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19.21)? ... In the Acts of the Apostles, Barnabas took Mark with him, and Paul took Silas and Timothy (Acts 16.3), and Titus (Tit. 1.5) " ¹.

(St. Ambrose)

“And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15.41).

The two apostles went through Syria and Cilicia, visiting the churches previously planted by St. Paul and St. Barnabas, by the Holy Spirit of God.

How did they strengthen the churches? Certainly by the word of God, that strengthens the bowed knees, and grants the power of the Spirit.

St. John Chrysostom believes that St. Paul was not in a hurry, so he went, not by sea, but by land, and that he preferred strengthening the churches he previously preached, to preaching in new regions, so that those churches would not constitute, because of any weaknesses, obstacles on the way of preaching².

¹ *Duties of the Clergy. 2.20. (101).*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 15
A HOLY COUNCIL
UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

- ❖ Our depths cry out to You:
Is it possible to hold a holy ecumenical council, with the spirit of that of the apostles,
Where no one sought to be the chairman;
Where no one insisted that his view is better than others;
Where the spirit of love and humility prevails;
Where every one rejoices in Your exalted divine works!
- ❖ There have to be differences of opinion!
Yet, Your fiery Spirit would melt all in one magnificent unity!
Nothing should preoccupy Your church, but the salvation of the whole world.
- ❖ There is nothing that Your bride seeks,
Except that all experience the joyful wedding,
That all soar above the deadly letter,
That all rejoice in Your works of salvation.
- ❖ How amazing God You are!
Your fiery Spirit provides the decisions,
Without disregarding Your priests or Your ministers.
Your priests rejoice that everyone shares the work with them.
What an amazing and joyful unity!
- ❖ Your church is led by Your Holy Spirit.
She covets the holiness of every believer, to enjoy You, O the Holy One.
She does not wish to press by the deadly letter,
But for everyone to taste the sweetness of the yoke of Your cross,
And for everyone to be glorified by bearing Your glorified cross.

CHAPTER 16

A PRISON IN PHILIPPI OR PRAISE IN HEAVEN?

The last chapter ended with the beginning of the second preaching Journey by the apostle St. Paul, accompanied by St. Silas. The present chapter tells about a part of this journey; the most important events of which were St. Paul's choice of the young Timothy as a disciple, to train him on ministry; and putting St. Paul and St. Silas in prison in Philippi, where the two saints, while suffering from painful wounds, enjoyed praising God, as though they were in heaven, in the darkness of night in the inner prison.

1- Choosing Timothy as a disciple	1 – 3
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4- ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’	8 – 10
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1- CHOOSING TIMOTHY AS A DISCIPLE

“Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek” (Acts 16.1).

In Lystra, where St. Paul was stoned during his first preaching Journey, he encountered with the young man Timothy, in whom the apostle saw the possibility of spiritual leadership work. We see here, how God never forgets the labor of love, as in the same place the apostle suffered the agony of stoning, he plucked a joyful fruit, that brings pleasure to God's heart; and that would become a blessing to many. It is the exalted grace of God that allows for affliction, while providing comfort one way or another.

One of the attributes of St. Paul is his paternal attitude. Here, he adopts Timothy, and cares for teaching and training him, the way he did with others, having given birth to them in Jesus Christ during his preaching. As a father, St. Paul was loving, compassionate, and wise. He wrote to his son, true in faith, two epistles that bore his name.

1- He was a disciple, who was probably baptized in his childhood, when his mother accepted the faith, the way the family of Lydia was baptized (Acts 16.15), and the Jailer and his household were baptized (Acts 16.33).

Some believe that Timothy has been one of the disciples who surrounded the apostle Paul after being stoned, and was baptized by him, as is clear from his saying: “Timothy, the true son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1.2), “My son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2.1).

2- He accompanied him during his first preaching journey in Antioch Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra, as it came in (2 Tim. 3.10-11), “You have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra – what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me”.

3- The apostle probably dwelt among his family, and got acquainted with the details of their life, saying, “when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also” (2 Tim. 1.5). His mother was originally a Jew who believed in the Lord Christ. Here St. Paul speaks of her and her mother with respect as believers whose life was attached to the teachings of the Lord Christ, and who enjoyed fellowship with Him. Here, it is fitting for us to stand with reverence to the mother and the grandmother, as we hear nothing about the existence of a Jewish synagogue in Lystra, and hence there was no religious care in the Jewish congregation there, and yet the mother and the grandmother played a spiritual role of piety in raising Timothy, who was fed since his childhood upon the uncorrupted milk of the Holy Book. This demonstrates the important role of the family in raising the new generation, not depending completely on the care of the church or on the ministers.

❖ "For the praises of our ancestors, when we share in them, redound also to us. Otherwise they avail nothing, but rather condemn us"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ Commenting on Timothy’s Jewish background, Paul confirms his faith, as there is nothing to support man like a reference to his family².

(Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

4- His father was a Gentile Greek; and although it was not allowed for a Jewish girl to marry a Gentile (Deut. 7.3; Ezra 9.12); yet that statute was only followed within the boundaries of Canaan. And as the father was a Gentile and not a Jew, he did not have to circumcise Timothy. But the mother and the grandmother sew the seed of faith in God in the infant, that he longed to get circumcised, as a sign of entry into a covenant with God, even before they both believed in the Lord Christ.

¹ *Hom. On 2 Tim. 2.*

² *Interpretation on 2 Tim. 1.5.*

❖ "Thus, as these mixtures of Jews and Gentiles took place, the Law (in its literality) began gradually to be dissolved" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

5- Timothy has, most probably, accepted the faith during the first preaching journey of St. Paul. Because he was known as a good person by the Christians, as testified by the brethren in Lystra and Iconium, St. Paul chose him to be his companion, and trained him on preaching and shepherding.

6- St. Paul did not circumcise him for the sake of his salvation, but to calm down the Jews in Jerusalem, and to spare himself of being accused of opposing the law.

The apostle Paul, amid the persecutions, has gained a valuable disciple who became a Bishop over the church of Ephesus, considered to be a treasure enjoyed by the church in Christ Jesus.

“He was well spoken of, by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16.2).

Educating Timothy since his childhood, and training him on the holy books, by his mother and grandmother, has undoubtedly provided him with a good practical spiritual knowledge, and qualified him for evangelism as a disciple of St. Paul. Despite his young age, he was well spoken of by the believers who got in contact with him, as well as by the apostle Paul himself who said to him, “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4.12).

“Paul wanted to have him go with him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek” (Acts 16.3).

One of the most important attributes of St. Paul was his ability to use the energies and talents of many, particularly the youth, as is proved here in this living example with the young Timothy. St. Paul, appreciating his qualities, piety, and love for the Holy Book, sown in him by his mother and grandmother, received him, not only as a disciple, but counted him as a partner in ministry, and entrusted him with shepherding the church in Ephesus.

He had him circumcised to win the Jews, according to his principle: “To the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win the Jews” (1 Cor. 9.20), and because he was half a Jew (his mother was a Jew); Whereas he refused to have ‘Titus’ circumcised (Gal. 3.2), because both his parents were Gentiles, and there was no reason to circumcise him. In the first instance, he intended to win the Jews, and in the second, to win the Gentiles.

It was not easy for the Jews to have a half Jew preaching the word to them. And according to **St. John Chrysostom**, as he did not want to aim two strong blows to the Jews, he let Timothy get circumcised before preaching and his ordination as a Bishop². Circumcision does not harm anyone, and

¹ Hom. On 2 Tim. Hom. 1.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.

at the same time, even if it is not essential for salvation, yet it has its benefit, to put the hearts of the Jews at ease, until everyone accepts the idea that circumcision is not important¹.

- ❖ "It is indeed amazing, the wisdom of Paul! He that has had so many battles about circumcision, he that moved all things to this end, and did not give over until he had carried his point, now that the decree is made sure, circumcises the disciple. He not only does not forbid others, but himself does this thing. ... And the wonder is this, that he even took him unto him. "Because of the Jews," it says, "which were in those parts:" for they would not endure to hear the word from one uncircumcised. Nothing could be wiser. So that in all things he looked to what was profitable: he did nothing upon his own preference. And what (then)? Mark the success: he circumcised, that he might take away circumcision: for he preached the decrees of the Apostles"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem” (Acts 16.4).

They went through the cities of Syria and Cilicia etc, and delivered to the Christians there the decrees of the council of Jerusalem concerning accepting the Gentiles into faith (Acts 10.20-29). There is no doubt that the contention that happened in Antioch concerning this subject, that led to holding that council, has spread to churches in far places, and caused much disturbance. That council was actually held in the right time to deal with a problem that could shake the faith of many, as the church was embracing every day many of the Gentiles.

2- A DAILY GROWTH OF THE CHURCHES

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16.5).

The decrees of the council of Jerusalem had put an end to the disputes that occurred between the Christians of Jewish origin and those of Gentile origin. So, Instead of wasting the time and energy in disputes, all began to care for positive work, to win if possible every soul to enjoy the salvation of God. The churches were thus strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

3- THE SPIRIT FORBIDDING THEM FROM PREACHING THE WORD

“Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia” (Acts 16.6).

Phrygia was the biggest province in Asia Minor in the north; whereas Pisidia and Lycia were the biggest in the south, Galatia and Capadocia in the east, and Lydia and Mysia in the west.

The region of Galatia, East of Phrygia, was previously taken over by at least three tribes of the people of ‘Gal’ (France) several times, then called after their name ‘Galatia’. Many Jews dwelt in it, and

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.

accordingly, many disputes happened between them and those of the Gentiles who accepted the faith, as is obvious in the epistle to the Galatians.

According to God's plan, preaching was to enter strongly into Europe; That is why, when the apostles Paul and Silas, in this journey, went through some of the regions of Asia, where they have previously planted the seeds of the word, and intended to water them, the Holy Spirit forbade them to do that, and exhorted them to get out of it. They probably wondered why the Holy Spirit, who usually exhorted them to minister, forbade them to preach the word in Asia, until the Spirit revealed to them the divine plan in Troas, when St. Paul saw in a vision, a man of Macedonia pleading with him to come over to Macedonia to help them.

“And after they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them” (Acts 16.7).

The same thing happened in Mysia and in Bithynia.

Mysia in Asia Minor has Propontis to the north, Bithynia to the east, Lydia to the south, and the Aegean Sea to the west.

They tried to go east to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.

- ❖ When St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “I often planned to come to you” (Rom. 1.13), he shows how much he loved the Romans, and when he added, “but was hindered until now”, and in another situation: “When we tried to go to Bithynia, the Holy Spirit did not permit us” (Acts 16.7), he reveals how God, according to His will, commits the apostles where to go and where not to go. ... He wished to go, and kept on praying to bear fruits of them as well as from others of the Gentiles¹.

(The scholar Origen)

4- “COME OVER TO MACEDONIA AND HELP US”

“So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas” (Acts 16.8).

Troas is a city in Phrygia or in Mysia between Troy in the north and Assos in the south. Sometimes the name ‘Troas’ or ‘Troad’ is used for the whole state of the Trojans, which embraced the old city of Troy, where Homer wrote *the Iliad*. Troas was often mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 20.5; 2 Cor. 2.12; 2 Tim. 4.13).

“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (Acts 16.9).

In a vision by night, a man of Macedonia stood by him, whom he probably identified by his features, language, or his attire. Was St. Paul asleep when he saw the vision, or was he awake? This is difficult to say, as God uses several ways to proclaim his will to the men who consummate His council. **The scholar Origen** believes that it was a shepherd angel who appeared to St. Paul [There are angels

¹ *Comm. On the Epistle to the Romans. (1.13).*

entrusted to ordain human things (Dan. 10.13), each on his watch day and night]¹. Whereas Grotin believes that it was the angel of Macedonia who appeared to St. Paul, As, according to (Dan. 10.12-13), every nation has its special angel.

Macedonia is a great province in Greece, with Thrace to the north, Thessaly to the south, Epris to the west, and the Aegean Sea to the east. It was inhabited by the children of Kittim, the son of Javan (Gen. 10.4); and its kingdom was set in the days of Emperor Philip and his son Alexander the Great. It was the first region in Europe into which the gospel entered.

The two apostles Paul and Silas responded to the vision, and delivered themselves to the divine work.

This call always cries out in the ears of the church from every side, to come over to the world to present the word of salvation.

The angel did not appear in the form of a ruler of Macedonia or one of the statesmen, but in that of a regular man of the common people. The good preacher does not discriminate between a great man and a common one, a rich man and a poor one, a learned man and an illiterate one, as the Lord Christ came for the sake of every soul.

The Macedonian man pleaded with him to come over and help them. It was not enough to pray for them, but he should move and go to them. As God in his love for mankind, came down to them, and lived among them as one of them, It Is fitting for every preacher to come over to the wounded souls, to present to her the Physician of the souls, and the medication of the Spirit.

Why was he not sent by the Spirit to Macedonia, but saw in a vision by night a man from Macedonia pleading with him to cross over to help them, Whereas when St. Paul and those who were with him tried to go to Bithynia, the Spirit did not permit them (Acts 16.7)? Forbidding them to go to Bithynia necessitated the direct intervention by the Holy Spirit to spare them the doubt, why it is possible not to go somewhere to preach. The Spirit confirmed to them the divine plan to forbid them, without presenting any reasons; Whereas here, in a vision, equally of the work of the Holy Spirit, a Macedonian man appeared to flare the heart of the apostle Paul with fraternal love, as we have a multitude of brethren who cry out asking for our help, through practicing the divine work.

It was not possible for the apostle or those with him to doubt the vision, as it was a cry out of the heart, pleading for help to be saved from eternal perdition.

❖ "For since he was but urged to preach, to this end it is shown him in a dream: but to forbear preaching, he could not readily endure: to this end the Holy Ghost reveals it to him"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Comment. On Luke. Hom. 12.3.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 34.*

- ❖ There was a shepherd angel in Macedonia who needed God's help, so he appeared to Paul in a vision, as a man from Macedonia, who said to him, "Come over to Macedonia to help us". Actually the angel did not say that to Paul, but to Jesus in Paul's heart! In like manner, The shepherds always need the presence of the Lord Christ¹.

(The scholar Origen)

"Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16.10).

That is the first time St. Luke refers to himself as a companion of St. Paul, and a partner with him and St. Silas in preaching. Once the apostle Paul saw the vision, all of them hasten to set forth to realize the divine call to work in Macedonia. All of them showed that they were always ready and pleased to work according to the will of God, with no hesitation, or discussion. Once the apostle Paul got the divine call to set forth to Macedonia, he did not linger in the churches in Asia or elsewhere; but, in complete obedience, he sought, together with his companions, to abide to the summon.

- ❖ St. Paul had the material to boast visions (2 Cor. 12.1), things he had seen (Acts 16.10, 18.9), signs and miracles (Rom. 15.19; 2 Cor. 12.12), the troubles he bore for the sake of Christ, and churches he established through his ambition to establish one everywhere there is no knowledge of Christ. ... All this is a material for boasting, and yet, as boasting even of such things is not without danger, the good Father who granted them to him, allowed the angel of the devil to annoy him, so as not to boast².

(The scholar Origen)

5- PAUL AND SILAS IN PHILIPPI

"Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis" (Acts 16.11).

Samothrace, an island in the Aegean Sea, is not far from Troas (Thrace), with the highest mountain in the whole region, second only to Mount Athos. Samothrace can be seen from the coast of Asia Minor, when the sun is behind it at sunset. Its inhabitants are a mixture of people from Thrace and Samos; hence, its name is Samothrace. The circumference of the island is 20 miles; it was a resort for the fugitives and criminals.

Neapolis: A port on the coast of Macedonia, close to the border of Thrace, and 10 miles far from Philippi. It is called nowadays 'Cala', 'Caula' in the Turkish language, the home town of Mohamed Ali Pasha, the Turkish ruler of Egypt.

"And from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days" (Acts 16.12).

¹ Homilies on Luke. Hom. 12.3.

² Homilies on Jeremiah. Hom. 12.8.

Philippi: The main city of Macedonia, described by St. Luke as the foremost city of that part of Macedonia. That is why St. Paul and his companions cared much for it, that if it received the gospel, it would easily spread to other cities in Macedonia. Its old name was ‘Dathos’, then was called after Emperor Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great, who renewed it in the year 357 BC. As it was a military city more than a commercial one, there were few Jews in it.

Philippi was famous for having been the site of several battles during the civil wars of the Romans, and between them and others. In it the decisive battle between Brutus and Anthony took place, during which Brutus was killed.

A Colony: it was directly under the Roman care, and its citizens enjoyed the Roman rights and privileges, like not being scourged, not being arrested except under certain conditions, and having the right to plead directly to the Roman Emperor, like the citizens of Rome itself. When Augustus Caesar, called Octavius, conquered his enemies in the year 42 AD there, he granted it that honor. Politically, the word ‘colony’ means that its laws are the same as those followed in Rome itself; I.E., Philippi was a mini Rome.

“And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made, and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there” (Acts 16.13).

Places for prayers were usually set out of the cities, in case the Jews are poor, and can not afford to build a synagogue within the city, or in case they are banned of building one. Prayers by the rivers were preferred, In captivity, as the Psalmist says, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea” (Ps. 137.1), And the prophet Ezekiel says that he was by the river of Chebar (Ezek. 1.1), And the prophet Daniel enjoyed a vision by the river Ulai, and another vision by the great river Tigris (Dan. 10.4)¹.

Having probably been banned of building a synagogue within the city, they built a small place for prayers by the river, as an assembly hall called ‘proseuchoe’; I.E. a place for prayers, most probably roofless. Building it by the river outside the city was to have more peace, or because of their required use of a plenty of water, prior to, and during the religious rites. It seems that only women used to pray in that building, or to attend the services more often than men.

¹ Freeman. p. 445.

6- BAPTISM OF LYDIA AND HER HOUSEHOLD

“Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God, the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16.14).

The business of selling purple was very profitable. The purple dye used to be extracted from the fish scales, and was favorable among the rich (Isa. 1.18; Luke 16.9).

Thyatira is the hometown of Lydia, nowadays called Akhisar in Asia Minor (Rev. 1.11). It was famous for the production of dyes, as is clear from the writings of Homer¹. Its port, close to it is Pergamum, and the relationship between Philippi and Thyatira was based on the fame of Thyatira in the production of dyes.

Lydia was a Gentile, from a prominent family, well respected among the Jews. Her household followed her lead, accepted the faith, and were baptized together with her.

The sermon of St. Paul in the assembly hall at Philippi to those women was the first sermon by one of the apostles of Christ in Europe. Lydia was the first woman to give hospitality to an apostle in her house in that region; and the River Gagtias was the first river to be sanctified by Baptism.

“And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay’, and she constrained us” (Acts 16.15).

Once she believed, she got baptized together with her household; her children were baptized on the basis of their mother’s faith,² who became responsible for raising them in Jesus Christ. Being hospitable, she obliged them to stay in her house, as a believer in God.

❖ ““She constrained us”, then look at her wisdom, how she importunes, the Apostles how full of humility her words are, how full of wisdom”³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

7- ST. PAUL COMMANDING A SPIRIT OF DIVINATION TO COME OUT

“Now it happened, as we went to prayer, which a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling” (Acts 16.16).

As they were going to the assembly hall for prayers ‘proseuchoe’ (Acts 13), they met a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination, called ‘Python’ – one of the names of Apollo, the Greek god of fine arts, like music, poetry, medicine, ...etc, believed to be the inventor of arts, and to be the third son of the god Jupiter and the goddess Latona. He had a special temple and a priest Delphi, who was probably the only ‘spiritual medium’ of universal fame, to whom people used to come from all over the world. That spirit of divination was called ‘Python’, as it was believed that once he was born, he killed by arrows a

¹ Iliad. 4.141.

² Barnes’ Notes on Acts 16.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 35.

serpent with this name. It was also claimed that his father sent him to persecute Latona, hence his name became 'Python Apollo', he had temples on Mount Parnassos, in Delphi, Delos, Claros, Tenedos, etc. his worship was world wide. In Delphi, there was a slave girl, a priestess, who claimed that she was inspired by that spirit of divination, hence called herself 'Python', and used to get violently agitated in the process, something that was considered devilish by the apostle Paul.

"The girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, 'These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation'" (Acts 16.17).

She followed St. Paul and his companions, probably assuming that she might gain some money or commendation if she prophesied for them, Or because the evil spirit who dwelt in her feared to be driven out of her by the apostle. But it is most probable that, by testifying to them, and by accepting her testimony in public, she would go back to deceive people. She intended to begin uttering the truth, not because she loved the truth, or preaching it, but as a trap to entangle her listeners in deceit, The same way the devils used to follow the Lord Christ, crying out: "This is the Holy One of God" (Mark 1.24), in order to be able later on to deceive people. That unclean spirit in the diviner girl, followed the apostle Paul and his company, crying out, "***These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation***" (Acts 16.17).

- ❖ "What may be the reason that both the demon spoke these words, and Paul forbade him? Both the one acted maliciously, and the other wisely: the demon wished in fact to make himself credible. For if Paul had admitted his testimony, he would have deceived many of the believers, as being received by him: therefore he endures to speak what made against himself, that he may establish what made for himself: and so the demon himself uses accommodation in order to destruction"¹.
- ❖ "This demon: since he saw them becoming famous, here also he plays the hypocrite: by this means he thought to be allowed to remain in the body, if he should preach the same things. But if Christ "receive not testimony from man" (John 5.34), meaning John, much less from a demon. "Praise is not comely in the mouth of a sinner" (Sira. 15.9), much less from a demon. For that they preach is not of men, but of the Holy Ghost. Because they did not act in a spirit of boasting"².
- ❖ "What then, does no demon call upon God's Name? Did not the demoniacs say, "We know who You are, the Holy One of God" (Mark 1.24)? Did they not say to Paul, "these men are the servants of the Most High God" (Acts 16.17)? They did, but upon scourging, upon compulsion; never of their own will and without being scourged"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. on Acts. Hom. 35.

² Hom. on Acts. Hom. 35.

³ Hom. On 1 Cor. Hom. 29.3.

“And this she did for many days, But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’, and he came out that very hour” (Acts 16.18).

The apostle got greatly annoyed, fearing that the listeners might assume that he accepted her testimony for them. He was also grieved as well, for the sake of the diviner girl, who was enslaved by an evil spirit, moving her at his will, and deceiving people through her.

In the days of the Roman Empire, many believed that inspiration dwelt upon the priestesses of Apollo; and the temples everywhere used to be crowded by those who came, following that vanity. Christianity had to reveal that vanity, even if some seemed to prophesy, or to testify to the truth.

The evil spirit coming out of that girl was a sign of the authority given by God to the apostles, and of the power of the name of Jesus Christ, that the devil cannot stand to hear.

In a comment on the words of the Lord Christ: “If I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out” (Luke 11.19), **St. Cyril the Great** says that the blessed apostles were Jews, and sons of Jews according to the flesh, Yet they got authority from Christ over the evil spirits, to liberate those over whom they reigned, through the invocation by the words: ‘In the name of Jesus Christ’, like when St. Paul once commanded the evil spirit by an apostolic authority, saying: ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’ (Acts 16.18)¹.

❖ "They do indeed injure, but those only by whom they are feared, whom the powerful and lofty hand of God does not protect, who are uninitiated in the mystery of truth. But they fear the righteous, that is, the worshippers of God, adjured by whose name they depart from the bodies of the possessed: for, being lashed by their words as though by scourges, they not only confess themselves to be demons, but even utter their own names-those which are adored in the temples-which they generally do in the presence of their own worshippers"².

(Father Lactantius)

8- PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON

“But when her masters saw that their hope of profit has gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities” (Acts 16.19).

Her masters were not preoccupied with the knowledge of the divine truth, but with the material profits, as the love of money blinds human hearts from seeing and accepting the truth, and even excites them to oppose the truth, and to fill their hearts with hatred. Up to the present days, we find in some countries those who oppose the Christian faith, despite their mental conviction that it is true. They do this for the sake of material profits and gaining dignity from the ignorant. I was told by a friend, that a friend of his, who is a famous writer, often writes against the Christian Faith, despite his friendship to

¹ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 81.*

² *Lactantius. Divine institutes. 2.16.*

several Christians. And when he was asked by one of them why; He answered: ‘By such attack my newspaper sells more!’

❖ "Everywhere (love of) money the cause of evils. O that heathen cruelty! They wished the girl to be still a demoniac, that they might make money by her" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, ‘These men being Jews, exceedingly trouble our cities’” (Acts 16.20).

As Philippi has been a Roman colony, the magistrates were military men who managed both civil and military affairs. They accused the two apostles of causing trouble and of being against the people, as though all what preoccupied them was the peace of the city, and their zeal for the laws of the state. So they saw the divine power and the holy work, as opposition to authority and a breaking of laws. This same accusation is still presented every day against the true believers in several countries.

“And they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive and observe” (Acts 16.21).

The second accusation against the apostles was that they taught some strange new religious customs to Roman customs, namely, presenting a new religion not recognized by the Roman laws. They pretended to be zealous for the Roman and Jewish customs, although they were actually preoccupied with material profits.

The Roman laws did not allow for worshipping new gods, not recognized by the law. **The scholar Tertullian** says that it was not lawful to worship a god, unless it is recognized by the Roman Senate.

The same way the Jews have previously hid what was in their hearts, when they accused the Lord Christ that He intended to set Himself a king, and cried out, “We have no king but Caesar; Whoever makes himself a king, speaks against Caesar” (John 19.12, 15); So were those masters. They did not reveal what is in their hearts; they did not say that the apostles cast out the demon from their slave girl, so as not to be counted as evil, but accused them of changing their customs as Romans, and of disturbing the peace of the city.

“Then the multitude rose up together against them, and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods” (Acts 16.22).

It is obvious that the masters of that slave girl have managed to agitate a great multitude against the two apostles, and in an unlawful way, as the apostle Paul has protested (Acts 16.37). It was the custom to undress those who were beaten with rods.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 35.

“And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely” (Acts 16.23).

It was the custom among the Romans to lay stripes on the accused three times by the ‘Lector’ (2 Cor. 11.25).

The Jewish Law did not allow more than forty stripes as a punishment; therefore, a punishment did not exceed thirty-nine stripes, that if there is an extra one by mistake, the one who executed the punishment would not be counted as acting against the Law. As for the Romans, their law did not put limits for the number of stripes. That is why, the apostle meant by saying that they laid many stripes upon them.

“Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks” (Acts 16.24).

The dangerous criminals were thrown into the inner prison, which was usually filthy, unhealthy, and dark. Their feet were usually put in the stock, I.E. between two pieces of wood, to keep them from movement, and they were even bound in such a way to be able only to lie on their backs, which were usually covered with wounds, to suffer more. The use of the stocks is a very old custom (Job 13.27). Some believe it to be a wooden frame, with two openings in which the feet are put far from each other, and sometimes even five openings, to put through them the two feet, the two hands, and the head.

At the present, there is in Ceylon, an instrument resembling the stocks used, but the head is left free¹.

9- THE JAILER BELIEVING

“And at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16.25).

With so much suffering, it would be impossible for those in the inner prison to be able to sleep, they would be screaming with agony; whereas those two prisoners were joyfully praying and singing hymns to God, supported by the grace of God, exalted above nature. The true believer is a partner of the King of kings in His sufferings and crucifixion, finding in the midst of sufferings, pleasure that is greater than any, found by a king or an emperor on his throne.

It was not possible for the prison with its darkness, filth, and muck, for the chains and stocks, or the wounds that covered the bodies of Paul and Silas, to take away from them the spirit of joy, that turned the prison into heaven, and transformed the apostles into angelic hosts who praise the Lord, and shake heaven, earth, and the foundations of the prison. The sufferings turned into a joyful song; the apostle sang with an inner glory, saying, “Are they ministers of Christ? – I speak as a fool – I am more:

¹Freeman. p. 445.

in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often” (2 Cor. 11.23).

- ❖ "What could equal these souls? These men had been scourged, had received many, stripes, they had been misused, were in peril of their lives, were thrust into the inner prison, and set fast in the stocks: and for all this they did not suffer themselves to sleep, but kept vigil all the night. Do you mark what a blessing tribulation is? But we, in our soft beds, with none to be afraid of, pass the whole night in sleep. But belike this is why they kept vigil, because they were in this condition. Not the tyranny of sleep could overpower them, not the smart of pain could bow them, not the fear of evil east them into helpless dejection: no, these were the very things that made them wakeful: and they were even filled with exceeding delight" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The two apostles thus practically proclaimed that man’s happiness comes out of his heart, where God dwells and sets His kingdom. They proclaimed as well, that no man, or an adversary force, can ever destroy the peace of a true believer. Wicked people can apply great pressure on his flesh, but, as for his soul, no force can bend it.

The church gives interest to practicing spiritual vigils. Vigilantius, on the other hand, attacked the life of watching, and spending nights of vigil, to pay tribute to the relics of martyrs and saints in the Lord, although his name means the ‘vigilant’.

- ❖ "You tell me farther that Vigilantius execrates vigils. In this surely he goes contrary to his name. The Wakeful one wishes to sleep and will not hearken to the Savior's words, “What, could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26.40, 41). And in another place a prophet sings: “At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgment” (Ps. 119.62). We read also in the gospel how the Lord spent whole nights in prayer (Luke 6.12). and how the apostles when they were shut up in prison kept vigil all night long, singing their psalms until the earth quaked, and the keeper of the prison believed, and the magistrates and citizens were filled with terror (Acts 16.25-38). Paul says: “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (Col. 4.2), and in another place he speaks of himself as “in sleeplessness often” (2 Cor. 11.27). Vigilantius may sleep if he pleases and may choke in his sleep, destroyed by the destroyer of Egypt and of the Egyptians. But let us say with David: "Behold, He who keeps Israel, shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121.4). So will the Holy One and the Watcher come to us (Dan. 4.13). And if ever by reason of our sins He falls asleep, let us say to Him: “Awake, Why do you sleep” (Ps. 44.23)? And when our ship is tossed by the waves let us rouse Him and say, "Lord, save us, we are perishing” (Matt. 8.25; Luke 8.24) ”².

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.*

² *Letter 109 to Riparius, 3.*

(St. Jerome)

He who is drawn by the fire of Christ will become as though living alone on earth; he does not care neither for glory nor for abasement; no temptations, scourges, or prisons can move him. He would be as though suffering in a body that is not his, or like someone with a body with no senses (feels no pain). He despises all the pleasures of this life. He does not feel pleasure, like a senseless corpse, And like insects which do not approach fire, but keep away from it, the insects of the spirit do not dare to oppose him¹.

- ❖ Paul, the citizen of heaven, the pillar of the church, is an earthly angel, a heavenly creature, like iron aflame with fire, in like manner, Paul is aflame with love, so he became love itself².

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ We should pray at midnight, as we are taught by what Paul and Silas did. ... The Psalmist says: "At midnight I will rise to give thanks, because of Your righteous judgment" (Ps. 119.62)³.

(St. Basil the Great)

- ❖ "But how" in every place," (Eph. 6.18; 1 Thess. 5 17; 1 Tim. 2.8), since we are prohibited (from praying) in public (Matt. 6.5, 6)? In every place, he means, which opportunity or even necessity, may have rendered suitable: for that which was done by the apostles (who, in jail, in the audience of the prisoners, "began praying and singing to God") is not considered to have been done contrary to the precept; nor yet that which was done by Paul, who in the ship, in presence of all, "made thanksgiving to God" (Acts 27.35) "⁴.

(The scholar Tertullian)

“Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundation of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed” (Acts 16.26).

While the hearts of the two apostles were lifted up to heaven to enjoy the glorified Lord Christ, partaking of his angels their praises to Him, earth shook under their feet, as though in terror for what the wicked were doing to the children of God. When the two apostles found no one to defend them, nature set forth to testify to them.

The great earthquake was an indication of the presence of God, before whom mountains shake. If the two apostles were put in the inner prison, and their feet were put in chains, the God of heaven and earth proclaims His presence and company with them.

¹ Hom. 52 in Rom. PG 60 .364.

² Praises of St. Paul. Hom. 1. Pg 50 .453.

³ Syrian Monastery. St. Basil the Great. P.122.

⁴ on Prayer. 24.

It was not possible for the gates to remain closed before the divine care, or for the chains to remain binding the devout children of God. All that took place, to pave the way for the two apostles to testify before the jailer and the fellow prisoners.

❖ "This let us also do (prayers by night), and we shall open for ourselves-not a prison, but-heaven. If we pray, we shall be able even to open heaven. Elias both shut and opened heaven by prayer (Jam. 5.17). There is a prison in heaven also. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16.19). Let us pray by night, and we shall loose these bonds. For that prayers loose sins, let that widow convince us, let that friend convince us, who at that untimely hour of the night persists and knocks (Luke 11.5): let Cornelius convince us, for, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God" (Acts 10.4). Let Paul convince us, who says: "Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day" (1 Tim. 5.5). If he speaks thus of a widow, a weak woman, much more would he of men (to set up and pray). ... Let us arouse ourselves during the night: though you do not make many prayers, make one with watchfulness, and it is enough, I ask no more: and if not at midnight, at any rate at the first dawn. Show that the night is not only for the body, but also for the soul: do not suffer it to pass idly, but make this return to your Master: nay rather (the benefit) itself returns to you" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"And the keeper of the prison, awakening from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners have fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself" (Acts 16.27).

The two apostles did not see that event as a divine command to get away from prison, but as a wonderful opportunity presented by God for evangelism. The prison keeper could not imagine that any prisoner would stay in his cell when the earth shakes, all the doors open, and all the chains loose. There was nothing he would do but to commit suicide. It is amazing how Philippi, as the site of many battles, has seen the suicide of many leaders, as they faced danger, like Brutus, Cassius, and many others, who fell on their swords to end their lives. That wide spread action was uprooted by Christianity from the hearts of believers, as man is not allowed to commit suicide whatever the reasons are.

According to the tradition of the Roman honor, the prison keeper who fails to control his prison does not wait for the investigations and to fall under punishment, but ends his own life. According to the Roman law, in case a prisoner escapes, the verdict against him would be executed on the guard. As the guard thought that some of the prisoners escaped, he thought that he would suffer various punishments. Therefore, he counted his death by his own hands better than death after being much tortured².

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.

² Freeman. p. 446.

“But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, ‘Do yourself no harm, for we are all here’” (Acts 16.28).

That is the cry out of the Christian faith to men everywhere in the world: ***“Do yourself no harm”***. No one can do you harm, unless you harm yourself. Lift your hand up, and do not stab yourself with your sword. God seeks your virtuous life and your eternal glory."

Paul called with a loud voice, as the guard was far from him. He called in the darkness of the night, seeing with the eyes of his heart what the keeper of the prison was about to do to himself.

“Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas” (Acts 16.29).

The word ‘light’ in Greek came in plural, probably because the keeper of the prison asked his assistants to bring several torches, and to go around searching in every direction to investigate. Then he himself set forth in terror to the inner prison, marveling how not a single prisoner had fled from his cell despite the great earthquake and the opening of the doors of the prison. What amazed him most was the peace and joy in the Lord which he saw on the faces of the two apostles. When he realized that they were in the presence of God, He counted them as holy men of God, so he fell down trembling before them.

“So he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (Acts 16.30).

He addressed them in great reverence, saying, ‘Sirs’, the way the masters are addressed.

He was not preoccupied with his temporal salvation, and his position before the authorities, but with his eternal salvation. He realized that he was in the presence of real apostles of God, who could reveal to him the way to salvation. He realized that he was a sinner, and in need to be saved from his sins; that he was weak, with no authority, despite his terrifying post.

The prison keeper was terrified, whereas the prisoners were in inner peace. The prison keeper realized his great helplessness, and even his inability to protect himself, whereas the prisoners were enjoying the protection under the shadow of God’s wings, for them the earth shook, before them the iron doors open, and the chains loosed.

❖ "Do you mark what happened in the former case, and what here? There a girl was released from a spirit, and they cast them into prison, because they had liberated her from the spirit. Here, they did but show the doors standing open, and it opened the doors of his heart, it loosed two sorts of chains; that (prisoner) kindled the (true) light; for the light in his heart was shining. "And he sprang in, and fell before them;" and he does not ask, How is this? What is this? But straightway he says, "***What must I do to be saved?***"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.

“So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (Acts 16.32).

They presented a simple, clear, and effective direction, namely, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, as the beginning and living basis for every worship and behavior. It is amazing that they asked him to believe to be saved together with his household, as with his faith would be reflected upon his wife, and both of them, as responsible for their children, would present to them the practical living faith, and raise them on it.

“Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (Acts 16.32).

The apostles spoke to all his household, old and young, as salvation is presented to everyone with no discrimination.

“And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized” (Acts 16.33).

With all the wonders done by God to be glorified in His two apostles Paul and Silas, for whom the earth shook, the prison doors were opened, and the chains of all were loosed, beside what He did in the heart of the prison keeper and his household, yet he left the wounds on the bodies of the apostles in need for someone to wash them. God probably intended to hold them fast in their humility, to spare them thinking that, because of all that, they are in no need for the services of the prison keeper. God also left those wounds, for the prison keeper to gain the blessing of serving the two apostles.

We saw how the handkerchiefs and aprons were brought from Paul’s body to the heal the sick and drive out the evil spirits (Acts 19.12); whereas the apostle himself, together with his close disciples like Timothy, remained sick, and the Lord did not heal them. How amazing are God’s ordainments And His wisdom and love for the salvation of every soul! For fear that pride might affect the apostles, God kept them always in humility and contrition.

“Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them, and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household” (Acts 16.34).

The prison keeper enjoyed the most important of the fruits of the Spirit, namely, the joy, ***“He rejoiced with all his household”***. The secret for their joy was that they received the gospel, the good news, and that they enjoyed the sonhood to God through baptism.

❖ "Those he washed from their stripes, himself was washed from his sins: he fed and was fed. "And rejoiced," it says: although there was nothing but words only and good hopes"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.

St. John Chrysostom believes that the belief of the prison keeper together with all his household in that magnificent way is a greater miracle than the earthquake, the opening of the prison doors, and the release of the two apostles. It is the exalted work of the Holy Spirit in the life of man.

❖ "What worse than a jailer, what more ruthless, more savage? He entertained them with great honor. Not, because he was safe, he made merry, but, having believed God" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

10- THE RELEASE OF THE TWO APOSTLES

“And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, ‘Let those men go’ (Acts 16.35).

What happened to the magistrates, that when it was day they instructed the prison keeper to let the two apostles go? Did they see visions warning them against abusing them?

They probably heard about the earthquake and the following events, and they intended to share with the people their joy for the amazing work of God. Or they probably feared the wrath of the gods, as the Romans considered the earthquakes as such; they might have seen what happened as a heavenly warning against them.

“So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore, depart, and go in peace’” (Acts 16.36).

It is obvious that the two apostles voluntarily returned to the prison after they baptized the prison keeper and his household, have eaten and everyone rejoiced, probably to spare the prison keeper any trouble, and to proclaim that they did not fear the prison.

“But Paul said to him, ‘They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us in prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out’” (Acts 16.37).

The apostle referred to three illegal actions:

- 1- Beating them was against the Roman law.
- 2- They have beaten them openly, to bring them shame and disgrace before the people.
- 3- They put them in prison without trial.

Putting a Roman citizen in chains, beating him, and not giving him a chance to be tried and defend himself, were three crimes against the Roman law. The ‘Valerian law’ forbids putting a Roman citizen in chains, and the ‘Procian law’ forbids beating him. Cicero says in his article ‘Oration against verres’, that putting a Roman citizen in chains breaks the law; to beat him is evil; and condemning him without listening to his defense is forbidden².

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.

² Freeman. p. 446.

Although the apostle Paul was longing to partake of the sufferings of the Lord Christ, and despite his joy in it together with his humility and meekness, **yet he intended to proclaim the believer's right to claim his legal rights, with no chance for anger, hatred,** or desire for revenge against his oppressors to infiltrate into his heart.

St. John Chrysostom believes that the apostle sought this, not to regain his dignity, but in order to spare the prison keeper and Lydia who gave them hospitality, any punishment¹.

- ❖ "It is so distributed as it were into the right and left cheek that whatever disciple of Christ might have to bear reproach for being a Christian, he should be much more ready to bear reproach in himself, if he possesses any of the honors of this world. Thus this same apostle (Paul), if he had kept silence respecting the dignity which he had in the world, when men were persecuting in him the Christian name, would not have presented the other cheek to those that were smiting the right one. For when he said, 'I am a Roman citizen' (Acts 16.37), he was not unprepared to submit to be despised, in that which he reckoned as least, by those who had despised in him so precious and life-giving a name"².

(St. Augustine)

“And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans” (Acts 16.38).

They were afraid because they were aware of the punishment of whoever punishes a Roman citizen breaking the laws of the Roman State. He, whatever his status is, would face even execution and the confiscation of his wealth³.

When the people of Rhodes crucified some Romans, Emperor Claudius took away their freedom and made them slaves⁴.

“Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city” (Acts 16.39).

In humiliation, the magistrates came to plead with the apostles to leave the prison, and to depart from the city. They did this to confirm to them that they did not know that they were Roman citizens, and they asked them to depart from the city, for fear of any riot that might expose their life to danger.

“So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16.40).

They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia to encourage the believers, and thus the church in Philippi was established.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 36.

² Sermon on the Mount. 1.19.58.

³ Dionysius Hal.; Ant. Rom. 11.

⁴ Dio Cass. Lib. 60.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 16
GRANT ME IN THE VALLEY OF TEARS
THE REJOICING OF THE HEAVENLY BEINGS

- ❖ Allow me by Your Holy Spirit to accompany the apostle on his journey.
In his flaring zeal, he motivated every believer to work.
He did not despise the young age of a pure young man,
And did not take lightly the gift of a believer.
- ❖ He did not preoccupy himself with foolish disputes,
Confining himself to presenting the church decisions,
To be only dedicated to the positive work to gain every soul.
No matter, whatever its importance might be,
Is more exalted than drawing a soul to enjoy the joy of Your salvation.
- ❖ Let Your fiery Spirit lead me,
To open and close the door of work according to His divine wisdom.
Let me listen to His call to work on the tongue of every man.
- ❖ Let every soul be valuable in my sight.
Let me not disregard who is rich like Lydia, the seller of purple,
Or despise a slave girl, possessed by a divination spirit.
- ❖ What does the valley of tears present to me?
Affliction and bitterness for no cause.
But You turn for me the valley of tears into a deposit of heaven.
- ❖ It was not possible for the stripes to suppress the wounds of the heart;
Or for the chains and the stock, to hinder the soul from soaring up to You;
Or for the violence of the prison keeper, to distract the insight from the riches of Your compassion.
- ❖ The hearts of Paul and Silas rejoiced;
And their mouths opened to sing hymns of praise by midnight.
The prisoners forgot their sufferings to listen to that angelic voice.
Heaven rejoiced together with the prisoners,
And the foundations of the prison were shaken!
- ❖ The iron doors of the prison were opened.
The chains of all the prisoners were loosed;
And the heart of the violent prison keeper was disturbed.
Whatever has happened?

The prison transformed as though into heaven;
And the prison keeper bowed seeking eternal salvation.
Together with his household, he enjoyed the new birth;
And joy has found a place in his household.

❖ How amazing!

The magistrates plead with the prisoners to get out!
And the two prisoners are only preoccupied for every soul to get out of its prison!
In this manner, the two apostles enjoyed the deposit of heaven ;
And the valley of tears was transformed into a fellowship of the heavenly matters.

CHAPTER 17

FROM PHILIPPI TO ATHENS

St. Luke tells about the crossing over of St. Paul and St. Barnabas from Philippi after their imprisonment, until they reached Athens, where St. Paul stood in Areopagus preaching to the philosophers.

1- In Thessalonica	1 – 9
2- In Berea	10 – 15
3- In Athens	16 – 21
4- In Areopagus	22 – 31
5- Mocking the resurrection from the dead	32 – 33

1- IN THESSALONICA

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 17.1).

St. Paul together with Silas set forth to Thessalonica to practice their work, not disturbed by what happened with them in Philippi. The prison did not destroy their mentality, and did not decrease their enthusiasm to preach. And as he wrote in his epistle to the Thessalonians: "But even after we have suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict" (1 Thess. 2.2). What the two apostles suffered in Philippi motivated them the more to greater strife in their ministry in Thessalonica. On their way to Thessalonica, they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, the first close to Philippi, and the second close to Thessalonica. They headed west on the military way called 'Via Egnati'. St. Paul's plan was to pay greater care to the important strategic locations, to make them centers of preaching to the surrounding cities and villages.

Thessalonica is considered a sea port for the second section of Macedonia, located on the head of the gulf of Thermacius. Aemelius Paulus made it the capital of the second section of Macedonia, when he divided the region into four sections. It was formerly called 'Therma', then was called 'Thessalonica', either by Cassander, as a tribute to his wife Thessalonica, the daughter of Philip and the sister of Alexander the Great, or as a memorial of the conquest by Philip on the armies of Thssaly. It was inhabited by the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews. It is called nowadays 'Saloniki'. It is the second largest and most important city in European Turkey, because of its geographic importance. Since its beginning and up till now it did not lose its commercial importance. It is located on the inner bend of a gulf between the Adriatic and the Hellespont on the coast, over a spacious valley irrigated by several rivers.

Thessalonica was not a colony, but a free city, which had the same privilege like Antioch, Troas, and Athens, because its inhabitants took part in the war on the side of Augustus Octavius. Thessalonica controlled its own affairs, and was not governed by foreign rulers.

A church assembled in it, which had its preaching role in the time of the apostle Paul: “So that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. From whom you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything” (1 Thess. 7-8). To it the apostle Paul sent two epistles later on.

It is known that Thessalonica introduced Christianity to the Slavs and the Bulgarians, and it was called in the middle eras by the name ‘The Orthodox city’.

Here, the author turns from the present pleural tense to the absent pronoun, saying, “They had passed” which indicates that he (St. Luke) together with (Timothy) have stayed back in Philippi to take care of the new church where Lydia and her household, and the prison keeper and his household accepted the faith. But we hear that Timothy has joined St. Paul in Berea (Acts 17.13-14). As for St. Luke, we do not hear of his joining St. Paul until the end of his sojourn in Rome, when the apostle Paul wrote in his farewell epistle to Timothy, saying, “Only Luke is with me” (2 Tim. 4.11).

Nevertheless, it seems from what is mentioned in (Acts 20.5-6), that St’ Luke had joined St. Paul in his return journey from Philippi to Troas.

Amphipolis: It was originally a colony to the Athenians, then became the capital of the eastern section of Macedonia, under the Roman authority. Its location is one of the most important in Greece, close to Thrace, on a way that leads to the mountains surrounding Strymonic Gulf. It is not far from the mouth of River Stymon which flooded its water around it, whence came its name ‘Amphipolis’ that means (around the city). It is 33 miles far from Philippi, 30 miles from Apollonia, which, in its turn, is 37 miles far from Thessalonica. As it was possible to go from one city to the other in one day. They must have gone every day to a city, where they spent the night.

It is an easy link between the coast of that gulf and the plains of Macedonia, which extends 60 miles beyond Melinko to Philippi. That location was known as ‘The nine ways’, because of the several Thracian and Macedonian ways that cross one another there. Realizing its importance, the Athenians established a colony there.

Apollonia is Located between Amphipolis and Thessalonica, famous for commerce. It was a city in Illyricum (Rom. 15.19). St. Paul passed quickly by those cities, yet he throw the seeds, and paved the way for other ministers, whom he sent to preach and minister in them. Some believe that he did not stay there long, because there were no synagogues of the Jews, where he can preach. He just had some quick encounters with some disciples, who came together with some friends and relatives to hear the apostle preaching.

“Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17.2).

In Thessalonica, he did not pass as quickly, as it had a synagogue where he reasoned with them for three successive Sabbaths.

St. John Chrysostom wonders why the apostle Paul should begin his ministry here with the Jews in their synagogues, although he is the apostle to the Gentiles. Then he answers that by saying that indeed, through the Jews and his talks to them, he exhorted the Gentiles. He knew that such was the most suitable way to convey faith to the Gentiles. While he says: “... I am an apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11.13), his epistles came as well against the Jews¹.

The great majority of the people were from the Gentiles and not from the Jews, yet he used to begin his speech addressing the Jews and the proselytes in their synagogues, reasoning with them, confirming from the prophets that Jesus is the Messiah.

The word “reasoned” (dielegto) can be used in delivering a public speech or an essay, as well as in debate.

While debating in the synagogue on the Sabbaths, he used to practice the profession of tent making, so as not to be a burden on anyone (1 Thess. 2.9; 2 Thess. 3.7-12). Moreover, as we have already mentioned, he probably encountered those who were ready to accept the word, or serious to debate, through the weekdays.

- ❖ ***“And Paul, as his manner was, went into the synagogue of the Jews.”*** Although he had said, ***“We turn to the Gentiles”*** (Acts 13.46), he did not leave these alone: such was the longing affection he had towards them. For hear him saying, “Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10.1): and, “I wished myself accursed from Christ for my brethren” (Rom. 9.3). But he did this because of God's promise and the glory: and this, that it might not be a cause of offence to the Gentiles”².
- ❖ ***“For so used Christ also to do: as on many occasions we find Him reasoning from the Scriptures, and not on all occasions (urging men) by miracles. Because to this indeed they stood in a posture of hostility, calling them deceivers and jugglers; but he that persuades men by reasons from the Scriptures, is not liable to this imputation. And on many occasions we find (Paul) to have convinced men simply by force of teaching: and in Antioch “the whole city was gathered together” (Acts 13.44): so great a thing is this also, for indeed this itself is no small miracle, nay, it is even a very great one”***³.
(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

“Explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ’” (Acts 17.3).

The subject of his preaching was that Jesus who appeared is indeed the Messiah, who had to suffer, to die, and to rise again from the dead. He is both the victorious King and the suffering Servant, as they were not used to hear about the Messiah as a suffering Servant, despite the clear prophecies that came especially in the book of Isaiah.

He explained (dianoigoon): revealed what was vague in their minds, and demonstrated (paratithemenos): confirmed what they should have realized about the Person of the Messiah, that he suffered for the sake of the people.

As the cross was for the Jews an offense, and for the Greeks ignorance, the apostle explained that the cross is the sign of the truth of the Person of the Lord Christ, and His love for the whole world, being the power of God for salvation, something that Jesus Christ Himself has confirmed (Luke 24.26). The main subject in the preaching of the church is the proclamation of the divine love, shown by the precious blood on the cross.

“And some of them were persuaded, and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas” (Acts 17.4).

The ministry of three weeks in Thessalonica was fruitful, and the harvest was great.

1- Some of the Jews were persuaded by what the apostle Paul said, and joined the two apostles Paul and Silas, not just as friends; but they delivered their lives to God under their spiritual leadership, in a true spiritual fellowship.

2- In true demonstration of their faith, they made their portion with Paul and Silas.

3- As usual, although a few of the Jews received faith, yet the majority came from the Gentiles, the devout who feared God.

4- Those were also joined by not a few of the leading women to worship God.

The two last categories were proselytes who forsook the worship of idols and the pagan abominations, to worship the true God; and in the spirit of piety, they literally kept the law. Those people found in the Christian faith the seriousness of the glory of the children of God, and the freedom from the deadly letter, together with the realization of the prophecies in the Person of Jesus.

Furthermore, the apostle has most probably gained after that many of the idol-worshipping nations, which turned to worship the living God, as it came in his first epistle to them (1 Thess. 1.9).

“But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people” (Acts 17.5).

Wherever they preached they expected affliction and persecution in every city, as the devil would never stand with hands tied before the uprooting of his authority upon mankind, and the spreading of the kingdom of God.

The Jews opposed the word and persecuted the preachers and those who received their preaching, especially those who were Jews and became Christians. The Jews hired some evil men from the marketplace, the idle who lingered in the streets, only preoccupied with practicing evil and corruption, and attacking believers. Such was the offensive position that was taken by the Jews against Jesus Christ the Savior of the World, and they became a tool in the hand of the devil.

They attacked Jason's house where the two apostles stayed, intending to bring them out to the uproaring people, to tear them apart.

'Jason' is a Greek word for 'Joshua', or 'Jehovah Savior'. He was a Jew who believed in the Lord Jesus, and opened his house before the two apostles to stay. He was most probably a relative of St. Paul (Rom. 16.21).

The idle man, who has nothing constructive to preoccupy his mind, is easily used by the devil and the wicked people as a tool to realize evil. The common proverb says that the mind of the wicked is a workplace for the devil.

St. John Chrysostom stands in admiration before St. Paul and St. Silas, as when they realized that they were chosen by God for this work by a predestined divine ordainment, they did not think of themselves as great, because many have accepted the faith, or because of their feeling of commitment to work all, and of the responsibility thrown on their shoulders, concerning both the Gentiles and the Jews. He says, "They gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised" (Gal. 2.9), yet Paul's heart was spacious enough to accommodate both¹. His love made him do more than what he is committed to do. As an example, although it is the Lord's command, that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel (1 Cor. 9.14, 1.17), yet the apostle worked with his hand to fulfill his needs and the needs of those with him, in order not to be an offense to the gospel. Likewise, although the Lord Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach, yet he sometimes baptized, together with his commitment to preach.

"And when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, 'These who have turned the world upside down have come here too'" (Acts 17.6).

They dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, accusing them of being dangerous people who should be treated firmly. They are harboring people who are dangerous to the general security, who cause disturbance wherever they go, and who corrupt the society.

It is amazing how these same accusations are often referred to believers up to the present, despite their mild, loving, quiet, peaceful nature, and holy life. The world, seeing itself in shame and disgrace, as the believers forsake their servitude to it, and reject the enjoyment of its pleasures, refers to them every vain thing, with the assumption that it can destroy them.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

“Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary of the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king – Jesus” (Acts 17.7).

They are acting contrary to the laws of the State and the Ruler, having their own divine law, against that of the world, and having another king called Jesus instead of Caesar. This is the same deceiving spirit working in the children of the devil up to this very day, as they provoke the rulers against the believers, with these two charges: breaking the laws of the State, and the intention of taking over the authority.

“And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things” (Acts 17.8).

The rulers of the city were troubled, for fear that a riot might happen that no one can know its consequences, which could make them responsible before Caesar. And the people were troubled for fear that the rulers might take a firm position against such gatherings, punished by death according to the Roman law; and some innocent people might be wasted by what is done by the Jews.

The apostle Paul, realizing that what happened was the work of the devil, to hinder him from revisiting Thessalonica, wrote to them saying: “We wanted to come to you – even I, Paul, time and again – but Satan hindered us” (1 Thess. 2.18).

“So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go” (Acts 17.9).

2- IN BEREIA

“Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas by night to Berea. When they arrived they went into the synagogue of the Jews” (Acts 17.10).

Fearing for the safety of the two apostles Paul and Silas, the brethren sent them by night to Berea, after the church in Thessalonica was established.

Berea: A city in Macedonia close to Mount Cithanes, on the eastern slope of the series of the Olympian Mountains, overlooking a spacious scenery of a plain irrigated by the two rivers Haliacmon and Axios. Having several natural privileges, it is considered one of the best cities in Rumili, with water canals in all its streets, and gardens rich in trees. It is considered as a city of second rate among the European cities of Turkey.

The brethren demonstrated their great love toward the two apostles, and their care for their safety. Yet, at the same time, the apostles consummated the commandment of the Lord Christ, that if they are expelled from one city, they should go to another. They escaped from Thessalonica, but not from ministry; they escaped from affliction, expecting afflictions in every city.

“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17.11).

The Jews of Berea were more fair-minded 'eugenesteroi' than those of Thessalonica. The expression 'fair-minded' refers to their exaltness of mind and heart, and their true longing for knowing the truth, with seriousness in research and study. They received the word with all care, and the gospel with all readiness and reverence. They did not close their eyes before the light. Their debate was constructive, not for the sake of entering into disputes without goal.

They were known for their love of the Holy Book; they used to read in the books of the Old Testament every day, and to search what the apostles were saying in its light.

As the two apostles uttered the truth, they did not fear such serious study by the Jews in the law and the prophets, but found in it a testimony to the truth. **St. Augustine** said that if it is not for the Old Testament, he would have not believed in the New Testament. The latter realized the prophecies and the divine promises that came in the former. The Lord Christ exhorted us to “search the Scriptures, for in them we think we have eternal life” (John 5.39).

Studying the Holy Book is a joyful daily action that satisfies the soul, and grants peace to the heart, and pleasure to the mind. It presents the divine truth as daily nourishment to the soul, and lifts up the depths as though to heaven, for man to experience the exalted glory, ascending as though from glory to glory, until he encounters with the divine Word, face to face, the day he ultimately comes, to partake of His eternal glory.

“Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men” (Acts 17.12).

It was a great success, as those who were drawn to the truth were more than in Thessalonica, where “some of them were persuaded” (Acts 17.4) ; whereas here, “***many of them believed***” (Acts 17.11). That is because of the love of the latter people for the daily study of the word of God, with true longing to recognize the truth.

❖ Who does not know the Book does not know Christ.

(St. Jerome)

❖ Without the light of the Holy Book, we are not able to see God, who is the Light (1 John 5.1), and to realize His righteousness filled with light.

(Abbot Martyrus)

St. John Chrysostom refers that **success to the affliction and persecution that they faced in Thessalonica. God’s grace always works in souls that accept sufferings with thanksgiving for His sake, even if no miracles were done on their hands.**

❖ "See how the persecutions in every case extend the preaching" ¹.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

- ❖ "The Lord did not wish them to be always doing signs; for this is itself a sign, not less than the working of signs-that being persecuted, they overcame without signs. So that just as now He prevails without signs, so was it on many occasions His will to prevail then. Consequently neither did the Apostles run after signs: as in fact he says himself, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1.23). ... For it was right that thenceforth the believers should be mighty signs to the rest" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul in Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds" (Acts 17.13).

- ❖ "But he (Paul) teaches that knowledge (gnosis), which is the perfection of faith, goes beyond catechetical instruction, in accordance with the magnitude of the Lord's teaching and the rule of the Church" ².

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

The Jews, opponents of the truth, came from Thessalonica to Berea, to stir up the crowds against those preaching the gospel, the same way the Jews in Antioch and Iconium did, when they went from Lystra to stir up the crowds against the two apostles (Acts 14.19).

The devil will not stop opposing the kingdom of light in every way, as he can not bear the spreading of the name of Jesus Christ, and will not stand still watching the salvation of mankind, and their freedom from servitude to him. This animosity will continue between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, as God said to Eve.

The word 'stir up' (saleuein) here is used to describe the stir up of the waves of the sea, as though the forces of darkness are like the sea whose waves do not keep their peace day and night.

"Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea, but both Silas and Timothy remained there" (Acts 17.14).

As the Jews opposing the word were concentrating their interest on Paul, the brethren asked him to go to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained there for a while. He pretended to go by sea to Athens, while he went by land, in order to give the chance to the conditions in Berea to calm down.

"So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens, and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed" (Acts 17.15).

The Spirit of God led him to go to Athens, the city of philosophers to preach to them, those who see the cross as foolishness, because it does not offer them a philosopher to debate with them for the sake of debating itself.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 37.

² Stromata, 6.18.

He instructed Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed in Athens, although he asked Timothy to go first to Thessalonica to give him a report of the conditions of the church there (1 Thess. 3.1-2).

3- IN ATHENS

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols” (Acts 17.16).

That was Paul's first visit to Athens, and was probably the first time for any Christian preacher or minister to visit it. Although his success there was not great, yet he gained a few believers.

Athens has been the most important city in Greece, known for its military, philosophical, and literary abilities. It was established by Cecrops in the year 1556 BC, and was first built on a rock in the midst of a spacious plain; but throughout time, it extended to cover the whole plain. In it, several famous warriors, poets, philosophers, and statesmen were either born or raised. It was burnt twice by the Persians, destroyed by Philip the second of Macedon, then by Sylla. It was looted by Tiberius, devastated by the Gosians in the days of Claudius, and all the region was destroyed by Alarie. The city remained unknown from the reign of Justonian until the thirteenth century, although it remained a capital of a small state, taken over by Omar, a leader under Mohamed the Great in the year 1455 AD, then looted by the Venetians in the year 1464 AD, and taken over by the Turks in the year 1688AD. It was deserted because of the conflicts between the Turks and the Greeks, that left it in ruins. Now it is a free city, where the Christians try to bring it back its fame and importance.

Whereas any scholar who visits it is usually impressed by its greatness, and becomes preoccupied by its knowledge, and by the desire of its inhabitants for debates and hearing every day something new, St. Paul, the scholar of Philosophy, on the other hand, was preoccupied with the salvation of every soul, and its enjoyment of the holy life in the Lord. Wandering in its streets, he was offended by the idols and idol temples that filled them. It was said that the idols in Athens were more than all the idols in all the cities of Greece together. Together with the intellectual culture, idolatry greatly flourished, as St. Paul says: “The world through wisdom did not know God” (1 Cor. 1.21).

St. Paul's soul was disturbed to see how the Athenians were indulged in idol worship. Pausanias says that the people of Athens surpassed any others in their exalted zeal for religion¹. Lucian says about Athens that everywhere there were altars, sacrifices, temples, and religious festivals². Levy also says that Athens was full of images of gods and men, adorned with every material with very elaborate art. And Petronius mockingly says that it was easier to find a god in Athens than to find a man³.

The apostle was not impressed by the magnificent buildings, or with the art of sculpture and painting, or by its unique knowledge and philosophy, etc. But his heart was depressed because of their

¹ *in Attic. 1.24.*

² *T.i. Prometh, p. 180.*

³ *Sat. 17.*

spiritual destruction and their loss of inner glory, and their ignorance of the true God. He was not preoccupied with the luxury and beauty of the temples, but was preoccupied with the darkness that prevailed over the hearts of the worshippers in them. He got zealous for the glory of God.

- ❖ “My zeal has consumed me, because my enemies have forgotten Your words” (Ps. 119.139). The inspired author laments those who lived in corruption, getting angry to see the Author of the law insulted. Pinehas sanctified this zeal, and it brought fame to Elijah, and flaring in the conqueror Stephen, he accused the Jews of the lack of faith. St. Paul cried out loud: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation” (1 Cor. 11.29)? The blessed St. Luke says that St. Paul ‘s soul was disturbed when he saw how Athens was full of idols¹.

(Father Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

“Therefore he reasoned in the Synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17.17).

He went to the synagogues of the Jews to meet the proselytes from the Gentiles, who forsook idol worship, but did not enjoy yet the privileges of the Jews. Those were devout and loved to worship the true God.

He went as well to the marketplace where public debates were held between philosophers, and there he spoke the good news of salvation to those he met.

The marketplaces , beside buying, selling, and hiring labor, were places for debates. The Pharisees loved to go there in order to get greetings (Matt. 23.7; Mark 12.38; Luke 11.43, 20.46).

“Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods’, because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17.18).

The apostle Paul came to know two groups of Philosophers in Athens, namely two schools: the Epicureans and the Stoics.

The Epicureans: a reference to Epicurus who lived three centuries before Christianity. They believe in no gods, and if they have gods, those do not preoccupy themselves with any thing to do with this world. They thought of God as one of them, a being, thinking of nothing, and do not differentiate between good and evil. They do not consider God as the Creator and controller of the world, as the world is self-made, existed by a chance or by accident, in no need of a super power to manage it, and that the body as well as the spirit come to an end with no return (1 Cor. 15.32). All what preoccupied the true Epicurean was the peace of his soul, taking the animal as his supreme model, which finds its comfort in itself and in its instincts, enjoys itself with no limit. Man therefore is in no need of a conscience to rebuke him for what he does or says; he has no need to fear punishment, or hope for a

¹ Comment. On Ps. 119, article 67. The church banned some of his writings, as he is the founder of the Nestorian thought. He is considered more Nestorian than Nestorius himself.

reward. All those principles are contrary to Christianity. The Epicureans find happiness or virtue in their indulgence in carnal lusts and pleasures with no limits, things that the Lord Christ commands us to deny. We can summarize all their principles in the phrase: Live with no god, and indulge in pleasures as a great good for you.

The Stoics: Their name is derived from a Greek word that means a (court), as Zenon, the founder of that group, set his school and used to teach in a court in Athens. He was born in the Island of Cyprus, but spent most of his life in Athens teaching philosophy. He died in the year 246 BC, 97 years of age, of which he spent 48 years publicly teaching philosophy. Although he believed that God created the world, yet he also believed that every thing goes by destiny, including God Himself, and that the world itself is a reasonable mental being, that created every thing itself, experimenting them to end in it. Matter is united with the spirit or the deity. God did not create the world, but manages it. God is the natural law of the matter. The world came into existence as one of the links of God's evolution. The Spirit and the soul, according to them, are some matter consumed by death to return, then absorbed by God in Himself. Therefore, the resurrection preached by the apostle Paul, according to them, is against reason, and hence is an evil. A wise man uses reason as a great king or as a god. The Stoic does not believe in the idea of salvation, as it is a school of pride or deification. The wise man needs no Savior, And in order for him to submit destiny, he is committed to control and submit lusts, as Happiness is in the soul's ability to bear pain, and in man's commitment to have absolute authority over his lusts and natural instincts. Their look at virtue is as strict as that of the Pharisees, taking pride in their self-righteousness. According to them, matter is eternal, God is the world's soul, its mind, or its refreshing foundation, and everything is a part of God. Concerning their view of the future, some of them believe that the soul lasts only until the destruction of the universe, while others believe that, it ultimately is swallowed in the divine Essence, and becomes a part of God. Believing that they are as good as God, the Stoics give pride the upper hand, as the Epicureans give the same to the body lusts and all the senses. They see the virtuous man as not less, or more exalted than God.

It was not possible for those two groups, despite their contradictions, to accept the preaching of the apostle Paul, in particular what concerns the chastity or purity, or concerning humility before God, and the work of the divine grace in the life of believers. They did not take him seriously, as a stranger who came from Judea bearing thoughts unacceptable to the mind.

A babbler, I.E. talking without thinking, some meaningless fantasies, vain words with no activity, saying to somebody, things contradictory to what he says to another. The word 'babblers' (spermologos) in Greek, means a (seed-picker), used for the poor people who pick up seeds from a field after the end of the harvest season, or those who collect the trash cast in the marketplace. The term refers to those despised in a society because of their extreme poverty, as well as to the birds which disturb people by their persistent voices while picking seeds from the ground, to people who talk too much, with things they gather from here and there, with no logic, or true knowledge, yet pretending to be otherwise.

- ❖ The word ‘babblers’ or ‘Seed Picher’ is a name of a lowly bird, that picks seeds from the ground. Likening St. Paul to it, those idiots mock the word of salvation presented to them¹.

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ "So also with good reason, though they knew it not, did the Athenians give him his name. For as they heard the word from him, they said, who is this sower of words (babblers)?"².

(St. Augustine)

Foreign gods (daimonioon): namely, spirits higher than humans, yet lower than the gods.

They thought of the resurrection as a goddess bearing the name ‘Anastasis’, that controls the resurrection. They therefore believed that the apostle Paul intended to introduce two foreign gods into Athens, namely ‘Jesus’ and ‘Anastasis’.

“And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak” (Acts 17.19).

Areopagus either refers to the hill of Mars, located between the marketplace and the Acropolis, or to the assembly that used, in the old days, to be held in the hill of Mars. That assembly was not a court of justice, but a group of people who supervised religious and educational issues. They brought the apostle Paul before it to give an account of his philosophy, in order to decide if he should be allowed to teach in Athens. It was like a municipal hall in the city, or an amphitheater in a university, where scholars discussed issues. It was a famous assembly attended by many people who come from everywhere. If someone denies a god, or adds a new one, with no proper authorization from them, he would be criticized by them. They even condemned Diagoras to death, for mocking the gods.

“For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean” (Acts 17.20).

Paul was brought to that assembly not as a criminal, accused of any crime, but as a person nominated for a high post. They did not bring any witness against him, but wanted to examine him, as he was speaking of many things they were not used to hear from their own philosophers. They brought him to know what he means concerning Jesus and the resurrection; whether they were new gods.

“For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but to tell or to hear some new things” (Acts 17.21).

They were not seeking new knowledge, as much as being only interested in debates.

- ❖ Even Pharaoh, knowing that it is not fitting for man to seek God when he is idle, rebuked the Israelites saying: “You are idle! You are idle! Therefore you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the

¹ Comm. on Luke, Sermon 62.

² Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 51.1.

Lord” (Exod. 5.17). Comfort in itself is good and useful , whereas the idleness of the Athenians was evil, “who spent their time in nothing else but to tell or to hear some new things”¹.

(St. Basil the Great)

4- IN AREOPAGUS

“Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious’ (Acts 17.22).

Now, we listen to a sermon by the apostle Paul in Athens, which is totally different from what the apostles say addressing the Jews or even the Gentiles, who have some knowledge of the Old Testament and respect it, and worship the true living God. As far as the Jews and the proselytes are concerned, all what the apostles present is a confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah; whereas here, the sermon is presented to pagans who worship vain gods, and have no knowledge of the true God. The former are in need of revealing the realization of the prophecies, and the recognition of the Savior through the miracles to believe in Him; whereas the latter are in need of someone to tell them about the care of the God the Creator who is worshipped.

St. Luke gave a summary of St. Paul's sermon to them, or its broad lines, in order to reveal how the apostle dealt with every kind of listeners with what suits them, to gain many to the Lord Christ. The apostle spoke quietly and solemnly, proclaiming the truth without hurting their feelings. He denies the pagan worship, while showing what is true in the men of Athens. Thus, he set the basis of faith.

St. Clement of Alexandria used some texts like (Acts 17.22-28, 26.17-18), to confirm that the philosophers have achieved a certain degree of the truth².

❖ "Whence it is evident that the apostle (Paul), by availing himself of poetical examples from the Phenomena of Aratus,³ approves of what had been well spoken by the Greeks; and intimates that, by the unknown God, God the Creator was in a roundabout way worshipped by the Greeks; but that it was necessary by positive knowledge to apprehend and learn Him by the Son. "Wherefore, then, I send you to the Gentiles," it is said, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith which is in Me" (Acts 26.17-18). Such, then, are the eyes of the blind which are opened."⁴.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

¹ *Exegetic Homilies. 18.8.*

² *Stromata, 1.19.*

³ *Aratus was born in 315 BC, at Sola in Cilicia, Asia Minor. His poem The Phenomena consists of 1154 verses. Its main subject is about astronomy.*

⁴ *Stromata. 1.19.*

- ❖ When St. Paul spoke to the Athenians, he clearly revealed that the wise among the Gentiles have discovered the Creator. ... He first condemned the lack of faith of the Gentiles, to reveal that they could gain grace if they believed. As it is not fair, as far as they are concerned, to fall under punishment for not believing, and do not get the reward of believing¹.

(St. Augustine)

“For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘TO THE UNKNOWN GOD’. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (Acts 17.23).

Diogenes Laertius² says that when a plague once came over Athens in the sixth century BC, they resorted to the gods there, one after another, but to no avail. Then some advised them to release a flock of sheep with no guide, to see where they would eventually settle down, and there they set an altar for a god unknown by name, and offer sacrifices to that god.

It is also said that the Athenians, intending to please all gods, they set an altar on which is inscribed, ‘To the gods of Asia, Europe, and Africa’; and for fear lest they forget any of them, they set an altar for the ‘unknown god’. People from the surrounding nations when they came to Athens, used to vow by the name of that god, unknown to the Athenians. **St. John Chrysostom** says that the Athenians wanted to gather at their city all the gods of the other areas. Fearing that they might have forgotten any of them, they made an altar for the unknown god. Whence, the apostle Paul addressed them, saying that that unknown god is the Lord Christ, God of all.

We should acknowledge the wisdom of the apostle Paul in the Lord, as he never started his speeches or letters by criticizing his listeners or readers, but he used to show what is true in them, in order to draw their hearts and minds to the constructive word of criticism. He knew that love and compassion are more active than criticism and destruction, on one condition, that love should be connected to the truth, together with firmness in the right time.

- ❖ "Observe how he shows that they had already received Him, and "it is nothing strange," says he, "nothing new that I introduce to you." All along, this was what they had been saying: ***“May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears”*** (Acts 17.19-20). Immediately therefore he removes this surmise of theirs"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“God who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17.24).

¹ on Romans. 3.

² Diog. Laer, Book 1.10.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 38.

After confirming to them that he was not presenting to them knowledge of a new god, but a God they worshiped, although they did not know, he started to reveal the features of that God, that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, who does not dwell in temples made by hands, by which he set forth to reveal the foolishness of idol worshipping (Acts 17.29).

“Nor is He worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed anything since he gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17.25).

“Nor He is worshipped with men’s hands”: God does not need men’s sacrifices and feasts (Ps. 50.10-12). Being the source of life, he does not depend on what he granted to mankind to whom He gave life. Man remains indebted to God for every breath he takes. In this manner, the apostle corrected the concept of some philosophers who claimed that the world is eternal, or those who said that God is idle, and has nothing to do with the creation.

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17.26).

All humanity came from one origin, whatever their features, tongues, or customs are, they all have one father and one mother (Gen. 1, 2.10), and are all equal. So it is not fitting for the Greeks, especially the Athenians, to boast of their Hellenist culture, and the great number of philosophers among them, but they should consider all mankind as one family.

The variation among mankind has been allowed by God, who preappointed the times for a certain nation to flourish, and for another to fall. All revolts, wars, or victories, are realized by God’s allowance for an exalted heavenly wisdom.

“So that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him , though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17.27).

Although nations differ in languages, natures, habits, and locations, yet they all have in common their dependence upon God their Creator and Ordainer, Hence they should feel a spirit of brotherhood and equality. Idolatry and worshipping many gods is a kind of foolishness that would never realize that.

As to where God is, He is not far from each one of us. Seeking Him, we find Him within us, nearer to us than the idols before us. He is omnipresent everywhere, filling the heaven and the earth with His divine presence (Ps. 139.7-10; Jer. 23.23; Amos 9.2-4; Mal. 8.27).

“For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘for we are also His offspring’” (Acts 17.28).

No stronger words could express our dependence on God: He is the Source of life, and the Helper and Ordainer of our life.

In a criticism of Marcion, **the scholar Origen** says that Marcion has quoted, yet misused phrases from the Holy Book, as Satan himself did. Whereas the apostle Paul has quoted phrases from famous secular books, and from Gentile literature, to sanctify them¹.

- ❖ "But the heretic, though he use scriptural terms, yet, as being equally dangerous and depraved, shall be asked in the words of the Spirit, "What have you to declare My statutes" (Ps. 50.16)? Thus whereas the devil, though speaking from the Scriptures, is silenced by the Savior, the blessed Paul, though he speaks from profane writers, "The Cretans are always liars", and, "We are His offspring", and, "Evil company corrupts good habits" (Acts 17.28; 1 Cor. 15.33), yet has a religious meaning, as being holy,-is "A teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (1 Tim. 2.7), as having "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2.16)"².

(St. Athanasius the Apostolic)

"For we are also His offspring": This was found in Aratus³ and in Caleanthus, in a praise to the god Jupiter, as well as in other writings. St. Jerome⁴ believes that the apostle's use of quotations from the writings of philosophers, he learned from the true David, who takes the sword of the enemy off from his hand, and with its edge he cuts the head of the haughty Goliath.

From the writings of their poets or prophets, he confirmed to them that God is the source of our life, vitality, and existence; that he is Omnipresent, and closer to every soul, than any other being.

- ❖ He is Omnipresent, and ready to help everybody⁵.
- ❖ God Himself says through His prophet: **"I am a God near at hand, and not a God afar off"** (Jer. 23.23 LXX)⁶.

(Father Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ Paul said to the Athenians: **"For in Him we live and move and have our being"** (Acts 17.28), and "Do I not fill heaven and earth" (Jer. 23.24)? "I am a God near at hand" (Jer. 23.23). Prayers are not ascending to Him as though He is a God afar (Jer. 23.23). It is also said about the Son: "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him" (John 1.10); And He Himself says: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18.20), and also says: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28.20)⁷.

(The scholar Origen)

¹ Cf. *Homilies on Luke. Hom. 31.3.*

² *Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia. 3.39.*

³ *Phaenom, v. 5.*

⁴ *Letter 60.*

⁵ *Comment. On Ps. 139.*

⁶ *Comment. On Ps. 139.*

⁷ *Fragments on Jeremiah from Catena, 17.*

- ❖ Goodness is known to us, not far from any of us, “***For in Him we live and move and have our being*** , ... for we are also His offspring” (Acts 17.28), as this was said, according to the confirmation of the apostles, by the pagan writers themselves¹.
- ❖ We move like those on the way, exist like those in Truth, and live as though in eternity².
- ❖ This is the Goodness who enters in everything. In Him we all live; on Him we depend; and we acquire nothing outside Him, but acquire what is God’s, “For no one is good but One, that is God” (Mark 10.18). That is why, anything good is from God; and everything from God is good³.
(St. Ambrose)
- ❖ He is the One who restored man’s nature to what it was before; as He is the One who set our death-filled body, from the bonds of death⁴.
- ❖ Christ lets those, who approach Him in faith, live, for He is life, “***For by Him we live, move, and have our being***” (Acts 17.28), “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, ... the dead will be raised” (1 Cor. 15.52). So, having this hope in Him, we shall reach the city up there, and we shall reign together with Him⁵.
- ❖ The dead young man, the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7), was on his way to his burial place, followed by many of his friends, But he was approached by the “Life” and the “Resurrection”, namely, by the Lord Christ, the Destroyer of death and corruption, He “***By whom we live, move, and have our being***” , He who restores man’s nature to what it used to be, He who sets our death-filled body free from the bonds of death⁶.
- ❖ As I said, Christ gives life to those who get near to Him with faith, as He is life: “***For in Him we live and move and have our being***”; and He will give resurrection to the dead in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, as it is written in (1 Cor. 15.52). As we have this hope in Him, we shall reach the city up there and will reign with him. For by Him and with Him, praise and dominion to the Father, with the Holy Spirit, to the age of ages⁷.
(St. Cyril the Great)
- ❖ If, according to the divine book of Acts, “we are His offspring”, we have nothing unclean⁸.

¹ St. Ambrose. *Isaac, or the Soul*. 8.78.

² *Death as a Good*, 12.55.

³ *Flight from the world*, 6.36.

⁴ *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 36*.

⁵ *Comm. on Luke. Sermon 46*.

⁶ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 36*.

⁷ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 46*.

⁸ *Epistles*, 48.

- ❖ "He is an exact seal, showing in Himself the Father; living Word and true, Power, Wisdom, our Sanctification and Redemption (1 Cor. 1.30) " ¹.
- ❖ "The incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God comes to our realm, (although) he was not far from us before. For no part of Creation is left void of Him: He has filled all things everywhere, remaining present with His own Father. But He comes in condescension to show loving-kindness upon us, and to visit us" ².

(Pope Athanasius the Apostolic)

“Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising” (Acts 17.29).

The apostle Paul attacked idol worshipping, not by words from the Holy Book, but by the saying of the Greek poets themselves. He talks to them by the language they understand. If Man, being the offspring of God, according to their poets, is greater than any image of wood, stone, gold, or silver, How much more would God be, the source of wisdom and thinking? If the images, made of gold and silver, that are less valuable than man, being the product of his hands, The essence of God would certainly not be in gold or silver.

“Truly, these times of ignorance, God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17.30).

The apostle calls for repentance for what mankind had done in the times of ignorance, before they get acquainted with the gospel. He did not say the times of evil, so as not to accuse them of being evil, but he said the times of ignorance, because what they were doing was not out of opposition to the Truth, or hatred for it, but out of ignorance of it.

“Because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17.31).

Calling them to repentance, He draws their attention to believe in the judgment , and to the Judge, the Son of God whom the Father raised from the dead, to be raised up in Him, and to enjoy the fellowship of His glory. He is not the Judge of the Jews alone, but that of the whole world, with all its nations.

This same method Christ Himself followed. **St. John Chrysostom** noticed that the apostle Paul, in his talks, not only with the Jews, but also with the Athenians, starts with talking about Christ concerning His Manhood, then lifts them up to confirm to them His Deity³. **St. John Chrysostom** often

¹ *Il Iliud Omnia, 5.*

² *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, 8.*

³ *Homilies on Hebr. Hom. 8.*

repeated, in his homilies on the gospel of St. John, that the Lord has often confirmed His obedience to the Father, to consummate His will, And that He was given by Him the authority to raise the dead, etc, Then to bring them over to comprehend His unity in His same nature, That He has life in Himself, And that He is the Judge of the universe, To lift them up to the comprehension of His Deity without offense, As He is One with the Father, in the same Divine nature, and in the same Essence. That, as though by His works, He clearly proclaims His Deity. If the Divine Word had incarnated for our sake, to carry us in Himself to His heavenly glory, His Personality therefore is not a subject of discussion, but one of approaching Him, to discover His Deity through our attachment to Him, and our enjoyment of fellowship with Him. When St. Thomas looked at Him and got in touch with His love, and his eyes met those of His Lord, he cried out, saying: “My Lord and my God!”, most probably before even touching His wounds.

5- MOCKING THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD

“And when they heard of the resurrection from the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter’” (Acts 17.32).

It is not strange that the Greek Philosophers mock the resurrection from the dead, especially the Epicureans who completely refused the coming life, whereas the Stoics most probably sought to hear more from him on that topic. The apostle brought his sermon among the Philosophers to an end, who were longing at first to hear something new to their hearing, to make it a material for discussion. But as soon as the two groups realized that he bore a doctrine contradicting the two schools, the apostle hit against the pride of the Stoics, and the disbelief of the Epicureans of the resurrection of the soul and the body from the dead.

❖ "And when they heard what great and lofty doctrines, they did not even attend, but jeered at the Resurrection! “For the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2.14) " ¹.
(St. John Chrysostom)

“So Paul departed from among them. However some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17.33-34).

The harvest was few compared to it in other countries, but the labor of the apostle was not in vain. He gained the Philosopher Dionysius the Areopagite, and a certain woman of high philosophical and cultural status, together with others with them, realizing the words of the apostle, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting out arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10.4-5).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 39.

As it was when few of the Pharisees believed in Christ, so it was with the Philosophers who believed in the gospel, because of their haughtiness and self-esteem.

Dionysius the Areopagite had his reputation in the council of Areopagus. He was a judge and a senator, before whom Paul stood to have his teachings examined.

Damaris: Some believe that she was Dionysius' wife.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 17
GRANT ME A WORD FROM YOU

- ❖ In Thessalonica, the apostle did not do any signs or miracles;
But the attraction of Your word was the greatest miracle.
Many received the joy of Your salvation;
And the wicked stood opposing the word.
While the simple rejoiced in the power of Your cross;
The haughty had offense in it.
- ❖ Within three weeks, a successful church was established;
But the enemy saddled some men from the marketplace.
He made use of their laziness and slothfulness,
To turn them into an obedient tool in his hands,
Finding their pleasure in opposing Your gospel.
They counted Your ministers as dangerous on the public security.
They counted those who call for obedience and submission,
Trouble-makers who act against the laws of the State.
They claimed that calling You a King, a destruction of and a rebellion against the authority,
So is the devil, always accusing Your men with those charges, in all ages.
- ❖ The persecuted set forth to Berea:
There, the affliction gave exalted success.
Many believed, not for any miracle;
But through Your grace working with those who bear Your cross.
The forces of darkness got agitated for the spreading of light,
And assumed that they are capable of putting it off.
- ❖ The apostle Paul entered Athens:
He was not impressed by the temples and great buildings,
And was not preoccupied with the various schools of Philosophy;
But his soul was disturbed,
And wished that everyone would enjoy the joy of salvation.
- ❖ Grant me the wisdom as You did to the apostle Paul,
So that through love and encouragement, I can acquire every soul to You,
That, I may use the words of the Philosophers as a net to catch those of culture and philosophy.
The apostle did not mock their culture,

Or flatter them on the expense of the Truth.

- ❖ He hit paganism in its roots, by the words of their own prophets,
And revealed to them Your amazing love and Your immense care.
- ❖ Although the harvest was few, yet the few he gained was a blessing to many.
Grant me together with the apostle Paul, a word and wisdom.

CHAPTER 18

AT CORINTH

We have no knowledge of many afflictions or persecutions that St. Paul had undergone while he was in Athens; or that he was expelled from it through bad treatment as was the case in other locations; yet they encountered him with coolness and with no consideration or care on their side for the salvation of their souls.

The apostle Paul set forth from Athens, the stronghold of philosophy, to Corinth, the center of commerce; as though he set forth from a scientific academy to a crowded market. He entrusted the care for the believers there to Dionysius, and came to establish a church of importance in Corinth.

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1- PAUL IN CORINTH

“After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth” (Acts 18.1).

Corinth, the main city in Achaia, rich and magnificent, was not open for anyone to visit. (Non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum).

The apostle departed to Corinth where he waited for the arrival of Timothy and Silas from Macedonia.

In Corinth, the apostle wrote his first epistle – the first epistle to the Thessalonians. And as there were not many Jews among its congregation, that epistle came not bearing the nature of defense or contention, but to reveal the Person of the Lord Christ, His second coming, and the redemption by His sufferings. In it, he also revealed his own compassionate fatherhood, and his love for them; as the Thessalonians had a special place in the apostle’s heart. He wrote with such delicacy amid his sufferings from the opposition of the Jews.

2- PAUL WORKING TO SUSTAIN HIMSELF

“And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently came from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them” (Acts 18.2).

In other locations, it was referred to Aquila and Priscilla as friends of the apostle (2 Tim. 4.19; 1 Cor. 16.9); he was a Jew by birth, then he accepted the Christian faith.

Claudius reigned as an emperor over Rome in 41 AD, and died by poison in 54 AD. We do not know when he expelled the Jews from Rome; Some Jews preferred to depart from all Italy because they did not feel safe under the reign of Claudius. Suetonius the Roman Historian, in his book 'The life of Claudius', chapter 25, mentioned the expulsion of the Jews from Rome because of some riots that happened under the leadership of Chrestus, a foreign Jew who cared for the interests of the Jews, and was counted as their leader.

Aquila and Priscilla were expelled although they were Christianity; yet Christians were then considered as a Jewish sect.

“So because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers” (Acts 18.3).

St. John Chrysostom believes that we should not marvel that the apostle Paul dwelt with the tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla, and worked with them.

❖ "He abides, as having a suitable lodging-place, for to him it was much more suitable than any king's palace. And do not smile, beloved, to hear (of his occupation). For (it was good for him) even as to the athlete the palaestra is more useful than delicate carpets; so to the warrior the iron sword (is useful), not that of gold"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The apostle dwelt and worked together with them, making tents for shepherds and probably for soldiers, either from canvas, leather, or goats' hides. Lightfoot says that the Jews used to teach their children a profession by which to live in times of need; whatever their social position or level of education is. According to Rabi Judah, Who does not teach his son a profession is as though he taught him to be a thief. And another says that Who has a profession is like a vineyard protected with a fence. The Jews used not to despise any honest profession by which man lives. Saul of Tarsus, although a Pharisee taught at the feet of Gamaliel, learned since his childhood the profession of tent making, which he practiced in times of need. Although several churches and friends provided for him, yet he preferred to work with his own hands to fulfill his needs, and sometimes the needs of those who were with him. He was like his Lord, who would rather serve others than to be served by them.

The apostle was bound to those two persons, not only by their common profession, but because of what they bore of zeal in faith, and their work to the account of the kingdom of God (Rom. 16.3).

He worked, not only in Corinth, but also in Ephesus (Acts 20.34), and in Thessalonica (2 Thess. 3.9-10). Here we stand in awe before that huge work that hundreds of priests and preachers could not do.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 39.

Beside achieving all this, he found the time to work by his hands to spare himself stretching his hand to seek his daily needs.

What an amazing portrait of a minister, whose soul is chaste, who does not seek what is his, but what is others', who does not benefit from his right to be sustained by the gospel, so as not to offend anyone. The apostle made this philosophy and wisdom of his clear in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

St. John Cassian presents a living portrait of how the Egyptian monks looked at work, even for monks, as Abbot **Abraham** says:

"We have chosen to procure our daily bodily sustenance by our own exertions rather than rely on the sure provision made by our relations, having less inclination for idle meditation on holy Scripture of which you have spoken, and that fruitless attendance to reading than to this laborious poverty. And certainly we should most gladly pursue the former, if the authority of the apostles had taught us by their examples that it was better for us, or the rules of the Elders had laid it down for our good. But you must know that you are affected by this no less than by that harm of which I spoke above, because though your body may be sound and lusty, yet you are supported by another's contributions, a thing which properly belongs only to the feeble. ...

This at any rate is embraced in the definition of our predecessors, who have laid down that anything that is taken for the requirements of daily food which has not been procured and prepared by the labor of our own hands, ought to be referred to charity, as the Apostle teaches, who altogether forbids the help of another's bounty to the idle and says: "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall eat" (2 Thess. 3.10).

These words the blessed Antony used against some one, and instructed us also by the example of his teaching"¹.

Because of this offense, the apostle Paul committed himself to manual work, to sustain himself and those who were with him. Yet, according to **St. Augustine**, Paul confirms the fact that his fellow apostles did not do wrong in any way, when they did not sustain their need, necessary for life, by manual work, but lived according to the commandment of the Lord, that the minister of the gospel should live by the gospel. They received their physical needs from those whom they provided with free spiritual services².

He also says that Paul says so in (2 Tim. 2.3-6), to let his disciple Timothy realize that what he takes from those for whose sake he fights, plants their vines, and shepherd their flocks, is not alms on their part, but his own right³.

Yet **St. John Chrysostom** confirmed that the spiritual minister only seeks the necessities not luxury, saying that You, as a spiritual soldier, should not sleep on an ivory bed, but on the ground, not

¹ *St. John Cassian. Conferences, 24.12.*

² *The Work of Monks, 7.*

³ *The Work of Monks, 15.*

anoint yourself with fragrant oils, like the corrupt persons who flirt with wicked women, and lead a loose life¹.

3- PAUL'S MINISTRY IN THE SYNAGOGUE

"And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18.4).

He worked during the whole week, except probably on Saturday and Sunday, dedicating Saturdays to worship with the Jews, to preach the gospel, and Sundays to worship together with Aquila and Priscilla, and some few Christian individuals. He managed to convince some Jews and proselytes he met in the synagogue, and during some individual encounters during the week, with the Christian faith.

"When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was constrained by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 18.5).

The apostle Paul asked Silas and Timothy to come from Macedonia and rejoin him, as he could not go to Macedonia, having been constrained by the Spirit, and preoccupied with preaching Jesus Christ, as the Messiah promised by God to the fathers who were anticipating His coming.

Silas and Timothy worked together with the apostle Paul for a whole year and six months, to establish the church, amid the troubles created by the Jews. In a report of his ministry in Corinth, Paul said: "I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2.3-4). Committed to working with his hands, not caring for physical exhaustion, he kept on testifying to the Lord Christ, not by words of philosophy, but by the power of the Spirit.

❖ If our holy books drew people to faith, on account of their being written with eloquence and philosophical skill; it would have undoubtedly been claimed that our faith is built upon the art of writing, and upon human wisdom, not upon the power of God².

(The scholar Origen)

He also wrote to them in his epistle: "or indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcasts, comforted us" (2 Cor. 7.5-6). Amid the bitterness the apostle endured in Corinth, God's comforts supported him by the work of the divine grace in them, as he says, "... not only by his coming (Titus), but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more" (2 Cor. 7.6-7).

In his epistle to the Romans, he referred to many in Corinth (the province of Achaia), giving each a special title of endearment. He was also happy to have baptized Crispus the chief of the synagogue (1 Cor. 1.14).

¹ St. Chrysostom. *On Lazarus and the Rich Man*, 1.

² *De Principiis* 4.1.7.

Not after many months, he sent from Corinth his second epistle to the Thessalonians, in which he wrote about the ultimate coming of the Lord Christ.

4- PAUL'S MINISTRY IN JUSTUS' HOUSE

“But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’ (Acts 18.6).

As was there custom in many places, the Jews opposing the apostle, yet not able to enter into a debate with him, resorted to blasphemy, and to abusing the apostle. Reaching a conviction that he was no more able to speak freely in the synagogue, because of their persistence on opposition, he shook the dust from his garment, proclaiming his innocence from them, and announcing God's judgment because of their stubbornness. He exerted every effort possible, and consummated what is fitting for him to do; So that they would have no right to blame him, if he forsook them and went to preach among the Gentiles. Thus, “The failure is riches for the Gentiles” (Rom. 11.12); and the ministry among the Gentiles served to “provoke them to jealousy” (Rom. 11.14).

Shaking the dust off his garments before them probably refers to the fact that God would shake them as dust from His garments; that they have no more place in His church, which is His holy garment.

“And he departed from there and entered into the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshipped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue” (Acts 18.7).

Justus was, like Cornelius, a devout Gentile who accepted the Christian faith, and probably knew God through the Jews, although it is not certain if he ever became a Jew proselyte. He probably gave hospitality to some Jews as they went out from the synagogue, as an act of love and probably listened to those who began to respond to the preaching of the apostle Paul.

“Then Crispus the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18.8).

Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in our Lord Jesus together with all his household, probably receiving the word of the gospel through his study of the Holy Book (prophecies and symbols of the Old Testament) and his zeal for the salvation of his soul.

The apostle Paul probably baptized them (1 Cor. 1.14) and that certainly caused murmur among the Jewish circles and encouraged many Corinthians to believe in the Lord Christ.

The amazing thing is that Corinth, although famous for its corruption, embraced souls thirsty for the truth and the enjoyment of salvation. Having heard that Crispus the ruler of the synagogue accepted the faith, the Corinthians hastened to encounter with the apostle Paul, and to hear his teachings. They probably came first out of curiosity; then their encounter with the apostle transformed them to seriousness.

“Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent’” (Acts 18.9).

The more the apostle Paul saw of horrible corruption in Corinth and of the violent opposition by the Jews, the more generous the grace of God worked with him, by which he gained many of the Gentiles to faith and even the ruler of the synagogue. Now the Lord Himself encourages him in a vision by night to realize the work of God through him in that city.

He heard the Divine voice confirming to him: "Do not be afraid" from the opposition and blasphemy of the Jews especially after the conversion of Crispus the ruler of the synagogue had aroused them. He also should not fear the gentiles, who were known for their riches and prosperous trade, together with not caring for leading a proper life. Hence he refers, in his first epistle, that "he was with them in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling" (1 Cor. 2.3). The Lord intended to confirm to him His Divine presence; therefore, he should not fear the rich, the learned, and the great. He commanded him not to keep silent, as He Himself would talk on his tongue; and His Holy Spirit would work in the hearing and hearts of his listeners.

❖ "For He did not always permit them to suffer evil (pains), that they might not become too weak. For nothing so grieved Paul, as men's unbelief and setting themselves (against the Truth): this was worse than the dangers. Therefore it is that (Christ) appears to him now. "And he continued a year and six months"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"For I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18.10).

As the Lord Christ confirmed His Divine company with him, it was not fitting for him to fear or be disturbed, or to despair. He did not promise him that no one would confront him, but that no one would hurt him. Let the wicked opponents do what they wish to do; the apostle would not be hurt, or his ministry would stop, as it is the ministry of the Lord Christ, who seeks for Himself a people of His own.

"And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18.11).

The Lord Himself cared for Corinth, where three main centers, at that time, met: Rome, Alexandria, and Ephesus. Spreading the preaching there would certainly have its effect on people coming from those countries, especially that a great number of Jews came to Corinth after being expelled from Rome by the order of Claudius (Acts 8.2-3).

5- OPPOSITION OF THE JEWS TO ST. PAUL

"Now when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat" (Acts 18.12).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 39.

After the Romans took over Greece, they divided it into two sections: Macedonia and Achaia, each governed by a proconsul.

Gallio was originally called Marcus Annaeus Novatus, then when adopted by the orator Gallio's family, he was called by their name. He was described by old writers as being very gentle, and compassionate; His brother Cinika said of him that He was very amiable to anybody and everybody. He embraced a natural power for goodness, with no deception or pretence in his appearance.

When Gallio, a brother of the philosopher Cinika, came as a proconsul of Achaia, whose capital was Corinth, probably in July 52 AD, the Jews intended to apply a kind of pressure on the new proconsul to have St. Paul tried.

“Saying, ‘this fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law’ (Acts 18.13).

They probably meant the Roman law, for they, as Jews, worshipped according to a lawful religion recognized by the law; whereas, Paul, according to them, diverted from the Jewish religion; at the same time, he did not practice neither the Roman nor the Greek worships, recognized by the law. He was calling for a new unlawful religion, which makes him a breaker of the Roman law.

“And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you’ (Acts 18.14).

The Jews came with one accord to present Paul as one who corrupted their law, without giving the new proconsul a chance to study the situation, to present Paul to judgment. They could not present a single evidence that he hindered anyone from worshipping God or other gods. According to them, he was seeking worship in a way against the Roman law.

The Romans provided the Jews with complete freedom to worship God according to their law; yet they counted it as a crime if someone worshipped God in another way. They wished to commit people by force to worship God according to their rites and customs. That, the proconsul could not accept or even discuss.

It was not possible for the Jews to accept the speeches of the apostle Paul concerning the worship of God in Jesus Christ, and in Spirit and truth.

Gallio the proconsul did not accept the case from the beginning and considered the formalities taken by the Jews, as many in number as they might have been, beside the subject of the case, vain. He realized that the apostle Paul has not committed any crime against the law. In his mind, what the apostle was preaching was no more than a new way of interpreting the Jewish law I.E., representing inner religious controversies between the Jews, something he did not wish to preoccupy his mind with.

“But if it is a question of words and names of your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters” (Acts 18.15).

In the proconsul's mind, the problem was no more than some different interpretation by each sect, of the prophecies, and also some difference of opinion concerning certain nomenclatures. The Jews did not accept calling Jesus the Messiah, as claimed by the apostle Paul, beside certain statutes of the law, like the rites of purifications, of circumcision, etc. He refused to be a judge of such issues, which did not concern him as a Roman proconsul of the state.

“And he drove them from the judgment seat” (Acts 18.16).

He refused to hear or decide anything concerning that controversy. The word “drove” in Greek does not imply the use of force, but just a dismissal of the case.

“Then the Greeks took Sothsenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of such thing” (Acts 18.17).

Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, who probably came leading the people rebelling against St. Paul, was beaten by the Greek proselytes, because, once he heard what the proconsul said, he withdrew, an action they considered as an insult to their position.

Some believe that, because he believed in Christianity, and became an assistant to Paul in his preaching (1 Cor. 1.1-2), the rebels intended by beating him before the proconsul, to express their anger; Whereas, others believe that the Gentiles did that to express their anger toward the meaningless rebellion of the Jews, against whom they embraced feelings of hatred.

The proconsul, probably seeing Sothsenes' peaceful reaction, preferred not to intervene to let the people get calm after expressing their anger by beating him, yet within certain limits.

❖ "To them that beat us, let us return blow for blow, by meekness, by silence, by long-suffering. More grievous these wounds, greater this blow, and more heavy. For to show that it is not the receiving a blow in the body that is grievous, but the receiving it in the mind, we often smite people, but since it is in the way of friendship, ... So let us smite their heart. But that meekness inflicts a greater blow than fierceness"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

6- PAUL' S RETURN TO ANTIOCH

“So Paul still remained a good while; then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow” (Acts 18.18).

Having decided to depart from Corinth and head to Jerusalem, he took with him his close friends, Aquila and Priscilla, who decided to leave Corinth, and asked to go with him.

In the port of Cenchrea, Paul (or Aquila) had his hair cut; the Greek text did not say clearly who of the two did that. Fulfilling a vow for the inhabitants of Judea had to be done in Jerusalem; whereas

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 39.

those who lived outside it could do it anywhere else. This vow was presented by the Jews, as a kind of thanksgiving to God for some grace He did to them, like healing from a sickness or rescuing from a danger.

It would not be strange for the apostle Paul, who strived to set the Gentiles free from practicing those rites in a literal sense, to submit personally to them, so as to spare the Jews being offended by him as a breaker of the law.

"And he came to Ephesus, and left them there, but he himself entered the Synagogue and reasoned with the Jews" (Acts 18.19).

He went to Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor, a marine port, and there, he left Aquila and Priscilla to practice certain spiritual work and a ministry to the gospel in Ephesus. The apostle used to use the energies of his friends and brethren to the account of Jesus Christ.

Although the apostle was in a hurry to depart to Jerusalem, and refused to delay in Ephesus; yet he did not waste the chance to reason and debate in the synagogue to the account of the Lord Christ. Nobody can say why he was in such a hurry.

"When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, but took leave of them, saying, 'I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing. And he sailed from Ephesus'" (Acts 18.20-21).

The apostle insisted on departing to keep the feast in Jerusalem, to have the chance to encounter with many of his compatriots and beloved brethren who come to Jerusalem for the feast. Yet he promised to return to them, God willing; and so he did (Acts 19.1) and even stayed with them three years (Acts 20.31).

"And when he had landed in Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch" (Acts 18.22).

Once he landed in Caesarea, he went up to greet the church in Jerusalem then went down to Antioch. It was a short visit to the mother church in Jerusalem. he landed in Caesarea, a close-by port renewed by Herod, and not in the port of Jaffa, which was dangerous.

The apostle Paul was keen on keeping his contact with his friends in every city, especially in Jerusalem, the site of the mother church.

He went down to Antioch, where he spent some time with his old friends, since the time he was sent from there together with Barnabas to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 13.1). He probably considered Antioch as his center, where he could renew his energy, revise his accounts, find comfort with the old ministers, and present thanksgiving for God's grace helping him on every preaching journey he started from Antioch and returned back to it.

Galatia: In the old history, there is no mention of a city by this name. It was but a province; That is why some believe that he probably means here, the most important cities in that province, especially

Ankara, the Turkish capital of Asia Minor, the site of worship of the wise Cybele, called ‘the great mother of gods’; where there was a famous temple. That was a legendary goddess of fertility, whose worship goes back to the third century BC.

The second important city was Pasiros, which was the center of gathering of the Galatian tribes, also called Tolistoboi, or the Galatians of the West.

7- THE START OF HIS THIRD JOURNEY

As St. Luke was not in the Apostle Paul's company, the talk about that journey came very concise.

It is clear that it was a journey to visit, strengthen, and hold fast the disciples, which consisted of the following stages:

- 1- From Antioch Syria to **Galatia and Phrygia** (Acts 18.22-23), to strengthen the disciples.
- 2- Three years in **Ephesus** (Acts 18.24-19.41): Burning of the book of magic (Acts 19.19); There is the temple of the goddess Diana (Acts 19.35).
- 3- Three months in **Macedonia** (Acts 20.15): A plot by the Jews against St. Paul (Acts 20.30).
- 4- **In Troas** (Acts 20.3-6): Fall of Eutychus from a window (Acts 20.6-12).
- 5- To **Miletus** across the sea (Acts 20.13-15). There, the apostle bid farewell to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20.18-38).
- 6- To **Tyre**, via Rhodes and Patara (Acts 21.1-3)" there, the apostle took leave of the disciples in Tyre, despite their persistence to let him not go up to Jerusalem (acts 21.3-6).
- 7- To Jerusalem via **Caesarea** (Acts 21.7-15). In Caesarea, Agabus took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and prophesied about him being bound in Jerusalem (Acts 21.10-11).

“After he had spent sometime there, he departed and went over all the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18.23).

Some count that time as 18 months, during which he watered what he planted in those churches, holding them fast in faith and giving them advices.

“Now a certain Jew named Apollos born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures...” (Acts 18.24).

St. Luke put aside his talk about the travels of St. Paul, to talk about St. Apollos, whom he encountered in Ephesus. He presented a short account of him, to enable us to comprehend certain phrases which came in the epistles of St. Paul, in particular, his first epistle to the Corinthians.

Who is Apollos?

- 1- A Jew born to Jewish parents at Alexandria, where there was a huge congregation of Jews, that occupied two of its five sections.
- 2- He was named Apollos after a pagan god; some believe that it is the same name Apelles that came in (Rom. 16.10).
- 3- He had a strong personality, mighty in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and in the Jewish culture.
- 4- He was Eloquent and on a high level of learning, famous for attractive discussions of any subject.

5- He came to Ephesus, where he demonstrated his talent in interpreting the holy books, and reasoning in the Jewish synagogues.

6- His knowledge was confined to the baptism of St. John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for the Lord, being the voice of the one crying in the wilderness. But it seems that he did not hear yet about the crucifixion of Christ, His resurrection and ascension to heaven, or about the dwelling of the Holy Spirit on the church. He himself got the baptism of John, but did not enjoy the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, or gained the Holy Spirit.

7- He knew what concerns the Lord in the Old Testament; yet his knowledge about the salvation work of the Lord Christ, and the enjoyment of Baptism in His name, was lacking.

8- As a successful preacher, he taught with diligence and persistence, about the coming of the Messiah, boldly and with great courage.

“This man had been instructed in the way; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18.25).

When Aquila and Priscilla heard him speaking in the synagogue, and realized his lack of knowledge concerning our Lord Jesus, they explained to him the way of God more accurately. Through them, he recognized the Person of the Lord, His works, and teachings, expressed by St. Luke as “the way of the Lord”.

They explained to him that the Messiah he speaks about has already come and realized His mission.

“So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace” (Acts 18.26- 27).

That great eloquent and mighty in knowledge listened to Aquila and Priscilla; and his heart was flared with love for preaching Jesus Christ. That is why, having desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote to those in Ephesus to receive him. And there, he worked hard by the Divine grace granted to him to the account of the Kingdom of God.

“For he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly; showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18.28).

Apollos' knowledge of the Holy Book supported him in preaching Jesus as the long-anticipated Messiah; and hence he had an active role in the life of the church.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 18

THE DEFEAT OF SATAN IN CORINTH

- ❖ Your apostle entered into Corinth, the city of corruption;
He entered as though into the den of Satan;
Where the worship of the goddess Aphrodite with all its abominations drew many.
But, can the devil stand before You?
- ❖ Your apostle entered into the city as a needy person,
Who works with his hands to sustain himself;
When You, with Your grace sustain all creation.
He clothed himself with the garment of need,
Following Your example, You who, by Your poverty, enrich many.
You were not ashamed of working,
So that we would not stop doing the work which is sanctified.
- ❖ In awe, I stand before Your amazing apostle,
Stretching his hands to work together with Aquila and Priscilla at night,
So as not to become in need for anyone.
He strived in the spiritual battle as a good soldier,
Planted in Your vineyard diligently,
Shepherded Your flock with his whole heart,
Yet rejected the necessities so as not to cause offense to anyone.
For Your sake, he forsook his natural right according to the gospel;
The salvation of every soul in his sight surpassed anything, even his own life.
- ❖ Working in material things did not draw his mind or his heart to them,
But, by Your Holy Spirit, he was constrained,
To work by the Spirit, to bring all to You.
- ❖ Grant me to minister to You with my whole being.
Let every breath of my life be to Your account.
Let my heart, mind, talents, and all my energies, be dedicated to the account of Your gospel.
- ❖ The apostle used to work with his hands all the days of the week,
Except on Saturdays and Sundays, that he dedicated to worshipping and preaching,
But his heart and tongue kept on testifying to You with everyone he encountered.
- ❖ He was constrained by the Spirit, even while working with his hands.

He was surrounded by temptations; yet he never lost Your comforting.

- ❖ He was expelled from the synagogue, and the Jews persisted on opposing him,
But You proclaimed Your company with him.
While the Gentile ruler showed him compassion;
The people that refer themselves to You intended to rid themselves of him and of You.

CHAPTER 19

A SERIOUS RIOT AT EPHESUS

In The last chapter, we saw the apostle Paul starting his third preaching journey, as reported very concisely by St. Luke. Yet, in this chapter, he tells about the work of God with the apostle Paul, doing unusual miracles by his hands (Acts 19.11), as though He was supporting and encouraging him, to bear what would happen to him because of the riot of the Ephesians against him and those who were with him. The devil could not bear to see his children whom he forced for himself, casting the books of magic in the fire, to return with repentance to the heavenly father. It was a serious battle between the Lord Christ and the forces of darkness.

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1- ST. PAUL IN EPHESUS

“And it happened, while Apollos was in Corinth, that Paul having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples” (Acts 19.1).

Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor, built by Androclis of Athens. In its appearance, it was a Greek city, yet the nature and customs of its inhabitants were oriental to a certain extent, and it was the center where several peoples and cultures met.

It was a commercial city of rich natural resources with fertile land, several rivers, and a port.

Ephesus was full of magnificent buildings that Athens boasted of, the greater of which was the temple or Artemis, known as Diana, one of the seven world wonders. Once it was completely erected, it was burnt down by bigots, on the same day Alexander the Great was born, then rebuilt with more magnificence. When Alexander the Great visited it, and sought to have his name inscribed on it, the Ephesians haughtily refused. It remained as such until the days of St. Polycarp, then was destroyed, and wiped out of existence by the Gotists who came from beyond the Danube. Therefore, its location is unknown nowadays. Its pillars, adorned by precious stones, were used in building the church of Agia Sophia in Constantinople (Istanbul nowadays), and other cathedrals in Italy.

That temple was 425 feet long, and 220 feet wide; each of its 127 pillars, presented by a king, was 60 feet high. The statue of Diana inside the temple represented the goddess of hunting, with protrusions representing breasts, as a symbol of fertility; hence, it was called by **St. Jerome**: ‘multimammear’ or (the breasts worshippers). Its worshippers believed that it came down from heaven.

Silversmiths competed in making mini statutes and mini shrines in silver to sell to worshippers and tourists, that brought no small profit to the craftsmen (Acts 19.24-25). Coins were found in this location, with the image of the temple of Artemis on one side, and that of Emperor Nero on the other. If the apostle Paul, by his preaching destroyed Artemis, the devil set Nero to destroy its destroyer.

When the apostle Paul came to Ephesus, Apollos was in Corinth (Acts 19.1), he who has been in Ephesus before Paul (Acts 19.1). St. Paul entered into Ephesus in the year 54 or 55 AD, and there he stayed either three years, according to the words: “For three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20.31), or two years as it came in (Acts 19.10).

As God allowed it for the apostle Paul to find in Corinth the blessed Justus to open his house before him, He also motivated a Greek by the name of Tyrannus, the owner of a school, most probably teaching philosophy and literature, to receive Paul and those who were with him like an angel from God. He was baptized by the apostle (Acts 19.9).

As to the fruits of that ministry, St. Luke says: “All who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19.10).

Apollos came to water what Paul planted. St. Paul rejoiced to see others water his plants, being sure that it is God who grows them.

The apostle Paul passed the upper regions, the elevated regions in Asia Minor, referring especially to Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 18.23). They were so called, whereas Ephesus was less elevated than the sea, and hence was called the law city. To it Paul came to fulfill his promise to them (Acts 18.21).

2- BAPTISM OF A GROUP IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS

“He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit’” (Acts 19.2).

There, he met a group of disciples with an incomplete knowledge of the Lord Christ. Like Apollos. They received the teaching of St. John the Baptist, that the Messiah was to appear soon; they did not know that He has already appeared, or heard anything about the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Those were twelve believers (Acts 19.7), who have not yet been acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla, who were left behind in Ephesus by the apostle Paul, and whom he found again there.

Some believe that those twelve, although they believed that the Messiah has come, yet they did not have knowledge nor heard about the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Their hearts were ready to receive the Holy Spirit, to enjoy the second birth, and the renewal of the human nature, yet they found no one to preach it to them. They were in need to receive the seal of the Holy Spirit, granted to the church, to let

them have the light of the truth, to become steadfast in the teachings of Christ, and to grant them the fruits of the Spirit, namely, the fellowship in the divine nature, to enjoy love, joy, peace, chastity, and goodness, to let them walk by the Spirit, and under His guidance.

Lightfoot says that, according to the tradition of their nation, the Israelites believed that, after the death of Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel, and ascended to heaven; And although they anticipated His return, yet they did not hear that He did, and was already present in the midst of the believers.

- ❖ St. John the Baptist had no authority to grant the Holy Spirit, as testified by those whom he baptized, who said: "*We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit*" (Acts 19.2)¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "The first baptism was that of the flood for the eradication of sin. The second was through the sea and the cloud: for the cloud is the symbol of the Spirit and the sea of the water. The third baptism was that of the Law (especially for the Levites): for every impure person washed himself with water, and even washed his garments, and so entered into the camp. The fourth was that of John, being preliminary and leading those who were baptized to repentance, that they might believe in Christ"².

(John of Damascus)

"And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism'" (Acts 19.3).

The apostle Paul told them to get baptized, as they did not have any knowledge about the Holy Spirit. For who is baptized is learnt first by the Holy Spirit himself. As theirs was the baptism of John, with no knowledge of the Holy Spirit, they did not get the Spirit, or enjoyed the new birth.

This does not imply that they were baptized by John the Baptist himself, but probably by one of his disciples in his name, as we saw in our study of the gospel, according to St. John the Evangelist: there were those who used to exaggeratingly revere him, to consider him greater than the Lord Jesus Christ, and were even jealous because of the spread of the name of Jesus, who was Himself baptized by John. They complained to John about that (John 3.26).

"Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Jesus Christ'" (Acts 19.4).

St. Paul clarified to them the significance of John's baptism, as a preparation for the belief in the Lord Christ, that man should not stop at it, but should proceed to gain what is more perfect. St. Paul did not speak against the baptism of John. Since it had been a baptism of repentance, that makes people admit their need for a Savior, who could forgive their sins, they should then receive Him, to whom

¹ *Homilies on St. John . Hom. 17.2.*

² *Orthodox Faith, 4.9.*

John's baptism referred. St. John the Baptist, although he was a great man, yet he was the friend of the Groom; whereas Jesus Christ was the heavenly Groom, who has the Bride.

- ❖ "And so "the baptism of repentance" was dealt with as if it were a candidate for the remission and sanctification shortly about to follow in Christ: for in that John used to preach "baptism for the remission of sins," the declaration was made with reference to future remission; if it be true, (as it is,) that repentance is antecedent, remission subsequent; and this is "preparing the way." But he who "prepares" does not himself "perfect," but procures for another to perfect" ¹.

(The scholar Tertullian)

“When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19.5).

Having known the perfect truth, they did not argue with the apostle, but readily received baptism in the name of Jesus Christ on the spot.

- ❖ "Those who have received only John's baptism and have no knowledge of the Holy Spirit are baptized again, lest any should suppose that water unsanctified thereby could suffice for the salvation of either Jew or Gentile" ².

(St. Jerome)

3- The Holy Spirit coming upon them

“And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19.6).

After the baptism, the apostle laid his hands on them, most probably in the form of a cross, to grant them the secret of confirmation, through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon them. Then they got certain gifts, namely, speaking with tongues and prophesying. God probably allowed them to have those gifts, to confirm the distinction between John's baptism, and that in the name of Jesus Christ, that it is not a repetition of the day of the Pentecost, but an extension of that day, the activity of which is forever.

- ❖ God has established a doctrine, that they could not at that time deny, that the Holy Spirit dwells in believers. This gift was proclaimed by God, when He granted the apostles and disciples to speak with tongues, together with the ability to interpret, so that no one could dare to deny the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon them ³.

(Ambrosiaster)

4- His ministry in the synagogue

¹ on Baptism, 10.

² Letter 69 to Oceanus, 6.

³ Epis. To Galatians, 3.3.3.

“Now the men were about twelve in all. And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the Kingdom of God” (Acts 19.7-8).

As he used to do, he began his ministry in the Jewish synagogue, offering the gospel to them, with the hope of gathering the lost sheep of Israel, scattered on the mountains. In such doing, he followed the example of the Lord Christ, partaking of their worship like one of them. Hoping to persuade and gain any of them, He partook of their worship on the Sabbath days, until the church of the New Testament was set, and the believers could be transferred to worshipping on the day of the Lord.

For the duration of three months, he debated them boldly and without despair, concentrating on the “Kingdom of God”, that He sets in the hearts of men, to grant them the blessed life, and to make out of their depths an icon of heaven. He was correcting their concepts of the Kingdom of the Messiah, for whom they were waiting, that it is not a temporal earthly kingdom, but a heavenly spiritual one.

He reasoned, namely, debated with them, presenting proofs from the Holy Book, responding to their objections, posing questions and receiving their answers. He did not seek their belief without thinking, but tried to convince them by logical reasons.

The apostle tried to convince them that God’s Kingdom, He sets inside their hearts, is the enjoyment of His dwelling in them, As the Kingdom, in its essence, is an enjoyment of the Person of the Lord Jesus.

❖ The Holy Book says: “The word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut. 30.14). This is what the Savior gently referred to, that they should not seek something outside them, “Nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’, For indeed the Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17.21)¹.

❖ The Kingdom of God, according to the word of our Lord and Savior, does not come through watching. It is clear that whoever prays for the coming of the Kingdom of God, is indeed praying for the Kingdom to be set and consummated inside him, to let him bear fruition².

(The scholar Origen)

5- His ministry in the school of Tyrannus

“But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus” (Acts 19.9).

When some of them hardened their hearts and opposed the word of truth, despite his persistent effort along three months, he departed from the Jewish synagogue, and withdrew the disciple who believed, not out of despair, but lest those who have accepted the faith would be affected by the

¹ *Comm. on John, 19.77.*

² *on Prayer, 25.1.*

opponents. He intended to embrace them, to make them abide in faith, grow in spiritual knowledge, and so as not to stumble because of the persistent insults and attacks of the unbelievers.

The word “*reasoned*” is accurately translated as “debated” through teaching and discussions.

Some believe that the school of Tyrannus was a Jewish Theological institute, which they had beside the synagogues, especially in major cities, they used to call ‘Beth Marash’, namely, ‘a school’ or ‘house of research and seeking of knowledge through listening to lectures and discourses, that the Jews use to attend on the Sabbaths beside worshipping in the synagogues. We know nothing about the identity of Tyrannus, but he probably was a Jew who, not being an enemy to the Christian faith, allowed Paul to use a space in his school to teach his disciples. At that time, there was no churches; and the Christians used to assemble in any suitable location to worship and be taught. Some believe that it was a school of Philosophy owned by Tyrannus, who was probably an Elite person, or even the ruler of the city.

Paul’s withdrawal from the synagogue was not only to protect his disciples from offenses, but to give himself the chance to encounter with them on a daily basis, and not once a week, on the Sabbath. It also opened the door of faith before many. In the Jewish synagogue, it was possible for only the Jews and the proselytes to attend; whereas in the school, it was open before both the Jews and the Gentiles, as the doors of evangelic wisdom was open before all mankind.

“And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19.10).

The apostle Paul kept on preaching and debating for two years in that school, that many Jews and Greeks from different countries in Asia heard about it, and came to listen to the apostle. During that period, churches in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were established (Col. 2.1, 4.13), and probably other churches in Asia Minor mentioned in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2.3).

Many people who used to come to Ephesus, having been the capital of Asia, for worship, trade, education, or justice, hearing about the apostle Paul, got interested to hear him. So the people sitting in the darkness saw the light of the sun of righteousness, our Lord Jesus, who shines on them.

6- Unusual miracles

“Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul” (Acts 19.11).

God confirmed the preaching and teachings of the apostle Paul, by working signs and miracles.

We did not hear of any signs done by the apostle Paul, since that of casting out the evil spirit from the diviner in Philippi, No mention of any done in Theealonica, Perea or Athens. Has he done any sign, not recorded by the evangelist St. Luke? In most cases, wherever the word of the gospel prevailed, there was no need for working signs; whereas when there is strong opposition, God supports the work by signs. When, in Ephesus, there were strong opposition and insults from the Jews and the Gentiles, “God allowed for unusual miracles by the hands of Paul”. We should also not disregard that St. Paul was not preoccupied with recording all the signs and miracles, According to him, “Truly the signs of an apostle

were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds” (2 Cor. 12.12). Yet the evangelist St. Luke did not mention any miracles done by the apostle Paul there.

Because of the circumstances that prevailed in Ephesus, God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, not done by other apostles.

“So that even hand kerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them” (Acts 19.12).

When the devil strongly worked through the might of Artamis, God supported His church by working unusual miracles by the hands of the apostle Paul, that “the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (Acts 19.17). “And many of those who had practiced magic, brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver (Acts 19.19-20). And the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly magnified.

As much as the forces of darkness prevailed on Ephesus, God worked strongly to draw even the magicians themselves to faith. It was not the apostle Paul who was doing those unusual miracles, but he was the holy tool used by God, And according to him: “Who is Paul? And who is Apollo?”

God, not only sanctified his body, but even the handkerchiefs and aprons brought from his weak body did miracles to the sick and those with evil spirits. In that manner, the Lord realized His promise to His disciples, that they would do greater miracles than those He did (but in His name), and that “He gave them power over the unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” (Matt. 10.1).

❖ The Word became a body, to change our body into Spirit ... And to sanctify the whole body with Him, as in Him the firstfruits were sanctified¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

7- The exorcist sons of Sceva

“Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘We adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches’ (Acts 19.13).

Here the evangelist St. Luke mentions an example of the impact of the ministry of St. Paul in Ephesus. Some of the exorcists, who used to go around in Ephesus claiming their ability to cast out demons, thought that they could practice their work by the power of the name of Jesus preached by St. Paul. Those Jews, who saw the unusual powers granted to Paul, instead of believing, intended to use the power of that name in doing their magic.

¹ *Contra Eunomius, 4 PG 45.637AB.*

The Greek word translated as *'itinerant'* refers to some evil jobless and homeless person who goes around, performing magic, and claiming the ability to cast out evil spirits, by adjuring him by the name of God.

"There were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so" (Acts 19.14).

❖ "See the villainy of the men! They still continued to be Jews, while wishing to make a gain of that Name. All that they did was for glory and profit" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

The word 'Sceva' is Greek, and no priest was ever known by that name. And even if he was a chief priest, what was he doing in Ephesus? That is why some believe that he proclaimed himself, or was proclaimed by some Jews as chief priest, Whereas some others believe that he probably descended from the priestly family of Aaron, or was a member of the Sanhedrim, and departed from Jerusalem to dwell in Ephesus, or was wandering together with his sons from town to town as servants of the devil, claiming the ability to cast out demons, and to perform magic.

This fiction, according to the Historian Josephus, spread among the Jews, after king Solomon wrote down certain words to be used to heal sicknesses and cast out demons². The Lord Christ was probably referring to those people in (Matt. 12.27).

It is indeed grievous to see that the tribe, sanctified by God for His service, and the house of Aaron, He dedicated as His priests, turned out to provide ministers for the devil, practicing magic and divination in the name of God Himself, yet not as reverence to Him, or as faith in His might, but for the sake of this satanic deed. That is why the apostle cries out, "What fellowship is there between God and Bileal?"

We should not marvel to see the devil and his hosts, showing at times a sort of zeal for the name of God, Yet what they intend in all circumstances is to destroy the salvation of men. That is why the Lord Christ and His apostles did not accept their testimony, even when they looked genuine.

If we oppose the devil by the Spirit of truth and the living faith, through our covenant with God, we shall certainly destroy him. But if we count that we destroy him by apparently saying the name of God, he will overcome us, and inflict serious wounds on our souls, and will reveal our inner nakedness of God's grace.

The secret of our conquest over the devil lies, not in uttering the name of Jesus, without living with Him by His grace. That is why **Father Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus** says that after proclaiming the enemy, Paul referred to the Savior (Rom. 6.20). Those who gain the grace of God would never be defeated³.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 41.*

² *Josephus. Antiq. 8.45-46.*

³ *Interpretation of Rom. 16.20.*

- ❖ May God grant you conquest, not outwardly, over your enemy, but inwardly, over yourselves.
- ❖ Do not ever fear the enemy who comes from outside, for if you conquer yourself, you would be a conqueror of the whole world.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ The devil is called mighty, yet on no account of being so by nature, but in reference to the power he has because of our weakness¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And the evil spirit answered and said, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?’” (Acts 19.15).

The evil spirits realized that those people were doing that, not out of faith in Jesus Christ’s power to save and to grant the Kingdom, but as an abuse of this name, for although they adjure by Jesus’ name, they do not carry its power. The evil spirit in saying: ***“Who are you?”***, he means, ‘What is your power? Since You do not belong to Jesus, or realize the capabilities of Paul who preaches His name, You have no right to do signs in His name’.

- ❖ It is obvious that the unclean spirits would never find their ways in the bodies of those they possess, unless they first reign over their minds and thoughts, to deprive them of the fear of God, remembering and contemplating in Him. They would then, dare to approach them as someone with no divine protection, to shackle them, and find a convenient abode in them, as though they are have a legitimate right over them².

(Abbot Serenus)

“Then the man in whom the evil spirit was, leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (Acts 19.16).

- ❖ "The power of the demons is shown to be a great one, when it is against unbelievers. For why did he not say, ***"Who is Jesus?"*** He was afraid, lest he also should suffer punishment; but, that it might be permitted him to take revenge upon those who mocked him, he did this; ***"Jesus," says he, "I know,"*** etc. He was in dread of Paul. For why did not those wretched men say to him, we believe?"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus, and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (Acts 19.17).

¹ In Matt. Hom 41.

² John Cassian's councils with the illustrious desert fathers.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 41.

The evil spirit did not intend to glorify God, but found a chance to harm the seven sons; yet the good Lord turned that incident for the edification of the church, as the fear of God fell on all the Jews and Gentiles who dwelt in Ephesus, and His name was greatly magnified before many.

❖ The true fear of God is born of true faith,

As he, who truly believes, would fear Him in whom he believes.

Faith is born out of natural simplicity,

And is kept and abides as well by this simplicity.

Simplicity keeps faith sound.

And the fear of God keeps the commands of God¹.

❖ Let us speak of the fear of God through a mind that fears Him.

He does not intend to approach this subject, in order to parade philosophical thoughts, or to partake of dry mental debate, But, guided by the fear of God, he enters, as though, into sanctities, to deal with the relationship between God and men, as a life lived by the fathers, and handed over to his generation. It is as though he says: ‘Do you wish to recognize the fear of God? Seek that fear from the Lord, to enter with your holy thought into the depth of your soul, to discover the amazing work of God in me and in you’.

He does not wish for the fear of debates and words, but for that of the experience of the living Spirit.

The human mind is a gift from God to man, Yet it needs to enter into the circle of the fear of God, to guide him like a little kid in the care of his father and mother, to walk with it, in order to recognize the secrets of life, to practice, grow, and mature².

(St. Felixone, bishop of Mpeg)

“And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds” (Acts 19.18).

Many of those who believed and were baptized might have probably hid some of their sins, and did not present serious penitence, and were terrified by that incident. It is not enough to abide to the name of the Lord Jesus, but they should respond by the work of His holy Spirit, and walk according to the new covenant to which they became committed. Those came in the fear of God, confessing everything in their depths. Thus, that incident turned into a repentance of many, and their confession to the apostles and the disciples; it drew as well, many unbelievers to the living faith.

“Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver” (Acts 19.19).

¹ Sermon 6.162.

² Sermon 6.159.

8- Burning the books of magic

Many of those who practiced magic realized the weakness of the devil and all his hosts before the name of the Lord Jesus, when it comes from a heart with fellowship with Him, and from a soul sanctified to Him. In complete seriousness, many of those brought together their books of magic, and burned them in the sight of all, totally disregarding their costs.

Having practiced their magic publicly, they burned their books of magic the same way, proclaiming their repentance and confessing their sins. They offered their whole treasures – their costly books of magic, to confirm their firm resolution not to resume their evil practices. What they counted as the source of their living and riches became in their sight valueless, and even into something like a disease they wished to get rid of. That open burning of the books of magic was probably an expression of joy for the conquest over the devil, and for the salvation by the Lord Christ.

“So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” (Acts 19.20).

While the works of the devil, demonstrated in the works of magic, were being destroyed, the word of God mightily grew and prevailed, as the believers realized new depths of the word, and new believers were drawn to enjoy it.

9- A commotion in Ephesus

“When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome’” (Acts 19.21).

It was the desire of Paul’s heart as the apostle to the Gentiles, to testify to his Christ in Rome, the capital of the Gentile world at that time. God put it in his heart.

He planned to visit the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and in particular those in Philippi and Corinth, the main cities in those two states. He intended to visit the churches he planted to see how much God worked in their lives. He planned as well to go to Jerusalem, to bring the joy to the brethren there about the work of God among the Gentiles, and also to present the gifts of the churches to the poor of Jerusalem. And from there, he planned to go to Rome, on his way to Spain (Rom. 15.24-28).

“So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time” (Acts 19.22).

Timothy was the suitable man to send to Macedonia, having been there together with the apostle Paul, when he established its church (Acts 16.3, 17.14).

Erastus, the treasurer of the city (Rom. 16.23), was the suitable man to send with Timothy, for the mission of fund collecting for the poor of Jerusalem.

“He stayed in Asia for a time”, to prepare for the collection for the poor, in St. Luke's company.

“And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way” (Acts 19.23).

Paul took a quick decision to depart from Ephesus, where a great commotion took place about the Christian faith and teachings he preached. Ephesus was the center of the worship of the great goddess Artamis (called 'Diana' in Latin), counted as the mother goddess of Asia Minor, known also as 'Cybele'. The temple of Diana was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

“For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Diana, brought no small profit to the craftsmen” (Acts 19.24).

Those small shrines, with statues of wood or precious stones, were hanged around the necks of believers, for protection, with a side door that keeps the goddess inside¹.

As that industry, which has been very profitable, was threatened by destruction because of the success of the apostle Paul's ministry, a certain silversmith called Demetrius called for a meeting for the craftsmen of that industry, to draw their attention to the danger facing them. That custom of hanging little statues of gods and goddesses, placed in boxes of wood, iron, or silver, well known among the heathens including the Romans, and was referred to in (Gen. 31.19), when Rachel stole the statues of her father Laban; In (Judg. 17.5), about Micah, who had a shrine and household idols; And in (1 Sam. 19.13; Hos. 3.4).

Artamis Was one of twelve most famous gods, called in heaven, 'Luna' or 'Meui', meaning (Moon), On earth called 'Artamis' or 'Diana', and in hell, called 'Hecate'. She used to have a crescent on her hand, to wear hunting attire, to be portrayed with three faces, and to hold tools of torture. Considered to be the goddess of hunting, she was worshipped through several names, like 'Proserpine', 'Triavia', etc. She was often portrayed with multiple breasts, as a reference to being the source of blessings, that she grants to everyone according to his needs, and was worshipped in Egypt, Athens, Celia, and several other nations, with the main center in Ephesus.

“He called them together with the workers of similar occupation, and said: ‘Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade’” (Acts 19.25).

Demetrius did not resort to rulers or judges, but to the craftsmen, who were only preoccupied with material profits. An easy way to profit and even to wealth has always been to abuse religion.

“Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands” (Acts 19.26).

It was said that there were 33 centers of worship to the goddess Artamis. That was a testimony by the heathens themselves about the success of Paul's ministry all over Asia Minor.

¹ James N. Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*. N.J., p. 448.

“So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship” (Acts 19.27).

Here, Demetrius explains the extent of damage that would come to them, as the spread of faith would certainly end up in closing their shops, and abolishing their industry, beside the great insult of accusing them of worshipping vain gods. And in order to provoke their religious prestige, he proclaims to them that those preachers despise the gods worshipped in all Asia and the world.

The preaching of the apostle Paul was causing them the following serious losses:

(1) Loss of their source of income, making them prone to poverty and need.

(2) Loss of their prestige, as workers to the account of vain gods, which is far worse than the material loss.

(3) Slandering the image of the great goddess Artamis, worshipped by the whole world, something unbearable.

“And when they heard this, they were full of wrath and cried out, saying, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians’” (Acts 19.28).

Finding no real cause to accuse and kill the apostle Paul and his companions, they arose a great public riot and commotion.

“So the whole city was filled with confusion, and rushed into the theater with one accord, having seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travel companions” (Acts 19.29).

The mob seized Gaius, of Derbe (Acts 20.4), and Aristarchus, referred to in Acts 20.4; Col. 4.10, with a single charge, being Paul’s travel companions. They probably had the intention of offering them to the wild beasts in the theater, the site of public assemblies, and trials, and where the convicted are offered to the wild beasts.

“And when Paul wanted to go in to the people, the disciples would not allow him” (Acts 19.30).

Paul’s first reaction to that public riot was to flee, But when he saw that they seized his companions, he wanted to surrender himself to the mob, to save their life out of his love for them; but his disciples seized him and kept him from doing that, as though they said to him what king David’s servants did, that he was worth ten thousands of them (2 Sam. 18.3).

The apostle Paul probably intended by going in to the mob, to talk to them defending himself and his companions, or to use the chance to testify to the gospel.

“Then some of the officials of Asia, who were his friends, sent to him pleading that he would not venture into the theater” (Acts 19.31).

Those officials of Asia ‘Asiarchae’ were leaders responsible for supervising religious services and public festivals held on the honor of the gods and the Roman Emperor, on public occasions. Their

role was ‘para-religious’. They were sometimes called ‘priests’ with priestly duties. Each year, ten of the elite personalities in the great cities were chosen for those positions, after the approval of Rome, and could be re-elected for a second term. They used to hold an assembly in the main cities of the state, like Ephesus, Smyrna, and Sardes, etc. to discuss their affairs. They were usually very rich persons, as those festivals were very expensive to run, and they were committed to bear the expenses. They used to wear purple attire, and crowns over their heads. Whether they worked together, or one of them was the head, helped by the others, is not clear¹.

During that time of riot, the assembly was in session, they must have heard the sermons of the apostle Paul, loved him, and became his friends, although not necessarily converted to Christianity. To defend him, they had to absorb the wrath of the mob, to save the apostle and his companions.

Some believe that that assembly was formed of an acting chief beside former chiefs, meeting together to consult them and benefit from their past experience.

The disciples of the apostle and those officials saw that surrendering to the mob would certainly incite the situation the more, and he might be treated with extreme violence, and probably killed. They saw that he should wait until they can calm down the riot, and have the chance to hold a legal court of justice.

“Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (Acts 19.32).

Some of them cried out seeking to have all the Jews killed; and others, to have Paul and his companions killed; but the great majority of them did not know why they came together.

“And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander motioned his hand, and wanted to make his defense to the people” (Acts 19.33).

Feeling that they were in great danger, as many among the multitudes could not distinguish between the Jews as a whole and the apostle Paul, the Jews put Alexander forward to try to calm them down. Grotius believes that that Alexander was the coppersmith who did Paul much harm (2 Tim. 4.14); although other scholars do not agree to this. When he confronted the multitude, they realized that he was a Jew, who stood not only to defend himself, but all the Jews.

“But when they found out that he was a Jew, all with one voice cried out for about two hours, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians’” (Acts 19.34).

Considering the Christians as a Jewish sect, the multitude intended to mute Alexander.

“And when the city clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, ‘Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus’” (Acts 19.35).

¹ James N. Freeman. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*. N.J., p. 450.

That city clerk, or the secretary of the city council, had to be of high culture and legal knowledge (2 Sam. 8.17; Ezra 7.11, 6-12; Matt. 5.20, 12.38, 13.52, 15.1, 23.34; 1 Cor. 1.20).

He talked to them in a way that quieted them down, confirming that the great goddess Diana, who fell down from heaven, could not be destroyed by a tiny group of Jews, rebuking them for their unfitting fear for the greatness of Diana.

“Therefore, since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly” (Acts 19.36).

He confirms to them that, since an evil minority of the Jews could not possibly quench the zeal of the Ephesians to worship Artamis, therefore there is no justification of that riot that actually shows their worship as weak and vulnerable.

“For you have brought these men here, who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess” (Acts 19.37).

He says that, although those men are preaching against worshipping idols, yet they did not force anyone to adopt their doctrine by violence, but used peaceful debates.

“Therefore, if Demetrius and his fellows have a case against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful assembly” (Acts 19.38-39).

Every party could have its day in court wisely and peacefully, and the Roman proconsuls are ready to listen to all.

“For we are in danger of being called in question for today’s uproar, there being no reason which we may give to account for this disorderly gathering” (Acts 19.40).

Here, the clerk clarifies that such uproar does harm to the reputation of the city in Rome, as it is both disorderly and disregards the sound legal procedures. He also drew their attention to the fact that whoever takes part in such riot would fall under the Roman law, and could be executed.

“And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly” (Acts 19.41).

As many feared of being arrested and judged for participating in such a riot, they withdrew; and the whole gathering followed.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 19

THE DEFEAT OF THE DEVIL IN EPHESUS

- ❖ You have granted Your apostle Paul the joyful spirit of hope.
He was not shaken by the consistent troubles.
He entered into Ephesus as though into a lion's den.
He was aware that tribulations were waiting for him;
Yet he also realized that Your grace grants unlimited comforts.
- ❖ He drew many to receive baptism in your name.
And laying his hands on them, Your Holy Spirit dwelt on them.
Through gaining the seal of the Spirit, they came into Your possession.
Through gaining the royal seal, they became kings.
Through carrying Your features, no enemy could approach them.
- ❖ The apostle Paul was expelled out of the synagogue;
By which he enjoyed your company out of the camp;
As though he accompanied You on the way to Calvary, to be crucified together with You.
- ❖ He was expelled out of the Synagogue, where You found no place for Your head.
He set forth to minister among the Gentiles,
Supported by Your grace, by exalted miracles.
The powers of the devil have been destroyed.
- ❖ The sons of Sceva thought that there is magic in Your name.
And in Your name, they assumed that they could cast out demons.
How could they cast out the devil from others,
When he dwelt in them?
How could they use Your name, preached by Your apostle,
Without enjoying Your grace?
- ❖ The devil was utterly exposed,
For the magicians to realize his weakness.
They brought their books of magic together and burnt them,
To have the fires of the Holy Spirit working in them.
They treaded on the forces of darkness,
As the light of Your righteousness shined upon them.
- ❖ The enemy provoked his followers:

Demetrius the silversmith assumed that he could get rid of Your ambassadors,
The love of silver blinded his eyes.
He claimed that he was defending his goddess Artamis.
But Your mighty arm always supports Your ministers.
Glory be to You, O Heavenly Lord!

CHAPTER 20

RAISING EUTYCHUS IN TROAS AND A FAREWELL ADDRESS IN MILETUS

Tribulations were always accompanying the apostle Paul, So was the exalted grace of God, as though they were two close sisters always in his company wherever he went. In the last chapter, we saw how the magicians burned up their books, and how Demetrius the silversmith led a riot to try the apostle. In the present chapter, God is glorified in him, when a young man called Eutychus fell down from the third story and was taken up dead, but God raised him up by His apostle's hand. In Miletus, the apostle delivered a farewell address to the elders of the church, revealing his practical concept of shepherding.

1- A plot against the apostle in Helace, in Greece.	1 - 3
2- Departing to Troas.	4 - 6
3- Raising the young man Eutychus from the dead	7 – 11
4- Departing to Miletus	13 – 16
5- His farewell address	17 – 35
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1- A plot against the apostle in Helace in Greece

In his commentary on this chapter, Matthew Henry says that Paul's journeys, so presented concisely, if they were all recorded, they would be worthy to be written in gold letters. What we have here are just general glimpses of the events, extremely valuable.

“After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to him, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia” (Acts 20.1).

It is believed that St. Luke disregarded an earlier very short (second) visit to Corinth, especially that he was absent for three years while St. Paul was in Ephesus. Now the apostle Paul is visiting Corinth for the third time, as it came in (2 Cor. 12.14, 13.1-2).

He wrote to Corinth for the third time (the epistle preceding the first epistle was not recorded (1 Cor. 5.9, 11), exhorting the believers not to mix with adulterers, which the Corinthians misunderstood to mean not mixing with all evildoers, namely, not dealing with the people of the whole world). That is why the epistle, counted as being the first, came to confirm: “...I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, ... since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor. 5.10-11). So the first epistle, now in our hands, includes a clarification of what came in the lost preceding epistle.

In Macedonia, he wrote the third epistle to the Corinthians, counted as the second, in autumn of the year 57 AM. And in winter of the year 58 AM, he wrote his epistle to the Romans.

The apostle Paul departed from Ephesus after the day of the Pentecost, namely in the spring of the year 57 AM, heading north: ***“Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece and stayed three months”*** (Acts 20.2-3).

Here, St. Luke gave a very concise account, whereas the epistles of St. Paul revealed details that did not come in the book of Acts, of which, when he departed from Ephesus, he set forth to the north, going from one city to another, and from one island to another, until he came to Troas. Most probably, he had in his company two disciples from Ephesus: Tychicus and Trophimus, who accompanied him going and coming back, beside other disciples.

As the uproar provoked by Demetrius and the silver craftsmen ceased (Acts 19.40-41), the apostle counted what happened as a command by the grace of God to move to minister somewhere else, as his departure from Ephesus would quiet down the uproar of his opponents, and provide the church with an atmosphere of peace.

Some believe that he wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians before his departure, having included: “I have fought beasts in Ephesus”, referring to the uproar which happened, although some believe that he was actually cast among hungry beasts, and saved by God.

He did not depart from Ephesus in haste as though in fear, but quietly called his disciples to him, and bid them farewell by a kiss of love, as it was the custom in the early church.

He set forth to the Greek churches which he established, to water what he had previously planted, starting with the church in Corinth, as was his plan before the riot took place (Acts 19.21).

The apostle Paul gave an account of his departure from Ephesus, in his second epistle to the Corinthians. When he came to Troas, he found a great chance to preach the gospel, although he was grieved to hear about the commotion and divisions in Corinth. The apostle sent Titus to Corinth to deal with those serious problems among the believers, and expected to encounter with him in Troas, but when he could not manage to come, Paul, with a heavy heart departed from Troas, heading to Macedonia to encounter with his helper (2 Cor. 12-13). When finally Titus came from Corinth bearing good news about better conditions of the church (2 Cor. 5.16), the apostle wrote his second epistle and sent it with Titus and another brother (2 Cor. 8.17-19), before his departure to Corinth.

In Greece, he went to visit Philippi and Thessalonica, where he preached among them, not committing himself to a certain time.

St. Luke did not record the activities of the apostle Paul in those regions, other than the phrase in our hand (Acts 20.2). He stayed for three months visiting the churches and preaching in Greece and Achaia, and from there he wrote his epistle to the Romans, in which he proclaimed his desire to go to Jerusalem, and from there to Rome (Rom. 15.22-29). The apostle probably was not aware that he would set forth from Jerusalem to Rome, as a prisoner for the sake of the Lord.

St. Luke did not tell about the goal of the apostle's visit to Jerusalem, namely, to offer what he has collected from Macedonia and Achaia, to help the poor in Jerusalem (Rom. 15.25-27; 2 Cor. 8.1-9).

"Gone over that region", Macedonia and around it. He probably went to Macedonia via Troas, where he expected to find Titus there (2 Cor. 2.12). Not finding him there, he headed to Philippi and Thessalonica, etc., then returned to Greece.

❖ "Observe how we everywhere find him accomplishing all by means of preaching, not by miracles" ¹.
(**St. John Chrysostom**)

"And when the Jews plotted against him, as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia" (Acts 20.3).

St. Luke did not tell anything about that plot Against St. Paul. Some believe that it was probably an attack on the ship, or arresting him inside it, that is why he decided to travel by land. That proved to benefit the churches in Macedonia, which enjoyed another visit by the apostle.

"He was about to sail to Syria", to Antioch, on his way to Jerusalem.

2- Going to Troas

"And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia – also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia" (Acts 20.4).

Those laborers in the vineyard of the Lord, who accompanied St. Paul in his travel, were most probably of his disciples.

Sopater of Berea: Most probably the same Sopsopater mentioned in (Rom. 16.21), whom he called 'my kinsman'.

Timothy: He was among his company, although the apostle left him in Ephesus, then wrote to him his first epistle to instruct him to work, not only in Ephesus, but in other locations as well. Afterwards, Timothy came back to accompany him.

Trophimus: of Ephesus (Acts 20.29): When the apostle wrote his second epistle to Timothy, he was ill (2 Timothy 4.20).

Tychicus: He was the subject of confidence of the apostle, and his strong love, in his epistle to the Ephesians, he called him "a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord" (Eph. 6.21-22).

Why did St. Paul travel with such a large company of disciples, laborers in the vineyard of the Lord?

1- He preached the word, and in case someone accepted the faith, he used to deliver him to one of his disciples to teach and train him on the holy life of faith.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.

2- Wherever the apostle went to minister, the devil provoked much trouble inside and outside; so, there was need for those ministers to take care of the church, lest there would be confusion caused by that controversies against the apostle.

3- They accompanied him as disciples to be trained by him on preaching, to be prepared to minister according to the same program.

4- Some believe that, on account of his weak body because of some sickness, his disciples were supporting him in his many trips.

“Those men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas” (Acts 20.5).

Some of his friends went ahead to meet him in Troas, whereas some of them like Trophimus kept in his company all the trip to Jerusalem (Acts 21.19).

Here, St. Luke says again “*We*”, and kept it this way until Acts 20.15, then to resume anew in Acts 21.1, which indicates that the author stayed in Philippi during the second preaching journey of the apostle (Acts 16.16). And now, he caught up with him in Philippi in the house of Lydia, to stay with him until they reached Jerusalem.

While a group of his friends went ahead of him until Troas, the apostle remained in Philippi to keep the feast of the Unleavened Bread, then he sailed together with St. Luke to Troas to join the other friends. Yet some believed that he only mentioned the timing, that is, not by necessity he kept the feast. And some believe that those who went ahead were only Tychicus and Trophimus.

“But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of the Unleavened Bread, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days” (Acts 20.6).

That journey across the Aegean Sea had previously taken from them only two days (Acts 16.11-12), Yet traveling by sea, not being always predictable, took from them this time five days, the wind was probably not favorable.

What preoccupied the apostle’s mind during the days of the feast of the Unleavened Bread was that the Lord Christ is our Passover, who was slain for our sake, And that the Christian life is a new feast of Unleavened Bread (1 Cor. 5.7-8). The truth came to replace the shadow.

In Troas: the foremost point of setting forth from Asia to Europe, where a Macedonian man appeared in a vision to the apostle Paul, pleading with him, saying, Come over to “Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16.9), That was during his second preaching journey.

During his second preaching journey, the apostle did not stop long in this city, But in this third journey he insisted on staying long enough to establish a firm ministry to Christ and the gospel: “When I came to Troas to preach Christ’s gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother, But taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia” (2 Cor. 2.12, 13).

3- Raising the young man ‘Eutychus’ from the dead

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight” (Acts 20.7).

Ready to depart the next day, Paul stayed after celebrating the sacrament of the Eucharist (breaking bread) to speak to them for a long time until midnight before the dawn of Sunday.

The early church used to sanctify the day of the Lord “Sunday” (1 Cor. 16.2; Rev. 1.10). Here is a clear reference that Sunday was sanctified as the day of the Lord in the days of the apostles, in which the ministry of the word, and the collective worship celebrating the sacrament of the Eucharist, used to take place. That was probably beside some Christians of Jewish origin, sharing with their Jewish brothers their worship on the Sabbath in the temple in Jerusalem, being a symbol of the day of the Lord, as a celebration of the resurrection of the Lord Christ and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.

Being ready to depart the next day, and because everyone was eager to hear the word of God, the apostle kept on talking until midnight. It was as though the words of farewell were presenting the word of God, as a source of comfort, both to him and to them.

The church does not separate the worship from the listening to the word, neither through the spiritual readings, nor the sermon. Both of them are an integral part of the worship, whose goal is the enjoyment of the word of God, and the enlightenment of the mind and the heart, to prepare the believer to receive and to live the secrets of the word.

St. John Chrysostom presents a magnificent description of the situation, how the house was full of lamps, the apostle standing in the middle, while the place was so packed with people, that some of them sat in the windows, how the apostle kept talking to them until midnight, knowing that they would see him no more, although he did not tell them that lest they weaken. That Young man is actually rebuking us, having been resisting nature, doing his best to keep awake to listen to the apostle until midnight¹.

“There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together” (Acts 20.8).

They gathered together in the upper room to listen to the sermon and to enjoy the sacrament of the Eucharist. The reference to many lamps is not without significance, as the church, since the days of the apostles, cared for light, as it calls for living in the light.

“And in the window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking in a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep, and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead” (Acts 20.9).

Eutychus means (lucky). Some scholars blame him for sitting at the window, as he would not be harmed if he was sitting on the floor. But he was actually not to be blamed, as the upper room was

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.

packed with listeners, and there was no place on the floor to sit. Sinking in deep sleep does not imply that he did not care for what the apostle was saying, but he was overcome by the weak human nature.

The devil probably intended to cause some disturbance by that incident, Yet God, through His exalted care, turned it to His glory, and the edification of the church.

- ❖ "And the wonderful circumstance is, that though he was a youth, he was not listless and indifferent; and though (he felt himself) weighed down by sleep, he did not go away, nor yet fear the danger of falling down. It was not from listlessness that he slumbered, but from necessity of nature. But observe, I beseech you, so fervent was their zeal, that they even assembled in a third loft: for they had not a Church yet" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, ‘Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him’” (Acts 20.10).

“fell on him”, the way Elisha did with the little child of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4.32-35), a sign of great compassion and a strong wish to restore him to life.

- ❖ ***“Do not trouble yourselves”***, He said. He said not, "He shall come to life again, for I will raise him up:" but mark the unassuming way in which he comforts them: ***“for his life is in him”*** ².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed” (Acts 20.11).

Paul came up to the upper room, broke bread, and resumed his speech, which probably turned from a sermon to a debate, as that incident of raising the young man from the dead has created a more friendly atmosphere, and a chance for questions and answers about the living life of faith.

“And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted” (Acts 20.12).

At the end of that wonderful evening that extended until dawn, all those present came to congratulate the young man on being raised from the dead, many of them had a stronger faith because of that miracle.

4- Going to Miletus

“Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there intending to take Paul on board, for so he had given orders, intending himself to go on foot” (Acts 20.13).

Assos: Many towns bore this name: one in Lysia, another in the province of Apollos, a third in Mysia, a fourth in Lydia, and a fifth in Iris; he most probably meant the last one, between Troas and

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.

Miteliny, 20 miles by land from Troas, but double that distance by sea, hence the apostle preferred to go on foot, as he usually did.

Some believe that he preferred to go on foot, while leaving his companions to go by sea, despite his great love for his friends, yet he, from time to time, preferred to walk alone to contemplate in God. Whereas others believe that, in his love for his friends, he chose for them the easier way, choosing for himself the harder one, to practice some kind of self-sacrifice, and submission to suffering, in a fellowship with the passion of Christ.

In response to the persuasion of the officials in Troas, the apostle Paul stayed with them few more hours. That is why he let his friends go by ship, to wait for him in Assos, to sail together southward towards the island of Lyspus and its port city Mitylene, where they embarked and went on foot to Mitylene, they sailed by another ship.

Some claim that the apostle Paul was not accurate in his schedules, on account of what is said, “that he was hurrying to be able to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of the Pentecost” (Acts 20.16). Yet others say that he was extremely accurate, and managed to realize his goal, having started his journey from Philippi after the days of the feast of the Unleavened Bread, to arrive at Jerusalem on the day of the Pentecost. He spent the 49 days between the Passover and the Pentecost in the following way:

- ❖ The seven days of the feast of the Unleavened Bread, he spent in Philippi (Acts 20.6).
- ❖ Five days on the way to Troas, as the wind conditions were favorable (Acts 20.6).
- ❖ Seven days in Troas (Acts 20.6).
- ❖ Four days in the island of Chios, then to Miletus (Acts 20.13-15).
- ❖ Two days in Miletus, to bid the elders of the church of Ephesus farewell (Acts 20.17).
- ❖ Three days sailing to Patra via Cos and Rhodes (Acts 21.1).
- ❖ Two days from Patra to Tyre (Acts 21.3).
- ❖ Six days spent in Tyre (Acts 21.4).
- ❖ Two days from Ptolemais to Caesarea (Acts 21.7-8).

The total was 37 days, leaving 12 days as standby, in case of any problem, because the transportation in those days was unpredictable.

- ❖ "We often find Paul parting from the disciples. For behold again, he himself goes on foot: giving them the easier way, and himself choosing the more painful. He went on foot, both that he might arrange many matters, and by way of training them to bear a parting from him" ¹.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.*

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene” (Acts 20.14).

Mitylene: The capital of the island of Lyspus, famous for its beautiful location, and its superb buildings. The island of Lyspus is one of the largest in the Aegean Sea, and the seventh largest among the islands of the Mediterranean Sea, with a circumference of 178 miles. The city nowadays is called Castro.

“We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios, the following day we arrived at Samos and stayed at Trogyllium, the next day we came to Miletus” (Acts 20.15).

Chios: Also called Cos, is an island among a group of islands between Lyspus and Samos, on the coast of Asia Minor, known nowadays as Skoy, long-time remembered for the horrible massacre done by the Turks in the year 1823 AD, killing all its inhabitants.

Samos: Also one among a group of islands, on the coast of Lydia, famous in the old days for their superb wines.

Trogyllium: A city or a protrusion of land in Ionia in Asia Minor, between Ephesus and the opening of the river of Macander, facing Samos.

Miletus: Also called Milern, a city and Sea port, and capital of old Ionia, Originally formed of the Colony of the Cretans, that became very strong, and famous for its huge temple of Apollo, and as the hometown of Talis, one of the seven wise men of Greece. Between 40 and 50 miles far from Ephesus, it is called nowadays Milas by the Turks.

“For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of the Pentecost” (Acts 20.16).

As he could not resist the insistence of his friends in Ephesus to stay sometime with them, he decided to sail past the city.

❖ "Why this haste? Not for the sake of the feast, but of the multitude. At the same time, by this he conciliated the Jews, as being one that did honor the feasts, wishing to gain even his adversaries: at the same time also he delivers the word"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

5-His farewell address

“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church” (Acts 20.17).

As he did in Rome, when he sent and called the leaders of the Jews, to clarify the situation, that he did not come to Rome, to accuse his nation, the high priest, or the Sanhedrim (Acts 28.17-19), so as not to be considered as a traitor to his nation or his religion; he also sent and called for the elders of the

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 43.

churches of Ephesus, from 20 miles far, to remind them of their shepherding mission: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20.28), presenting himself as a practical role model of shepherding.

- ❖ He applied the term ‘overseers’, namely ‘Bishops’ to the priests, as at that time they were using both terms. ... As it is not probable to have many bishops in one city, it is obvious that he is giving that name to the priests as well. In his epistle to the Philippians, he calls the blessed Epaphroditus “your messenger” (Phil. 2.25), clearly referring that he entrusted him with the apostolic work, calling him ‘a messenger’, namely ‘apostle’¹.

(Fr. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus)

“And when they had come to him, he said to them: ‘You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you” (Acts 20.18).

His speech bore the spirit of a compassionate father, revealing his life and teachings, and reminding them of how he lived among them for three years (Acts 20.30), during which they must have seen his life which he dedicated to the gospel, his living faith, and his faithfulness in his love for God and for them. There was nothing to testify to the holiness of their life, more than their direct contact with him, and that of the neighboring countries in Asia.

“I always lived”, He never lived one time according to one manner, and other time according to another. All his life shone with the splendor of God’s work in him.

“Serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews” (Acts 20.19).

St. John Chrysostom believes that the apostle, in his address to the priests of the church, parades two important issues: love and steadfastness, and that what he presented was not with the spirit of boasting, but to teach the priests to follow his example in ministry².

His style was ***ministering to God*** not to the people, preoccupied with the glory of God, the edification of His church, and the setting of His kingdom in the heart of every one, never flattering on the expense of the salvation of the souls. He never ministered with self-esteem, but ***“with all humility, with many tears and trials”***, sharing with his Lord, his humility, and his bearing of trials and passion for the sake of His love of mankind.

The apostle often referred to the compassion of his heart, expressing it in his flooding tears for the sake of many (Phil. 3.18).

Wherever he went, many of the Jews plotted to kill him some way or another, as demonstrated several times throughout the Book of Acts.

¹ Epistle to the Philippians, 1.1-2.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.

“And how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20.20).

He did not stop presenting every thing helpful to them, being faithful in his love, seeking their happiness in the Lord, and their enjoyment of the inner glory. He never ministered out of bigotry, to seek greater numbers, or to boast success, but in fatherhood, sought what is for the edification of his children. That is the goal of the gospel, as “All Scripture is profitable” (2 Tim. 3.16).

“Proclaimed to you”, The Greek term came to mean proclaiming in public gatherings, as what he preaches there, he proclaimed **in every house**.

In his visits to every house, he had only one goal, to spread the word of God. It is remarkable that, although being the apostle to Gentiles on the level of the whole world, going from one country to another, and from one city to another; yet, whenever he found a chance, he visited houses, not for paying compliments, or to discuss worldly affairs, or even church administrative affairs, but to spread the word of salvation, by which he could confirm: “I am innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20.26).

“Testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20.21).

Two things preoccupy the Apostle Paul's mind and heart: faith and repentance. By his faith he testifies to the Lord Christ to every Jew and Gentile (Greek), namely to all mankind; whereas repentance is the return “to God”, as sin is actually directed against the Holy God, who is without sin, It draws man from the divine presence, and deprives him of God, who is alone capable of forgiving sins.

“And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there” (Acts 20.22).

He went to Jerusalem according to the divine ordinance; he went “bound in the spirit”. Despite knowing that afflictions and tribulations were waiting for him there, he did not know what they were. He only knew that he was going under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He was not throwing himself to the tribulations by his own accord, or in self-esteem, or according to his wisdom or capabilities. He was not going out of longing to see the city of his fathers – Jerusalem, or to worship in the Jewish temple, but as someone bound and drawn by the Spirit, and with pleasure, he walked according to His direction, whatever the outcome was.

He set forth from Asia, not fleeing from the afflictions and tribulations provoked by many, But he was crossing over to a way full of them. He was going to a battle far more severe and fierce.

He went to Jerusalem, not bound by the body, as he needed nothing carnal to go there, but he went bound by the Spirit of the Lord.

All he knew is that he was going to pass through fierce storms in Jerusalem, But God of the whole world is present, and is capable of turning these storms to the glory of His name and the edification of His church.

“Except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me” (Acts 20.23).

The Holy Spirit testifies, either by direct proclamation to him, or through prophecies he hears from those who have the gift of prophecy, as it came in Acts 21.11, that he would be chained, and would enter into tribulations, the details of which he did not know, That was testified by the Spirit, not in one single city, but in many.

“But none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20.24).

None of all these tribulations could deprive the apostle Paul of his joy which accompanied him in all his strife, counting his temporal life as valueless, that he offered a sacrifice of love to God. All what preoccupied him was to realize his goal, and to consummate his ministry which he received from the Lord Himself (Gal. 1.12), to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

The apostle counted himself as taking part in a race (Acts 13.25; 1 Cor. 9.24; 2 Tim. 4.7; Heb. 12.1). What preoccupied him in his strife was to keep his joy in the Lord, until the last breath of his life, ***“finish my race with joy”***.

Here, the apostle Paul reveals to them his own view of the ministry:

1- The temporal life is of no value to man compared to reaching his goal of the salvation of his soul and those of his brethren.

2- The ministry is a race, during which the minister never stops running, until he receives the crown of victory from the hand of the Lord.

3- The minister is characterized by perpetual joy amid his strife, even before death.

4- The realization that ministry is a personal call from God Himself.

5- The task of the minister is the joyful testimony to the grace of God which abundantly works.

❖ "You see that in casting out the tyranny of death, he also overthrew the strength of the devil. For he who has learnt to study innumerable [truths] concerning the resurrection, how should he fear death? ... Therefore do not be grieved, saying, why do we suffer such and such things? For so the victory becomes more glorious"¹.

❖ "For do not suppose that I say these things as lamenting them: for "I hold not my own life dear." It is to raise up their minds that he says all this, and to persuade them not only not to flee, but also to bear nobly. Therefore it is that he calls it a "course" and a "ministry," on the one hand, showing it to be glorious from its being a race, on the other, showing what was due from it, as being a ministry. I am a minister: nothing more"².

¹ *Homilies on Heb. Hom. 4.6-7.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.*

- ❖ "For it was Paul alone who suffered in good earnest all things for Christ's sake, not for the sake of the kingdom, or his own honor, but owing to his affection to Him. But as for us, neither Christ nor the things of Christ draw us from the things of this life; but as serpents, or snakes, or swine, or even as all of them at once, so do we keep dragging on in the mire. ... Yet did God give up even His Son for you"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "Paul denied himself, when, knowing that chains and tribulations awaited him in Jerusalem, he willingly offered himself to danger"².

(St. Ambrose)

“And indeed now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more” (Acts 20.25).

The apostle declared that such encounter is one of farewell, as they would see his face no more in this world, He would not return to Ephesus, but would face tribulations in Jerusalem, that he would go to Rome, and other cities like Spain.

It is difficult to express the apostle’s feeling as he bid them farewell, knowing that he would see them no more, but what preoccupied his mind was that, since he preached among them the kingdom of God that embraces all, death would not be able to separate them.

“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20.26).

The apostle Paul proclaims that he was faithful in his ministry to them, that he was not slothful to any of them, and even that he was going to take them along on the Day of Judgment as witnesses of his faithfulness and loyalty. If any of them perished, he would be innocent of his blood before God.

“Innocent of the blood of all men”: The blood here refers to the eternal perdition, that is similar to shedding of blood and to horrible death. He is innocent of the perdition of any Jew or Gentile. He was not to blame for anything on his part.

- ❖ ““I am innocent of the blood of all men”: This was fit and proper for Paul to say, but we dare not say it, conscious as we are of numberless faults. Whereas for him the ever vigilant, ever at hand, the man enduring all things for the sake of the salvation of his disciples, it was fit and proper to say this: but we must say that of Moses, "The Lord was angry with me on your account" (Deut. 3.26), because you lead us also into many sins"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20.27).

¹ Hom. On Rom. Hom. 15.

² Epistles, 63.73.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.

No fear of anyone or flattering anybody hindered him from declaring God's counsel which seeks the salvation of all. The gospel to him was open, to offer it to all, despite the persecutions. He never sought temporal glories; He presented the truth frankly and fully, simple and clear, with no human philosophy.

Here, the apostle presents himself as a role model minister to the Lord Christ, who never stops teaching.

❖ No one in the church, even a saint, can call himself a shepherd, unless he is able to teach those he shepherds¹.

(St. Jerome)

“Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20.28).

The apostle warns them against the dangers, they were going to face, which might cause destruction to them and to the flock of Christ.

“To yourselves”: The minister, even the Bishop, should take heed to the salvation of his soul (Col. 4.17; 1 Tim. 4, 14). The Bishop is exposed to temptations more than his flock, as the devil does his best to destroy him in order to destroy them.

“And to all the flock”: The Bishop is committed to give an account for every single soul of his flock before God. He should always teach, guide, and give advise to everyone, to protect him from the fatal strikes of the enemy. The shepherd does not seek what is for himself, or what is for his temporal life, but exerts himself for the flock, following the example of the Good Shepherd.

And to keep the Bishops from being disturbed, as who could ever be able to minister every single one of the flock, he confirmed to them that it is the Holy Spirit who set them, that the church is the church of God the Father, and that the incarnated Son has purchased her with His blood. The Holy Trinity – the mighty God, the Philanthropic, is the Support of the shepherd, who is serious in his love, and faithful in his ministry.

God has called them, and the Holy Spirit has set them for ministering and shepherding. This thought, namely, “God's call to men”, preoccupied the apostle's heart, and never left it. The scholar Origen believes that every believer is committed to be preoccupied with God's call for a particular role for himself in the edification of the church. As Paul is called an apostle, the Romans are as well, if not apostles, they are called to be saints in obedience to faith. We already spoke about the various modes of calling².

¹ Ep. to Ephesians, 4.11.

² Comm. On Rom 1.6.

“*overseers*”: In this sermon, he sometimes call them ‘elders’, sometimes ‘priests’, and sometimes ‘overseers’, namely, ‘Bishops’. Age-wise, they were ‘elders’; Ministry-wise, they were the priests of the Most High; and rank-wise, they were ‘Overseers’, or ‘Bishops’.

The expression “*The church of God*”, here, came in many versions, especially the Syrian, as “The church of the Lord”, having been purchased by the blood of the Lord (1 Cor. 6.20, 7.23; 2 Pet. 2.1).

- ❖ "You see, he calls the things of the Spirit, the Son's, and the things of the Son, the Spirit's. "Grace and Apostleship;" that is, it is not we that have achieved for ourselves, that we should become Apostles. For it was not by having toiled much and labored that we had this dignity allotted to us, but we received grace, and the successful result is a part of the heavenly gift" ¹.
- ❖ "*Take heed to yourselves*”: this he says, not because our own salvation is more precious than that of the flock, but because, when we take heed to ourselves, then the flock also is a gainer" ².
- ❖ "The matter is exceeding serious, for it is "*the Church of the Lord*:" great the peril for with blood He redeemed it: mighty the war, and twofold" ³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "You are not his to whom you have been born, but His to whom you have been born again, and who has purchased you at a great price with His own blood" ⁴.

(St. Jerome)

"He is sold, and very cheap, for it is only for thirty pieces of silver (Mark 26.15); but He redeems the world, and that at a great price, for the Price was His own blood. As a sheep He is led to the slaughter (Acts 8.32), but He is the Shepherd of Israel, and now of the whole world also" ⁵.

(St. Gregory Nazianzen)

“For I know this, that I after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20.29).

The apostle Paul prophesies about the appearance of false teachers, like savage wolves, who do not spare the flock, but devour and destroy, seeking their own temporal interests, and holding fast to their personal will. Many of those would only be preoccupied with ‘debates’, yet not for the sake of seeking the truth, but for the mere love of debating.

¹ *Homilies on Romans. Hom. 1.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.*

³ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.*

⁴ *Letter 54 to Furia, 4.*

⁵ *Oration 29, On the Son, 20.*

- ❖ The savage wolves, the apostle Paul proclaims, would come in among the flocks of Christ, not sparing it. Those false apostles and teachers would vomit the bitter deceit of the devil, would utter controversial things, to lead the ignorant souls to perdition, and to wound their weak conscience (1 Cor. 8.12)¹.

(St. Cyril the Great)

- ❖ "The heretics, by their good words and smooth tongue, deceive the hearts of the innocent, disguising with the name of Christ as it were with honey the poisoned arrows of their impious doctrines"².

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

- ❖ "Flattery is always insidious, crafty, and smooth. And the flatterer is well described by the philosophers as "a pleasant enemy." Truth is bitter, of gloomy visage and wrinkled brow, and distasteful to those who are rebuked"³.

(St. Jerome)

- ❖ "But if every man is a liar, and God only true (Rom. 3.3-4), what else ought we, the servants, and especially the priests, of God, to do, than forsake human errors and lies, and continue in the truth of God, keeping the Lord's precepts?"⁴.

(St. Cyprian)

"Also from among yourselves, men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20.30).

The danger which comes from inside is more bitter than that which comes from outside, especially when it comes from teachers or ministers inside the church. The apostles mentioned names of persons who did harm to the inside of the church, like: 'Diotrephes' (3 John 9), 'Phygellus' and 'Hermogenes' (2 Tim. 1.15), and 'Hymaeus and Alexander' (1 Tim. 1.20), those who, because of their love of dignity, created parties inside the church, that caused disturbance and division. The church does not fear the enemy from outside, if she has no opponents inside. All the powers and plans of the persecutors are counted as nothing, as long as the inside is sanctified in the Lord.

"Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20.31).

The apostle Paul did not cease to call the Bishops, all the ministers, as well as the people, to watch. And as he writes to the Thessalonians: "Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us

¹ *Comm. On St. Luke. Hom. 73.*

² *Catechetical Lectures, 4.2.*

³ *Against the Pelagians, 1.26.*

⁴ *Letter, 67.8*

who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5.6-8).

- ❖ We should sleep half-alert. ... The sleeping person is fit for nothing, like the dead one. That is why, even by night, we should wake up to praise God. Blessed are those who watch anticipating His coming. They make themselves like angels, about whom we say that they are always watchful¹.

(St. Cyril of Alexandria)

- ❖ The winged messenger of the day

Sings loud, giving the good news of the approaching dawn.

In exciting tunes, Christ calls our sleeping souls to wake up and live with Him.

He cries out: "Forsake the foolish relaxation.

Forsake the sleep of death, and the erroneous slothfulness.

Watch with alert hearts, righteous, and pure.

I am coming very soon!"².

(Father Prodentius)

If the apostle did not cease, for three years, to warn everyone night and day with tears, How much it is fitting for each one of us to watch seriously his own salvation!

He spent three years in Ephesus, two of which in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19.10), three months debating in the synagogue in Ephesus (Acts 19.8), and the rest of the time in other places. By the three years he probably meant, according to the Jewish custom, any part of the year, counted as a whole year.

- ❖ "When the sick man sees his physician partaking of food (that is for the sick), he also is incited to do the same: so likewise here, when he sees you weeping, he is softened: he will be a good and great man"³.
- ❖ "We accuse, we rebuke, we weep, we are in anguish, although not openly, yet in heart. But those (inward) tears are far more bitter than these (outward ones): for these indeed bring a kind of relief to the feelings of the sorrowful, whereas those aggravate it, and bind it fast. Since when there is any cause of grief, and one cannot give vent to the sorrow, lest he should seem to be vainglorious, think what he suffers! ... For what hope is there for the teacher, when his flock is destroyed? What kind of life, what kind of expectation is there for him? With what sort of confidence will he stand up before God? What will he say?"⁴.

¹ *Paedagogus*, 2.9.79.

² *Prudentius . Hymns 1.1-8. Prodentius of Spain composed praises more fiery than those composed by Ambrose who was contemporary to him, as they were not used during the liturgical worships.*

³ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.*

⁴ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 44.*

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And now brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20.32).

Having no other chance to further encounter with them, He commended their lives to the hands of God, under His protection and care, and to the word of His grace, namely, to the truthful and free promises, not only to keep them from temptations and tribulations, but also for their edification and preparation for the eternal inheritance in a fellowship with the saints. What always preoccupied the apostle Paul's mind was the inheritance set for the sanctified (Matt. 19.29, 25.34; Mark 10.17; Rom. 8.17; Gal. 3.29; Eph. 1.11, 5.8; Col. 1.12, 3.24; Heb. 6.12; Rev. 21.7).

- ❖ "He constantly puts them in mind of grace, to make them more earnest as being indebted (to God), and to persuade them to have confidence. "Which is able to build you up." He does not say, to build, but, "to build up," showing that they had (already) been built"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ If the apostle did not cease to preach the word of God, night and day, to the people entrusted to him, in order to be blameless in the sight of God. What would happen to us if we are shunned the ministry to the flock we are entrusted to us in Sundays and the days of feasts? That is why we should labor, with the help of God, as much as we can, to distribute among the congregation under our care with the spiritual (coins) of God, not only in the church, but also in the meetings and banquets, and wherever we are. From our side, let us distribute these coins, lest when He comes, He would ask us for the (interest). If we faithfully do that, we can, when we appear before the throne of the eternal Judge, truly say together with the prophet: “Here I am and the children whom the Lord has given me” (Isa. 8.18). Then, because of giving that double interest of our gifts, we shall worthily hear: “Well, You are a good and committed servant, Come to partake of the wedding of your Master” (Matt. 25.31-34). May God grant us that, He who lives and reigns forever and ever².

(Fr. Caesarius Bishop of Arles)

“I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel” (Acts 20.33).

Having advised them in what concerns caring for their own salvation and that of their flock, revealing his compassion all along his stay in Ephesus, and having warned them against false teachers, now he presents himself a practical example, concerning coveting nothing of what they have. He did not seek what is his but what is theirs (2 Cor. 12.14). It was his privilege as a minister who preached the gospel to live from the gospel, and giving the spirituals to be provided by his temporal needs (1 Cor. 9.13-14). Yet he neither sought anything of the sort, nor coveted it inside himself.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 45.

² Sermon 230.6.

He did not seek, even the apparel, having been satisfied with what he had. He did not say that he had taken no gold, silver, or apparel, having taken sometimes out of necessity, like what he did when he collected for the poor of Jerusalem, But he did not (covet) any thing of those things. He avoided the love of money, that is the source of all evil.

- ❖ "Let us never seek for presents and rarely accept them when we are asked to do so. For "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (20.35). Somehow or other the very man who begs leave to offer you a gift holds you the cheaper for your acceptance of it; while, if you refuse it, it is wonderful how much more he will come to respect you" ¹.

(St. Jerome)

"You yourselves know that these hand have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me" (Acts 20.34).

At Corinth, he lived with Apollos and worked with him, sustaining himself by the work of his hands (1 Cor. 4.12; 1 Thess. 2.9; 2 Thess. 3.8).

Commenting on this phrase, **St. John Chrysostom** said that it reveals the exaltness of this saint, who reached a high level of virtue, having gone beyond the optional poverty.

- ❖ "It is one degree to fling away one's possessions; a second, to be sufficient for the supply of one's own necessities; a third, to provide for others also; a fourth, for one (to do all this) who preaches and has a right to receive" ².

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. John Cassian, in his debate with father Abraham, writes:

Germanius: How could any harm happen to our system, if we rid ourselves of any care in this life, letting our relatives take over preparing our food, while we spend our time in reading and praying, preoccupying ourselves with only the spiritual things?

Abraham: I will not give you my own opinion against this, but that of the blessed Antony, whereby he confounded the laziness of a certain brother. ... For when one came as I said to the aforesaid old man, and said that the Anchorite system was not at all to be admired, declaring that it required greater virtue for a man to practise what belongs to perfection living among men rather than in the desert, ... the blessed Antony entered on a still wider field of discussion, saying: "This mode of life and this most lukewarm condition not only strike you with that damage of which I spoke (though you do not feel it now, when somehow you say in accordance with that saying in Proverbs: "They have struck me, but I was not hurt, They have beaten me, but I did not feel it" (Prov. 23.35), or this that is said in the Prophet: "Aliens have devoured his strength, but he does not know it, Yes, gray hair are here and there on him, yet he does not know it" (Hos. 7.9). because **day after day they ceaselessly drag down your**

¹ Letter 52.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 45.

mind to earthly things, and change it in accordance with the variations of chance; but also because they defraud you of the fruits of your hands and the due reward of your own exertions, as they do not suffer you to be supported by what these supply, or to procure your daily food for yourself with your own hands, according to the rule of the blessed Apostle, as he when giving his last charge to the heads of the Church of Ephesus, asserts that though he was occupied with the sacred duties of preaching the gospel yet he provided not only for himself, but also for those who were prevented by necessary duties with regard to his ministry, saying: "You yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me" (Acts 20.34). But to show that he did this as a pattern to be useful to us he says elsewhere: "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you ... not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us" (2 Thess. 3.7-9) ¹.

- ❖ "For there were many who were desirous of having an occasion for getting and selling the gospel, from whom the apostle wished to cut off this occasion, and therefore he submitted to a way of living by his own hands. For concerning these parties he says in another passage, "that he may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast" (2 Thess. 11.12) " ².

(St. Augustine)

"I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20.35).

He presented his life as a practical example of laboring with manual work, not only to satisfy his own needs, but to spend on those ministering together with him, and on the poor and the needy. His law in life was the words of the Lord Jesus, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive***".

- ❖ The apostle shows how much evil, slothfulness may cause, and how much blessings are realized by labor. Labor is a sign of love toward the brethren, not to receive from them, but to help them. ... It is said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" ³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

6- MOVING WARM FAREWELL

"And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all" (Acts 20.36).

He knelt down on his knees and prayed to commend them to the hands of God, that the divine presence would never depart from them. He did not only pray for them, but prayed with them, to offer a

¹ St. John Cassian. *Conferences*, 24.11.

² Our Lord's *Sermon on the Mount*, 2.45.

³ In *1 Thess. Hom.* 5.

collective farewell prayer, to keep the last impressions in their minds; that there is no way out except by prayer.

The apostle Paul used sometimes to pray kneeling on his knees (Eph. 3.14), as kneeling bears the spirit of humility and submission before God (2 Chron. 6.13; Dan. 6.10; Mark 1.40; Luke 22.1; Acts 7.60, 9.40, 21.5; Rom. 11.4; Phil. 2.10; Eph. 3.14).

Here, we see a living portrait of how the farewell rites should be: "When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed".

"Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him" (Acts 20.37).

He left them with a flood of tears, and because Paul, with his gentle heart, probably could not withhold his tears as he cast his last look on his beloved; all of them, overcome by his compassionate love, fell on his neck and kissed him. Their words were unable to express their gratitude for his efforts and love for them, so they let the language of tears and holy kisses do it on their behalf.

St. Augustine talks about our life on earth being like putting manure on the soil to give an abundance of fruits. This manuring is practicing repentance in grief for our sins, and hope for the enjoyment of the joy of fruition. As he Thanks God, the manuring on the right location, who gives fruition, That is indeed the joyful grief, to weep over the condition of our death, the abundance of temptations, the hidden attacks of the sinners, the fight against lusts, and the struggle against the flaring controversy against the good thoughts. For the sake of all that, we should grieve¹.

❖ If we are called to the kingdom of God, Let us then walk by what is fitting for the kingdom, to love God and our neighbor. Yet love is not realized by kissing, but by inner compassion. There are many in the church, who do nothing but the first, and do not acquire love inside them, That is a shameful use of the kiss, That is why the apostle calls it "a holy kiss" (Rom. 16.16)².

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

❖ "What prayer is complete if divorced from the "holy kiss?"³.

(The scholar Tertullian)

It is fitting to practice the holy kiss in church worship, as a sign of the features of the kingdom of God, borne by the believers, namely, the holy love in the Lord. That is why it is fitting for the believers to walk according to the true spirit of peace and love before the kiss, that the kiss would not be like that of the traitor Judas.

"sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship" (Acts 20.38).

¹ *Easter Season, 254.4.*

² *Paedagogus 3.11.*

³ *On Prayer, 18.*

How awesome those moments were, as they looked for the last time on that face which bears all the features of true love, which reflects God's love for them!

"They accompanied him to the ship", seeing him as though setting forth to heaven, to see him no more, but together with the Lord of glory Jesus Christ, when he comes on the clouds to embrace His church and bring her to the bosom of God the Father.

That was the magnificent portrait presented by St. Luke as an eye-witness of the feelings of the multitudes, as they bid the apostle Paul farewell.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 20

GRANT ME TO BE FAITHFUL UNTIL THE END

- ❖ What have the plots done to Your amazing apostle,
But justified him before You,
And let Your sweet fragrance emerge from him!
- ❖ He was not preoccupied with the tribulations from his consistent ministry.
He turned the night into day by his attractive preaching,
Longing for all to become the children of light and the children of the day,
With no one among them, a son of night and darkness,
With no place for the darkness in the hearts of men.
- ❖ The young man Eutychus fell from the window, and was taken up dead.,
But when Paul fell on him, God granted him life.
The apostle believed that You are able to raise the souls from death and corruption.
Will it be difficult for You to raise the bodies!
- ❖ The young man fell from the window and died,
And man fell down from Paradise, and lost his eternal life.
You descended to him, embraced him,
And brought him together with You to Your heavenly throne.
- ❖ In Miletus, Your apostle delivered his farewell address,
Daringly, he spoke to the bishops and priests.
He lived faithfully until the end,
With contrition and tears, he spent his life as Your minister.
He enslaved himself to his people;
He did not shun to become a servant,
To the sake of whom You became a servant.
- ❖ How could tears not pour from his eyes,
Seeing You in the garden, with Your soul grieving even to death, for the sake of every man?
- ❖ Enjoying You, O the divine Truth,
He did not cease to teach,
To bring every soul to You.
- ❖ In every house he entered, he was preoccupied only with Your word.

Every place became to him a lectern,
On which to stand and incessantly preach,
To exhort faith in You, so that everyone would enjoy the fellowship of your glories.
He offered himself cheap for the sake of preaching Your gospel,
And found in the many deaths, the sweetness of life with You.

- ❖ He proclaimed his innocence of the blood of all men,
As his whole life turned into a consistent practical sermon.
He warned Your people against false teachers and deceitful prophets,
For all to enjoy Your divine care.
- ❖ He proclaimed his innocence, having not coveted anything instead of Your ministry.
He did not work as a laborer for a pay,
Being Your son, O Owner of the vineyard,
Whom You adopted with Your grace, to enjoy the inheritance together with You.
- ❖ Finally, How unique was the farewell!
Fountains of deep love flowed from him and from his fellow ministers!
All knelt down together to pray,
To give You thanks, O the good Shepherd,
Having granted them the undefeatable love.
- ❖ With holy kisses, they departed by the flesh,
To meet again together in paradise,
To join all Your believers on the day of Your ultimate coming on the clouds;
When the heavenly hosts celebrate them as a bride, pure and chaste for You.

CHAPTER 21

IN JERUSALEM

The evangelist St. Luke presents a consummation of the third preaching journey of the apostle Paul. He concentrated on how God used the events which seem very bitter, to push Paul to go to Rome to testify in the imperial palace, in the capital of the world at that time.

The author demonstrated how the apostle Paul challenged the tribulations even to death, for the sake of the preaching; and how the incident of trying to have him killed in Jerusalem has been used by God to let him go to Rome.

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1- TO TYRE

“Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course, we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patrara” (Acts 21.1).

Having bid farewell to the priests who came from Ephesus to Miletus, to set forth to Jerusalem, and the time came for every party to go their way; it was not easy for him or them to depart, because of the strong bond of love between them. That is why St. Luke says, “When we had departed from them”, as though their departure was by force.

St. Paul and his company sailed in a boat between the islands and the coasts, as Cos and Rhodes are islands. Rhodes was the name of a city on the coast of an island that carried the same name.

Cos: A small island in a group of Greek islands close to the South-west of Asia Minor, called nowadays ‘Stanco’, famous for its fertility and its production of wine and silk, 40 miles away from Myletus.

Rhodes: This is also among the group of Greek islands, and includes a city that bears the same name, and was famous for its huge bronze statue, and was included among the Seven Wonders of the World. It was built by Chares Lyndus, and was known for its very high elevation; that ships sail between them as though between its feet. After 56 years of its building, it was destroyed by an earthquake. When the Moslem Arabs took it over, in the year 600 AD after 600 years of its destruction, they sold the fallen

statue to a Jewish trader, who carried its bronze on several camels. Its name was formerly ‘Asteria’, and then was called ‘Rhodes’ because of its abundant production of roses.

Patra: A Sea port in Lycia in Asia Minor.

“And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went abroad and set sail. When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there, the ship was to unload her cargo” (Acts 21.2-3).

They sailed from Cyprus to Syria, to unload the cargo of the ship. Tyre was one of the main commercial cities in the world, and so it remained until the days of St. Paul.

2- The disciples’ counsel to Paul, not to go to Jerusalem

“And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21.4).

The apostle Paul was not anymore in a hurry to go to Jerusalem. As they had to wait seven days to unload the ship’s cargo, they found disciples who accepted the faith. The expression “finding” refers to the care of the apostle Paul and those who were with him, to look for believers wherever he went, to contact them, to worship together, and to get comfort in the continuous work of God with them.

In the days of the Lord Christ, as Tyre was not yet ready to receive him, He said, “Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the mighty work which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented a great while ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than you” (Luke 10.13, 14). But then, there were disciples for the Lord Jesus in Tyre, who attached themselves to the apostle Paul, and asked him to stay with them and not to go to Jerusalem.

Some believe that by then, the prophecy about Tyre was realized: “Her gain and her pay will be set apart for the Lord” (Isa. 23.18).

He probably stayed there seven days to worship together with the believers in the day of the Lord, and to preach among them.

Some of the believers in Tyre got special gifts, that they prophesied by the Spirit about the troubles waiting for the apostle Paul in Jerusalem, as “The Holy Spirit testified to this in every city” (Acts 20.23).

What is meant by *“They told Paul by the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem”?*

1- As they prophesied through the Spirit about the troubles waiting for Paul in Jerusalem, they told him not to go there, counting his ministry and preaching as needed by many.

2- This does not mean that the Holy Spirit has commanded him not to go to Jerusalem; but the apostle realized that what they did was out of their zeal and love for him. The Spirit revealed the troubles, but not going to Jerusalem was a request from the congregation for the sake of his own safety against danger.

It was amazing that the Holy Spirit, who granted Paul to work unusual miracles in Ephesus (Acts 19.11), was telling him, in Tyre, about the troubles waiting for him in Jerusalem, yet not directly, but through the disciples there. Despite the gifts that were given to Paul, and despite his great achievements, what was hidden from him was revealed by the Holy Spirit to the disciples, to let all feel their need for one another. The same prophecy was given by Agabus in the house of Philip the preacher (Acts 21.10-11).

“When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our ways, and they all accompanied us, with wives and children till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed” (Acts 21.5).

Although the disciples in Tyre did not accept the faith on the hands of Paul, yet they revealed great respect and love for him; that, only after seven days of his ministry there, all went: men, women, and children- to bid him farewell, to seek God’s blessing through him, as well as to pray for his sake. Here, that congregation revealed love for the ministers of the word, whoever they are, and felt the commitment to pray for the sake of the ministry and the ministers. They also managed to train their children to bear the same spirit and to partake of the same deed. In them the prophecy, “And the daughter of Tyre will be there with a gift” (Ps. 45.12), was realized. What is this gift given by the rich daughter of Tyre to her Groom, other than the true love for the word and the ministers, to the unity to work with one spirit, to pray even on the sea shore for the sake of the ministry and ministers, and finally for their marvelous act of offering their children to the Lord, as fellows with them in the same spirit and work.

At Miletus, the Clergymen knelt down on their knees to pray as they bid the apostle Paul and those who were with him farewell (Acts 20.36); And in Tyre, the congregation, men, women, and children, knelt down on their knees, to do the same, with the same spirit.

They all knelt on the pier of the port, which was most probably paved with rocks covered with dirt because of the unloading of cargoes. But the church turns every location wherever and in whatever condition it is, as though to a sanctity for the Lord, through prayers. Kneeling to pray is something attached to the church, practiced by the believers wherever they are. And according to George Herbert, kneeling to pray would not hurt the silk stockings.

❖ We bow our knees, as the bowed knees prepare man to gain forgiveness from God, take away His wrath, and let him enjoy His grace more so than any movement of other body parts.

(St. Ambrose)

❖ "The emperor himself, as a sharer in the holy mysteries of our religion, would seclude himself daily at a stated hour in the innermost chambers of his palace; and there in solitary converse with his God, would kneel in humble supplication, and entreat the blessings of which he stood in need"¹.

¹ Vita Constant. 4.22

(Eusebius of Caesarea)

- ❖ The church commands us to raise persistent prayers to God, kneeling on our knees, in certain days, day and night¹.

(St. Epiphanius)

- ❖ He (St. Paul) turned from a persecutor of the church, into a preacher and a teacher of the Gentiles (2 Tim. 1.11). He says, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy, ... that in me first Jesus Christ might show all suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Tim. 1.13-16). As you see, by the grace of God, we are saved from our sins, in which we are weakened. God is alone the medication that heals the soul. As the soul is truly capable of harming itself; so also people are capable of becoming sick, but incapable of becoming in a better shape².

(St. Augustine)

“When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home” (Acts 21.6).

In an atmosphere of amazing spiritual love, they took leave of one another, and Paul and those who were with him joyfully boarded the ship, despite the tribulations they knew were waiting for them. All the congregation returned home with a feeling of joy and thanksgiving for God’s persistent work through His minister. And like what the prophet Moses said as he was blessing the tribes: “Rejoice Zebulun, in your going out; and Issacher in your tents”. The apostle Paul and those who were with him set forth rejoicing in the prayers for their sake by the congregation; and the congregation returned home bearing the blessings of the apostle Paul, and his prayers for them.

3- The prophecy of Agabus in Caesarea

“And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day” (Acts 21.7).

Ptolemais: Acre nowadays, an old city from the days of the Judges (Judg. 1.31), among the portion of the tribe of Asher; it had its reputation since the middle ages. It was one of the stops of the Crusaders, who called it after the name of St. John (St. Jeane d’Acre’), and built in it citadels and huge marine strongholds, close to the Carmel Mountain.

When visited by the apostle Paul, it was called by the name ‘Ptolemais’, after one of the Ptolemaic kings, who beautified it. In the days of the apostle, it was under colonial control.

The apostle Paul came to it, and greeted the brethren, as an indication of the presence of a church related to the apostle Paul. After staying with them one day, he departed to Caesarea.

¹ De Fide, 24.

² Sermons 278 .2.

“On the next day we who were Paul’s companions, departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him” (Acts 21.8).

Philip, known as the evangelist, was one of the seven deacons chosen by the congregation, to minister to the needs of the widows (Acts 6.3 etc.). He was also the one who preached in Samaria (Acts 8.5), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.26), and in the cities on his way from Azotus to Caesarea (Acts 8.40), where he settled down. He was called the evangelist to distinguish him from the apostle by the same name.

The apostle Paul rarely lived in a public place, but mostly as a guest with one of his friends, who used to feel comfortable to give him hospitality, as their houses were turned then into centers of spiritual, preaching, and worship. So became the house of Philip the evangelist.

Evangelist: a preacher of the good news or the gospel; a term which also came twice in (Eph. 4.11; 2 Tim. 4.5), but was not given to any of the remaining six deacons; although we saw in the life of St. Steven, how he preached in the synagogues, debating with the Jews who came from other regions, like Alexandria, Celicia, and Rome etc. We cannot say that preaching is not the work of deacons, as every believer is committed to testify to the gospel of Christ whenever one has the chance.

“Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied” (Acts 21.9).

Before those virgin daughters of Philip who had the gift of prophecy, others prophesied to the apostle about the troubles waiting for him in Jerusalem. Yet this repetition in several locations encouraged Paul and put his heart at ease, because the Holy Spirit was confirming to him, that what would happen to him was by divine allowance, as well as was justifying him before the church, where believers would not be disturbed when they hear about what would come upon him and realize that he went there with his free will, knowing what was awaiting him, rejoicing in his fellowship in the cross of the Lord.

We are as though in the days of the prophets, as we see those four virgin daughters, who were disciples of their father, and gained the grace of prophecy.

❖ "She admired also the zeal of Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who continued even to extreme old age to serve the Lord in the temple with prayers and fastings. When she thought of the four virgins who were the daughters of Philip, she longed to join their band and to be numbered with those who by their virginal purity have attained the grace of prophecy"¹.

(St. Jerome)

❖ Now, if women are commanded to keep silent in the churches (1 Cor. 14.34); and those virgin daughters of Philip could prophesy, why should we not allow our daughters to talk and prophesy? To

¹ Letter 130 to Demetrias, 4.

answer this, we say, that in order to prophesy, they should first show the signs of prophecy in them; and secondly, the daughters of Philip did not prophesy in the church. In the Old Testament, although Deborah was known as a prophetess (Judg. 4:4), yet there is no indication that she ever stood and addressed an assembly of people, the same way Isaiah and Jeremiah did; The same applies to Hilda the prophetess (2 Kings 22.14; 2 Chron. 34.22)¹.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ In the Old Testament, women prophesied, like Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron; then Deborah; then Huldah, in the days of Josea, and Judith (Judi. 8.11) under the reign of Darius. St. Mary the mother of God, her relative Elisabeth, and Anna, also prophesied (Luke 1.46, 2.38). And in our days, the virgin daughters of Philip. Yet all these were never haughty toward their husbands, but kept their meakness².

(Constitutions of the Holy Apostles)

“And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named ‘Agabus’ came down from Judea” (Acts 21.10).

The time to the apostle Paul was very valuable; he counted his ministry in any city by days, no single day without work, even if he is in prison, or during the unloading of a ship, etc.

Agabus had the gift of prophecy; when he came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, he prophesied about the great famine throughout the entire world (Acts 11.27-28).

“When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’” (Acts 21.11).

As the apostle was not anymore in a hurry to go to Jerusalem, they stayed many days in Caesarea, during which that prophet Agabus came. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he bound his hands and feet with Paul’s belt, prophesying what the Jews of Jerusalem were going to do to him. That was how the prophets used to do symbolic acts to reveal future events, like when Jeremiah buried his belt at the River Euphrates, as a reference to the captivity of the Jews (Jer. 13.4); and when he made for himself bonds and yokes, put them upon his neck, then sent them to the kings of Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, Tyre, and Sidon, to proclaim to them that Nebuchadnezzar was going to prevail and enslave those nations (Jer. 27.2-7); and also when Jeremiah came down to the potter’s house, who was making a vessel of clay at the wheel, and when that vessel was marred in his hands, he made it again into another vessel, as a reference to the destruction that was going to come upon the nation of the Jews (Jer. 18.4). Isaiah likewise walked naked and barefoot, as a reference of the captivity of Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa.

¹ Comm. On 1 Cor. 4.74.6-61.

² Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, 8.1.2.

20.3-4). Ezekiel was called the symbolic prophet, because of his many works and symbolic acts that bore prophecies.

“And when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21.12).

Here we notice that St. Luke, and those who were companions of the apostle Paul, beside some believers from Caesarea, have joined to plead with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Although they all knew that the apostle moves according to divine commands; yet for the sake of their love for him, and for the sake of the continuity of his ministry, they pleaded that with him. And although the apostle counted that as love, yet it bore weakness; for he was ready not only to be bound, but also to die joyfully for the name of the Lord Jesus.

❖ "For they had tried to keep him back with the intention not of dissuading, but to show love for him; as yearning for (the preservation of) the apostle, not as counselling against martyrdom"¹.

(The Scholar Tertullian)

“Then Paul answered, ‘What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21.13).

Knowing their true flaring love for him, and their longing for the continuity of his ministry, he nevertheless rebuked them; for he sought the consummation of God’s will, of having fellowship with the crucified in His passion and also His death. Although he could not bear to see their tears for his sake, that broke his heart; yet he did not conform to their action, but with love and courage in the Lord, he raised them up to realize the value of suffering for the Lord’s sake.

The apostle Paul had very gentle feelings, and could not bear to see anybody’s tears; Yet it was gentility in the Lord. Although the tears tore his heart, yet they could not turn him away from the way of the cross.

St. Ignatius of Antioch bore the same spirit, when he wrote to the Romans asking them not to show love in the wrong time, as they were doing their best to convince him not to martyr.

❖ "Pray, then, do not seek to confer any greater favor upon me than that I be sacrificed to God while the altar is still prepared. ... I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable good-will towards me. Suffer me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may be no trouble to

¹ Scorpiace,15.

any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body"¹.

❖ "Trusting through your prayers to be permitted to fight with beasts at Rome, **that so by martyrdom I may indeed become the disciple of Him (Christ)**"².

❖ "Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]"³.

(St. Ignatius of Antioch)

The apostle Paul, through the divine grace, counted any suffering or even martyrdom as consummation of the passion of Christ, and partaking of love with the crucified. He counted them as a marvelous chance to open the door to set forth and "depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1.23).

In a letter to Heliodorus,⁴ St. Jerome wrote to express the necessity of rising above the human emotions through the love for God, saying that Paul responded to the brethren, who tried to keep him from going up to Jerusalem, saying, "**What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready, not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus**" (Acts 21.13). The natural emotion, which mostly corrupts faith, should return powerless from the stronghold of the gospel: "My mother and brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (Matt. 12.50; Luke 8.21). If they believe in Christ, let them command us to go and fight in His name; and if they do not believe, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt. 8.22)⁵.

❖ How amazing to command them to overcome like men, any persecution, and to daringly go through temptations. ... In case someone is ready to bear the fears of death and despise them; if he put himself and departed, would he not leave behind him something to be remembered? For, as he puts his soul, he somehow will find it; whereas if he finds his life, he would bring perdition upon himself. So what fear would the saints feel, if what used to look difficult has become for them joyful to bear?⁶

(St. Cyril the Great)

"So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased saying, 'The will of the Lord be done'" (Acts 21.14).

It is clear that they were insisting that St. Paul the apostle would not go up to Jerusalem. However, as they saw his persistence and how he joyfully accepted such a prophecy, they realized that

¹ Ep. to Rom. 2, 4.

² Eph. 1.1, 2.

³ Rom 1, 2.

⁴ Heliodorus was a soldier; then, he was ordained a priest. St. Jerome took him with him to the East. As he felt himself not called for the life of solitude in the desert, he returned to Aquileia to resume his responsibilities as a priest. Later on, he was ordained a bishop over Altinum.

⁵ Letter 14 to Heliodorus, 3.

⁶ Comm. on Luke, Sermon 50.

this was the will of God and submitted to it. They realized that the decision of the apostle Paul was not out of self-esteem, of pride, or of lack of wisdom; but it was a joyful entering into the way of the cross, together with delivering everything into the hands of God. When they did not see any hesitation or fear on his part, they felt the hand of God working in his heart, mind, and his whole life.

4- Going up to Jerusalem

“And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21.15).

They prepared themselves like soldiers, carrying their equipments; and they probably also carried with them what they have collected from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia for the poor of Jerusalem. With Paul, were those who accompanied him, anticipating the tribulations expected to come over the apostle, intending to be with him in his suffering.

❖ "When Paul has heard that he has to suffer numberless perils, then he is in haste, not flinging himself upon the dangers but accounting it to be the command of the Spirit"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 45.*

5- The disciples' counsel to Paul in Jerusalem

“Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them one, Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge” (Acts 21.16).

With them went some disciples from Caesarea, who brought with them Mnason of Cyprus, who had a house in Jerusalem; as it was difficult during the feast season to find a place to lodge in Jerusalem.

Although Mnason heard what was expected to happen to Paul in Jerusalem, he did not hesitate to give him and his company hospitality, disregarding any troubles he could face because of them.

The Greek text came vague concerning whether Mnason came with them from Caesarea to receive them in his house in Jerusalem, or they came to his house while he was not with them in Caesarea, as he was known to the believers in Caesarea. Some believe that they brought him from his house midway between Caesarea and Jerusalem.

St. Paul came to Jerusalem after so long absence, during which he suffered many tribulations in several countries.

“And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly” (Acts 21.17).

They came to Jerusalem on the eve of the feast of the Pentecost (May the 27th 57 AD). The apostle met his early disciples in the house of Mnason, who gladly received him together with St. Luke and the rest of his company¹.

- ❖ "Though it be not Paul, yet if it be a believer and a brother, although the least, Christ comes to you through him. Open your house, take Him in.
- ❖ “Who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man, shall receive a righteous man’s reward” (Matt. 10.41). Therefore too he that receives Christ, shall receive the reward of him who has Christ for his guest”².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (Acts 21.18).

As it seems that James was the only apostle who was at that time dwelling in Jerusalem; St. Paul and all who were with him went to visit him.

“When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21.19).

¹ David Smith. *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, p. 657.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 45.

In the spirit of humility, the apostle Paul did not parade his exalted achievements; but, quietly and gradually, he told them about God's exalted work among the Gentiles through his ministry, as he always confirmed that it is not him, but it is God's grace that works in him. He believed that he sowed, and others watered, but it was God who makes the plant grow.

“And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who had believed, and they are all zealous for the law’ (Acts 21.20).

Although the elders were pleased to hear God's work through the ministry of Paul, yet they intended to warn him, that there were thousands of Jews who accepted the Christian faith, together with their zeal for the law. Those people heard that the apostle Paul, while preaching the gospel of grace, disregards the law, seeking from the Jews to forsake their Judaism, and cease to count themselves as Jews, to become like the Gentiles, in no need for circumcision or the other Jewish customs.

Some believe that, among the elders present, were those who accepted the Christian faith, yet they were embracing the thoughts of the Pharisees, and counting Christ and preaching Him as serving the law and for the glory of Israel, besides holding fast to the literality of the law and the Jewish customs. Although they glorified the Lord, for the spreading of faith in several countries, with such exalted and fast rate; yet they were worrying to hear how the apostle Paul was an opponent of the Jewish rites.

❖ "Observe with what modest deference they too speak: "they said to him:" not (James) as Bishop discourses authoritatively, but they take Paul as partner with them in their view; ***“You see brother:”*** as though immediately and at the outset apologizing for themselves, and saying, "We did not wish this. Do you see! The necessity of the thing? “How many myriads" They said, ***"Of Jews there are?”*** And they say not, "how many thousands we have made catechumens," but, "there are. And these," They say, "Are all zealous for the law". Again Paul relates to them the things relating to the Gentiles, not indulging in vainglory, God forbid, but wishing to show forth the mercy of God, and to fill them with great joy. See accordingly: “When they heard it," It says, ***"They glorified the Lord”***, not praised nor admired Paul: for in such wise had he narrated, as referring all to God"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“But they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21.21).

Some may probably wonder: Have the council assembled in Jerusalem not already judged, not to put a yoke on the neck of the Gentiles; but it was enough for them to abstain from things polluted by

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 46.

idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood (Acts 15)? They would respond by saying that that decree included the following:

- ❖ The rites pertaining to the law; although they should be applied spiritually not literally, yet they have been issued according to a divine law.
- ❖ What the council judged concerned those outside Jerusalem.
- ❖ They are to be applied only by the Gentiles, not the Jews, even those scattered among them.
- ❖ The council did not take into consideration what would happen with the growth of the church, and the increase of those believing among the Gentiles; especially when the Christians are expelled from the temple, and when Jerusalem is destroyed.

The rumors heard in Jerusalem were not correct; as the apostle Paul did not seek that from all the Jews, but sought that from the converted Gentiles. On the other hand, he confirmed that salvation is not to be set upon the literal practice of the Jewish rites, but upon the faith in Christ, working with love. The law in its literality is not capable of justification.

Although the leaderships of the church realized that all what was heard in Jerusalem was all false rumors; yet, for the sake of pleasing those thousands of believers, they were committed to present a practical proof of their falsity.

We join **St. John Chrysostom** in standing in awe before that personality, amazing in its exalted love for opponents, and its tolerance and wisdom. While the Jews, even those who were converted to Christianity, took the position of animosity against him all along his ministry, and until his last breath, accusing him of opposing the law; yet, with the spirit of love, he writes to them in his epistle to the Hebrews: “Pray for us, for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things desiring to live honorably” (Heb. 13.18). He seeks from those who hate him, what he does from the others who love him, to pray for his sake, saying, “For we are confident that we have a good conscience”. “Never mind the accusations; for “our conscience”, as he says, “would never cause you any harm, and would never plot anything against you”; “we have a good conscience not only toward the Gentiles, but also toward you; we never did anything with deceit or hypocrisy. ... I write this to you, not as an opponent, but as a friend”¹.

It was expected that once the Jews who accepted the faith would hear that Paul came to Jerusalem, they would assemble together to protest strongly against his position as portrayed by the false reports.

***“What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come”
Therefore do as we tell you: we have four men who have taken a vow” (Acts 21.22-23).***

¹ *Homilies on the Hebrews. Hom. 34.4.*

They revealed to the apostle that they did not believe what was said against him, that he should prove that he embraces the law as far as the converted Jews are concerned, not those from the Gentiles. Some believe that there were certain of those converted Jews who, with ulterior motives, although they knew for sure the thoughts of the apostle Paul, yet they, and their likes, chased him in all countries, to stir the converted Jews as well as others, against him, claiming that he was an opponent of the law.

❖ "They say these things as advising, not as commanding. ... "Make your defense in act, not in word"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“ Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that they all may know that all those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law”

“ But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 21.24-25).

The apostle James confirms that what they asked the apostle to do does not contradict with the decisions of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), as they only concerned the Gentiles.

❖ "Here with a kind of remonstrance, as "we," they say, commanded them, although we are preachers to the Jews, so you do, although a preacher to the Gentiles, cooperate with us"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them” (Acts 21.26).

In order to reconcile with the church of Jerusalem, win them, and bring them over to the high spiritual concepts, Paul practiced certain rites pertaining to purification, according to what he already wrote: “To those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law” (1 Cor. 9.21). So, he also became to those under the law, as though he was under the law, to set free those enslaved to the letter, to the account of Christ.

“The expiration of the days of purification”: It is the statute of vowing; In case a Jew takes a vow for the sake of a request or a tribulation, he lets his hair grow for thirty days, and abstains from drinking wine (num. 6.2-5), for he is holy in the Lord. At the end of the period, he should bring the sacrifices of the Nazarite; and in case he is incapable of offering them, he should resort to someone who

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 46.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 46.

can. That is why they said to the apostle Paul: “**Take them and be purified with them and pay their expenses**”. The sacrifices and offers of the Nazarite rite came in (Num. 6.14-21).

St. John Chrysostom says that St. Paul could have brought St. Timothy as an example; for he had himself circumcised him; but he consented to them and did all what they asked him to do.

According to the law, those who take a vow should observe the following for purification: To abstain from drinking wine, eating fresh or dried grapes, approaching a dead corpse, even if it was that of his father, mother, brother, or sister (Num. 6.3-7). He should also offer sacrifices, and no razor shall come upon his head, until the days are fulfilled (Num. 6.5).

The apostle Paul refers to what he did by saying, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law” (1 Cor. 9.20). In preaching the Gentiles, as he chose not to oppose them as far as the unnecessary things are concerned, giving them the freedom of attire, language, customs of eating and drinking, and so on, as long as these customs do not contradict with faith; so he did with the Jews: He chose not to oppose them in what they hold fast, as long as they do not contradict with the faith in the Lord Christ.

❖ In all this, Paul did not pretend what is not in him, but revealed compassion¹.

❖ "For he that ministers to the sick becomes as if he were sick himself, not indeed falsely pretending to be under the fever, but considering with the mind of one truly sympathizing what he would wish done for himself if he were in the sick man's place"².

(St. Augustine)

❖ In every situation, he becomes every thing for everyone: He becomes bread for the hungry, water for the thirsty, resurrection for the dead, a physician for the sick, and salvation for the sinners³.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

❖ Did Paul flatteringly pretend to be every thing to everyone? Nay, but as a man of God, a physician of the spirit, capable of diagnosing every pain, he diligently cared for them, and sympathized with all. In some way or another, all of us have something mutual with everyone. This kind of sympathy was adopted by Paul in dealing with people⁴.

(Ambrosiaster)

6- An uproar in the temple

“And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (Acts 21.27).

¹ Letter 82 to Jerome.

² Letter to Jerome, 75.

³ Sermon on the Paralytic, 10.

⁴ Commentary on Paul's Epistles (1 Cor. 9.20).

Formerly, Saul of Tarsus used to be known in the temple; but then, after so many years, many, especially among the people, did not know him. For a whole week of purification, he remained unrecognized in the temple by any of the opponents of the Christian faith.

The apostle entered into the temple together with the four who had taken a vow; and having all been purified, they heeded to the court of the priests to negotiate with them the prices of the sacrifices, assuming that by this he would calm down those accusing him to be an opponent of the law. As it was the feast of the Pentecost, and the Jews came from all over the world, he was recognized by those coming from Asia, in particular those from Ephesus, who were full of hatred against that one, the opponent of the law. He was not recognized by the Jews of Jerusalem, but by those from Asia Minor. They did not go to the High Priest, or to the civil judges, to present accusations against him, probably because they assumed that this would not realize their intention of getting rid of Paul; but they resorted to creating a public uproar. They thus defiled the temple, and spoiled its peace and sanctity, under the pretence of zeal for the law, and the holiness of the temple.

Then, he was in their midst and in their hands inside the temple, far from any help from the converted Jews, or from the protection of the Roman law. They jumped on him and stirred the Jewish multitudes against him, accusing him of defiling the holy place. It was their hour and the power of darkness (Luke 22.53).

“Crying out, ;Men of Israel, Help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks to the temple and has defiled this holy place” (Acts 21.28).

“Crying out, Men of Israel”: O Friends of the Law of Moses, and You who are entrusted to keep the law! “This is the man!” the one who preoccupies the minds of all; although they do not know him by face; this is the opponent of the nation of Israel, of the Law of Moses, and of the temple!

❖ ***“Men of Israel, Help”***: as though it were some (monster) difficult to be caught, and hard to be overcome, that has fallen into their hands. “Who teaches men everywhere”, not here only. And then the accusation (is) more aggravated by the present circumstances” ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple” (Acts 21.29).

When they saw Trophimus with him in the city, they assumed that he accompanied him everywhere, even in the temple. The multitudes often believe lies through seeing half of the truth, without making sure of the whole truth. Half the truth was that Paul is in the temple; and the false half was that he brought Trophimus with him into the temple.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 46.

“And all the city was disturbed, and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were closed” (Acts 21.30).

The multitudes in the city soon uproared, and dragged Paul the apostle from the court of Israel to the court of the gentiles, and they closed the doors in order to stop any further uproar inside the temple.

When they dragged Paul out of the temple, and the doors were closed between the Court of the Gentiles and the rest of the temple to kill him; and the news came to the commander of the garrison, he immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them, took Paul, protected him by their shields, and carried him on their soldiers.

We can imagine how thousands of Jews coming from all over the world to the temple as the holiest place on earth, to celebrate the feast, saw a man caught, as though defiling the temple. No one can imagine how they felt; they intended to tear him to pieces; as in their mind, he intended to deprive everyone from the dearest things they had: the temple, the law, and the religious customs.

According to **St. John Chrysostom**, They did not need statutes or courts of justice. They beat him; yet he withstood their aggression with patience, to present, later on, his defense¹.

7- The intervention of the commander of the Garrison

“Now, as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar” (Acts 21.31).

The fort of Antonia, where the Roman Garrison had its headquarter, was located west of the temple, connected to the temple by two flights of steps, to facilitate easy movement if necessary. The garrison was formed of 1000 soldiers. When the commander heard the news he took with him two centurions and 200 soldiers, and ran to rescue Paul’s life.

The fort of Antonia was built by John Hyrcanus the High Priest who called it ‘Baris’, then was strengthened and beautified by Herod the Great, who changed its name to Antonia, after his friend Emperor Mark Anthony. Josephus describes it as having four towers, one of which was 70 yards high, that overlooked everything going on inside the temple². its force of 1000 men was always on a state of standby.

The word translated as ‘*commander of the garrison*’ which came several time in the New Testament (Matt. 27.65-66; John 18.12; Acts 5.26), refers to an officer who leads 1000 men; his name was Claudius Lysias (Acts 23.26).

“He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he has done” (Acts 21.32-33).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 46.

² Josephus. Jewish Wars, 5.5.8.

He probably intended to calm the multitudes down, by assuring them that nobody is going to escape from the hand of justice, And by binding him by two chains to two soldiers, he protects him until the time comes to try him. His feet were also chained in a way to allow him to walk, by which the prophecy of Agabus was realized (Acts 21.11).

As this commander was previously deceived by an Egyptian prisoner who led a rebellion, and fled from the soldiers, this time Lysias took every precaution, commanded Paul to be bound by two chains, one to a soldier on each side.

“And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another; and when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks” (Acts 21.34).

When the commander asked the uproaring people, "Who is this person? And what is his crime?" The answer was meaningless cries. They did not know with what guilt they should charge the apostle. Some cried with something, and others with another thing. So neither the commander nor his men could know the truth.

“And when he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob” (Acts 21.34-35).

The multitude was unwittingly encouraged to see their prey in chains; and as many of them put in their hearts to crush him, as a service to God and to His people, they charged him as he was in the soldiers' hands, and beat him violently from all sides, crying out: "Kill him, Kill him"; And if it were not for the soldiers, they would have torn him apart.

“For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, ‘Away with him!’” (Acts 21.36).

The multitude were extremely agitated, supported and stirred by the Jewish leaderships. The commander and his men were confused, and could not find a logical interpretation of what was going on.

The soldiers were shocked to see how the multitudes did not care for the strong protection around the prisoner; and amidst all this tumult, there was no one with inner peace except the apostle Paul himself, who, as he was about to be led into the barracks, he asked the commander if he could speak to him. As that was a strange situation, not experienced before by the commander, he approached to listen to him.

“And as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, ‘May I speak to you?’ He replied, ‘Can you speak Greek’” (Acts 21.37).

The commander was astonished to hear Paul talking to him in Greek, as he thought that he was an Egyptian Jew who, some time ago, raised an insurrection and led 4000 rebels to the Mount of Olives,

claiming to them, as reported by Josephus,¹ that he would show them how the strongholds of Jerusalem would collapse, and how he would cross together with them through their ruins. Josephus said that he could gather around him thirty-thousand followers, who believed his claim that he could force his way into Jerusalem. Felix the Ruler at that time crushed that insurrection, killing 400, and taking 200 of them captives. As that Egyptian got away and disappeared; it was natural for the commander to assume that the prisoner in his hands was that rebel, who, on coming back, the multitude attacked him.

“Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago raised an insurrection and led the 4000 assassins out into the wilderness?” (Acts 21.38).

The controversy between the number of men mentioned by Josephus (thirty-thousand) and that by the commander (four-thousand) may be explained by the fact that the Roman authorities preferred to underestimate the number of rebels, so as not to give that Egyptian that much credit of being able to gather so great a number around him. Some believe that the estimation by the commander could be more accurate, based on the number of those killed (400) and those caught captives (200), that could be very small, if the followers of the Egyptian were thirty-thousands.

“But Paul said, ‘I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people’” (Acts 21.39).

The divine will has turned that riot into a good thing, giving Paul the chance to speak to the people. And, according to **St. John Chrysostom**, he managed to draw them to listen to him, by speaking to them in their native tongue, beside his delicate and gentle way of speaking.

Under the circumstances, the apostle had to proclaim his nationality, being a Jew of an honorable origin, born in Tarsus, famous for culture, on the same level as Athens and Alexandria, called by Xenophon, a great and prosperous city, and by Josephus as the capital, and the most famous among the cities of Cilicia. Being a Jew, he had the right to enter into the temple to worship; and being a learned man, he could address the multitude.

“So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hands to the people. And when there was great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying” (Acts 21.40).

Paul stood with his small stature on the top of the stairs, surrounded by the soldiers in their shiny armor. Although he was bound with chains, yet he was dominating the whole situation by his amazing calmness and inner peace; something that astonished many, even among those who were against him.

He did not count the situation as shameful, but he was at the apex of his glory, as though he has ascended on Jacob’s ladder, to where the Lord was standing, surrounded by the heavenly hosts. Paul was

¹ Josephus. *Antiq.* 20.86; *Jewish Wars*, 2.13.5.

looking down with a loving heart on his opponents, hoping that the grace of God would make them enjoy what he was enjoying of inner glories.

As he stood on the flight of stairs that lead to the fort, he motioned with his hand to the multitude, to get an amazing response of silence that was an exalted grace from God. The apostle could never dream of that marvelous chance to testify to his Christ before all the levels of the Jewish nation, with its entire learned people, rulers, devout, both in Jerusalem and those coming from all over the world. What an amazing captive! Although in chains, yet of authority, which made the multitude listen quietly to what he had to say.

He spoke to them, not in Aramaic, the common language of the people, but in common Hebrew, known as Syrian-Chaldean, mastered only by the learned scribes and priests, that of the worship rites; They heard him speaking in their original language, that of the Holy Book, the language of the temple and the elite; So they responded by a great silence.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 21

THE DIAMOND CHAINS OF FREEDOM

- ❖ Your apostle Paul was on his way to Jerusalem,
With a heart enkindled to testify to You in Rome.
He longed to minister among the Gentiles.
Although he was a prisoner bound in chains;
Yet he was not preoccupied with what awaits him on his way to Rome,
As long as Your Holy Spirit was his guide.
- ❖ In Tyre, the brethren pleaded with him,
Not to go up to Jerusalem.
They realized what awaits you there of troubles, even to death;
When the whole world was in need of his ministry.
- ❖ He was not preoccupied with the labor of traveling,
But with your gospel to reach the capital of the world.
With love, the congregation came out: men, women, and children,
To kneel on the beach together with the apostle,
To give thanks to You, O the Controller of the life and ministry of the church.
- ❖ In Caesarea, the virgin daughters of Philip prophesied,
And probably proclaimed what would happen to the apostle.
Then Agabus came to confirm that the apostle would be delivered to the Gentiles
To be tried.
Counsels and prophecies followed one another,
But Paul's heart was longing to testify to You;
Yet he was broken-hearted because of the persistence of the brethren on keeping him from going to
Jerusalem.
He was ready, not only to be bound by chains,
But also to die in Jerusalem for the sake of Your gospel.
He was loved by the multitudes everywhere;
All realized how much they were in need of every minute of Your apostle's life.
Your apostle loved them back, longing to give them more and more.
Yet his love for the spread of the word was above all emotions.
- ❖ In humility, Your apostle consented to the counsel of the brethren in Jerusalem.
The multitudes in the temple were stirred against him.

Many coveted to kill him, although they had not seen him before;
But their blind prejudice corrupted their insight.
Let everyone flare up;
Yet Your apostle stood in Your amazing peace to testify to you.
Grant me, O Lord, the fiery heart of Paul, for the sake of Your kingdom.

- ❖ Grant me, O Lord, to behold through Your eyes, how Your apostle was,
To behold him, not standing on the staircase of the prison,
But borne on the eternal arms.
His chains were far more beautiful than any golden jewelry;
His chains were adorned with diamond and every precious stone.
Although he was surrounded by violent soldiers;
Yet there were as well angels rejoicing for Your saint.
He stood to speak;
Yet it was Your Holy Spirit who was directing all the speech.
What king is greater than Paul?
And what ruler was of more power and authority?
- ❖ The Jewish leadership considered him worthy of being stoned or crucified,
In order to purify the earth of him.
The multitude as well coveted to tear him up;
As in their eyes, he was a criminal;
Although they did not know what his crime was!
The Roman commander was impressed to see his amazing calmness, and the exaltness of the peace of his heart;
Whereas the Roman soldiers were confused, having never seen such a prisoner.
The heavenly hosts blessed him,
As he desired to be crucified together with you.
And You, O my Lord,
Were looking down on him, to welcome him in Your Kingdom.
Blessed are you, O the amazing Paul!

CHAPTER 22

THE FIRST DEFENSE BEFORE THE JEWS

The evangelist St. Luke presents the first defense directed by the apostle Paul to the Jews, in which he refutes the three charges against him: That he was acting against the interests of the Jewish nation; that he was an opponent of the law; and that he was a defiler of the temple.

Therefore, his defense came as follows:

- ❖ That he is a Hebrew by birth, zealous for his nation, and is proud of his language. His zeal is testified by the assembly of the Sanhedrim itself, and by the Chief Priest; as he was working with them to oppose the name of Jesus.
- ❖ That his conversion was not in response to a human call, but to a divine proclamation, in the midst of his fierce opposition to Jesus' name. The heavenly Jesus enlightened for him the way, and transformed him from a persecutor of the church to a preacher of her faith.
- ❖ That he did not desert the temple, but partook of the worship; and the Lord Himself appeared to him in the temple, to confirm to him that he would be rejected by the Jews, to go and preach among the Gentiles.

1- A zealous Jew	1 – 3
2- A persecutor of the Way	4 – 5
3- A light from heaven	6 – 11
4- Being called to testify	12 – 16
5- A vision in the temple	17 – 21
6- A plot to kill him	22 – 24
7- A roman, who should not be scourged	25 – 30

1- A ZEALOUS JEW

“Men, brethren, and fathers, hear my defense before you now” (Acts 22.1).

He started his defense by talking to them as one of them, considering them as his brethren and fathers, whom he loved and respected, being his fellow citizens.

He courageously and fearlessly spoke, as though saying with the prophet: “I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, who have set themselves against me all around” (Ps. 3.6).

“And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent” (Acts 22.2).

Many of those who were brought up outside Judea, and acquired Hellenistic culture, used to speak in Greek, or in the local languages of the land in which they were born, and have forgotten the

Hebrew language. But the apostle Paul, as one who loves his country since his childhood, spoke the Hebrew tongue well; That is why, having spoken to the multitude in it, they kept silent, as a sign of their pleasure of him who holds fast to his language, whatever his culture is.

What is meant here is the common language and not that of the Old Testament, which is called the ‘Syrian’, a common version of the Hebrew, or as believed by some, a deviation from it.

Like the multitude who found comfort in listening to him, the Roman commander also did. Hearing him speaking fluently in Greek and common Hebrew, he could not be then, that Egyptian who sometime ago caused an insurrection.

“I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Celicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our father’s law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today” (Acts 22.3).

He spoke, concerning his relationship to his people, that he is a Jew; and as he wrote to the Philippians that he is “circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3.6). Therefore, he was not a stranger to them, from one of their tribes, born in Tarsus, the capital of Celicia, an honorable and a free city, not a slave as was some of the Jews scattered among the nations; He had an honorable birth.

He is also a scholar who came to Jerusalem to learn at the feet of Gamaliel, the most prominent teacher of the Jewish law in his days. He is interested in the fathers’ law, proud of the sound fathers’ tradition that was delivered from generation to another. What he was practicing then is actually an extension of that sound fathers’ tradition, with no diversion. He is proclaiming what has been delivered to him, yet according to the spiritual thought. He is filled with zeal for God, as they testify, that he used to persecute those whom he thought were opponents to God. His zeal for God, on the spiritual keeping of the law, is itself, his zeal for Jesus Christ, who consummated the law and realized its goal.

❖ “Therefore he says, ***“at the feet of Gamaliel:”*** and not simply, “by Gamaliel,” but “at his feet,” showing his perseverance, his assiduity, his zeal for the hearing, and his great reverence for the man”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ Paul learnt the Hebrew language at the feet of Gamaliel; the one, who was not ashamed to say that, showed underestimation for the Greek rhetoric; or, at least, did not mention it. It is out of meekness, so that his evangelism would not be based on his ability to argue and persuade, but on the power of his signs².

(St. Jerome)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 47.

² Against Rufinus, 1.17.

2-THE PERSECUTOR OF THE WAY

“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (Acts 22.4).

He clarified how he started his ministry with a fiery heart, persecuting the Christians, both men and women, demonstrating that being transformed to the ministry to the account of Christ has been through a divine power and a heavenly call, that turned around all his thoughts and tendencies; He was responding to a sudden and a divine proclamation.

The book of Acts presented an actual portrait of Saul of Tarsus, as a persecutor of the church, that he was “breathing threats” (Acts 9.1); and “when they were put to death, he cast his vote against them” (Acts 26.10). He did not only persecute those who followed the Way, but the Way itself, having rejected the name of Jesus Christ, together with the faith in Him. He did his best to terrify everyone, man and woman, delivering them into prisons, for the sake of the name of Jesus, and of testifying to Him.

Saul put in his heart to oppose the Christians even to their death; counting them as not deserving to live. He could not imagine that, one day, he would find pleasure in dying all day long for the sake of his Christ.

- ❖ “Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man, but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant” (1 Tim. 1.13-14). ... On one hand, he confirmed that he is acting “blameless” (Phil. 3.6); And on the other hand, he admits that he is a sinner, to the extent that demonstrates to sinners not to despair from the mercy of God, especially that Paul has found forgiveness¹.

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ He was transformed from a persecutor into a preacher and a teacher to the Gentiles (2 Tim. 1.11). He says, “For this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Tim. 1.16). By the grace of God, as you may see, we are saved from our sins, that weaken us, because God is alone the medication, who heals the soul. As the soul is capable of harming itself, men likewise, although they have the ability to make themselves sick; yet they do not have the ability to make themselves in a better shape².

(St. Augustine)

- ❖ "Why then did other Jews not obtain mercy? Because what they did, they did not ignorantly, but willfully, well knowing what they did. ... Thus their love of power was everywhere in their way. ... Paul did not act as the other Jews did, from the love of power, but from zeal. For what was the motive of his journey to Damascus? He thought the doctrine pernicious, and was afraid that the preaching of

¹ *Sermons 170.1.*

² *Sermons 278.2.*

it would spread everywhere. ... It is for this he condemns himself, saying, "I am unworthy of being called an apostle" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished" (Acts 22.5).

He was like an agent representing the assembly of the Sanhedrim and the high priest, to oppose Christianity, something that they could not deny, Who when they heard that many Jews in Damascus accepted the Christian faith, they did not find a better one to deal with the situation, and provided him with every possible means to realize his mission successfully.

He says to them, 'What you are doing now is a faint portrait of what I formerly did to the Christians. I have experience, both of what was in their hearts, and what is now in yours. I am longing for you to get my experience and to realize the truth that I realized'.

3-A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

"Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me" (Acts 22.6).

Having revealed to them how he was as a persecutor of the church, which is the same condition they were living through, he began to tell them about God's work with him, as though he sought for them to have the same experience.

The apostle confirms that his transformation is not set upon love of something new, or a result of some human influence. God let him walk the entire distance to Damascus, until he came near Damascus, entertaining his day dreams of ministering to God through destroying the Christians, and uprooting the name of Jesus from the face of the earth, considering Christianity as a cult that opposes the divine truth, and corrupts the nation.

Suddenly, a great light from heaven shone around him. The Jews know that God is light, dwells in light, and his angels are angels of light. What occurred, happened at noon; when nothing can be the product of imagination, or a result of a human deception.

"And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me'" (Acts 22.7).

A voice from heaven called his name! He wondered who in heaven he is persecuting! Who knows his name?

"So I answered, 'Who are You Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 22.8).

¹ Hom. On 1 Tim. Hom. 3.

To him it was a surprise to hear that Jesus of Nazareth was still living, and was counting all opposition against His church, as directed directly against Him. The apostle was warning them against falling in what he fell; as their persecution of the apostle then was a persecution against Jesus of Nazareth, whom they thought that they have got rid of by crucifying him; they are opposing the heavenly Messiah.

“Now, those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me” (Acts 22.9).

St. John Chrysostom believes that there were two voices: the voice of the Lord and that of Saul. Here he is speaking about the voice that those who were with Saul could not hear. Whereas in the ninth chapter, he spoke about the voice of Saul heard by those around him. Concerning the light, here he speaks about their seeing the shining light, without discriminating the heavenly Person who was speaking to him; whereas in the ninth chapter, he says that they did not see a man, and does not say that they did not see the light. It was Saul alone who distinguished the voice and the Person speaking; whereas those around him saw light, and heard Saul speaking, but did not hear the heavenly voice, or saw Him¹.

And expecting their reservation: Why did the light and voice change your life, and not that of those around you? (Although we do not know, whether any among them was affected by the situation); the apostle confirmed that that vision was personally for him. They saw the light and did not recognize it and did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to the apostle. They probably heard an awesome voice, but they did not distinguish the words, as they were directed to Saul of Tarsus.

St. Ambrose believes that Saul of Tarsus was the only one who distinguished the voice of the Lord, and conversed with Him, because, in his depths, he was ready to receive the truth, and longing for knowledge. He says that in the Book of Acts, it came that Paul, when he heard the voice of Christ, he received the call of grace. Although he had with him many companions, it was said that he alone heard the voice of Christ. That is why, blessed saint: Whoever believes will hear; and will hear to believe. Whereas he, who does not believe will not hear and will not be able to hear, lest he should believe².

What I fear most is that we, not in Saul’s company, but while we are among the procession of the church, the Lord may appear, but we do not see Him or hear His voice. We may recall that the child Samuel heard the voice of the Lord, whereas Eli the priest did not hear the divine voice, while he was in the temple.

“So I said, what shall I do Lord?”; and the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go into Damascus, and there, you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do’” (Acts 22.10).

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 47.*

² *Of the Christian Faith, 2.15 (132).*

Saul did not instantly accept the faith, but sought the council of the Heavenly, who led him to the church to recognize the truth, And to the city, whose church he intended to destroy, to become a disciple to learn the evangelic truth.

“And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus” (Acts 22.11).

Unable to withstand the splendor of the light of the Lord Christ, his eyes were blinded; so that those of his heart would open to see the inner glory.

4-HIS CALL TO TESTIFY

“Then one, Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwell there came to me, and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight’. And at that same hour I looked up at him Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know his will, and see the just One, and hear the voice of His mouth” (Acts 22.12-14).

The God of the fathers has chosen him to recognize His will pertaining to the plan of salvation, and to realize His message, to see the holy and righteous Christ, and to receive from His mouth the call to apostleship.

“For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22.15).

As an apostle called by the Lord Christ, he would present a practical living testimony of what he has seen and heard; He would testify that Jesus, the true Messiah, anticipated by the fathers and prophets, has come and consummated the work of salvation; and that He is the Savior of the world.

❖ *“For you will be His witness to all men”*; not only to the friendly, but also to the unbelievers: for this is what witnesses are for; not to persuade those who know, but those who know not. Let us be trustworthy witnesses. But how shall we be trustworthy? By the life we lead. The Jews assaulted him: our passions assault us, bidding us abjure our testimony. But let us not obey them: we are witnesses from God. ... He has sent us to bear witness to Him" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. John Chrysostom believes that the testimony should be to the resurrection, not only through teaching, but through life.

“And now, why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22.16).

St. Luke did not mention those words in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts, where he told us the story of Paul’s conversion. Ananias could find no reason for postponing the baptism, to let Saul of Tarsus enjoy the new birth, and the forgiveness of his sins.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 47.

- ❖ "Here it is a great thing he has uttered. For he said not, "Be baptized in His name:" but, "calling on the name of Christ." It shows that He is God: since it is not lawful to "call upon" any other, save God"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

5-A VISION IN THE TEMPLE

"Then it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance" (Acts 22.17).

As it was not the goal of the apostle to parade his achievements, but to reveal the work of God to the account of the ministry; After talking about the role of God in Saul's conversion to faith, he did not talk about his ministry in Damascus and Arabia (Gal. 1.17-18) but told them about God's call on him to work among the Gentiles, while he was in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

He clarified that he did not depart from Jerusalem out of fear but in abidance to a call from God, while he was in the temple, praying with his Jewish brethren.

"And saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me'" (Acts 22.18).

St. John Chrysostom referred to the fact that, because he was in the temple praying, he was awake, and the vision was not an illusion. He clarified as well, that his departure from Jerusalem was not out of fear of danger, but because of their rejection of the testimony to the Lord Christ².

Having been accused of defiling the temple, the apostle intended to confirm that he enjoyed the heavenly vision, and the call to minister among the Gentiles, while he was in the temple.

"So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue, I imprisoned and beat those who believe in you'" (Acts 22.19).

It is obvious that it was Jesus Christ who appeared to him in the Jewish temple. Saul of Tarsus was of the opinion that he would rather testify to Jesus Christ among the Jews, his fellow citizens, who were aware of his past history; he did not expect them to reject his testimony, especially after providing them with the evidence that his conversion was through a divine work.

"And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him" (Acts 22.20).

Although he did not partake of stoning him, yet he was with those who stoned him in spirit, and consented fully to his death.

"Then He said to me, 'Depart. For I will send you far from here to the Gentiles'" (Acts 22.21).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 47.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 48.

His setting forth to minister among the Gentiles has been according to a divine call, not a human plan by him or by the apostles.

6-A PLOT TO KILL HIM

“And they listened to him until this word and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live’ (Acts 22.23).

They raised their voices to interrupt his speech, and to keep anyone from hearing about the necessity of ministry among the Gentiles.

They cried out that he was not fit to live on this earth, considering him like a destructive pest. They did not know that his name was written among the men of God, “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11.38).

No wonder for the apostle to feel that what he was going through was actually a consummation of the passion of Christ in his body. He has already heard the divine voice referring what befall the believers to Him personally, when he said: “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you persecute”. And as the multitude cried out saying: “Away with Him, Away with Him! Crucify Him!”; so they cried out concerning His apostle, saying: “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live”.

They listened attentively when he spoke to them in Hebrew, and even when he testified to the appearance of the Lord Christ to him on his way to Damascus; and how he chose him to testify to him. But, to proclaim that he was going to the Gentiles, this they did not bear to hear and counted him as not fit to live on earth, although all the prophets of the Old Testament have prophesied about the return of the Gentiles to God. It was not possible for the haughtiness of the Jews to accept the possibility that the Gentiles could enter into faith; as in their sight, they were unclean.

❖ The apostles have themselves seen the Word, not because they saw our Lord and Savior in flesh, but because they saw the Word. If seeing the body of the Lord means seeing the Word of God, Pilate, who condemned Jesus, would have seen the Word of God. The same applies to the traitor Judas, and to all those who have cried out, “Crucify Him, Away with Him” (John 19.15; Acts 22.22)¹.

(The scholar Origen)

“Then, they cried out, tore off their clothes, and threw dust into the air” (Acts 22.23).

They did not refer to a certain charge, but so acted to put the fear in the heart of the Roman commander. Tearing the clothes is done by the high priests when (they think) they hear blasphemy against God, to proclaim their innocence of the blood of the blasphemer (Matt. 26.65-66). As to throwing dust into the air over their heads, it is an expression of injustice that came on them, for which they cry out to heaven and earth. The commander was disturbed by this scene, and ordered him to be brought into the barracks, to be examined under scourging.

¹ Hom. On Jer. Hom. 12.8.

Some believe that tearing their clothes was an expression of their heart intention to tear Saul up to pieces, or to stone him, if he fell in their hands.

“The commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him” (Acts 22.24).

As the apostle spoke in Hebrew, the commander could not understand his speech; and the uproar of the multitude did not give him the chance to realize the situation. So he intended to resort to violence with the apostle by scourging him to know what he did, that made the multitude shouted so against him.

7-A ROMAN, WHO SHOULD NOT BE SCOURGED

“And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is Roman, and uncondemned’” (Acts 22.25).

The apostle used this privilege before, in Philippi, yet after he was scourged (Acts 16.37). But here he used it before being scourged. He spoke to the centurion gently and mildly without anger. The Romans had a certain law called ‘Iex Sempronia’, that exposed a judge or a ruler who condemns or scourges a free Roman citizen without listening first to him, to fall under the same judgment.

“When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, ‘Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman’. Then the commander came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman?’ He said ‘yes.’ And the commander answered, ‘With a large sum I obtained this citizenship’ and Paul said, ‘but I was born a citizen’” (Acts 22.26-28).

The Roman citizenship was given to a person, either by birth from Roman parents, purchased by money, or given as a gift from the government. Paul’s parents probably got the Roman citizenship as a reward for their services to the state. Some believe that Tarsus, as a Roman colony, had that privilege; Its citizens were considered Romans; and according to Appian, Tarsus gained the privilege as a free city from Augustus Caesar, because it stood on his side in wars, and bore much damage to his account. Whereas others believe that Paul had that privilege on account that some of his ancestors have presented military aid to the Roman state.

“Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him, and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him” (Acts 22.29).

The commander got terrified, as that was a grave responsibility before Rome. He previously assumed that Paul was that Egyptian who some time ago raised an insurrection, then was astonished to hear him speak in Greek (Acts 21.37); and his astonishment increased when he realized that he is a Roman citizen by birth: counted as of an honorable family in the sight of Rome.

How amazing that the commander got ashamed when he knew that he is Roman, and that he had bound him! It was a law that terrified the judges and rulers; whereas the law of God was not respected by anyone, because of God’s longsuffering.

“The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them” (Acts 22.30).

He released him from his bonds, lest he would be a breaker of the Roman law; yet he left him in prison, probably for fear for his life.

The next day he commanded Paul to stand before the assembly of the Sanhedrim in the presence of the commander, who probably had the intention to set him free as a realization of justice.

Paul stood before the chief priests who killed the Lord Christ, to testify before them to the resurrection from the dead. He looked intently at their faces; as he recognized them for sure, and had previously carried from them letters to oppose the Christians. Then, he was calling them to accept the Christian faith.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 22

A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

- ❖ Saul was in the darkness of the deadly letter.
He thought in himself that he is the son of light.
He persecuted You, O the eternal light, and opposed the children of light.
He blasphemed against Your name, not realizing that You are the holy Heavenly.
- ❖ When You shone on him from heaven, he collapsed before the splendor of Your glory.
He fell like a dead man and lost his sight,
To set him a new man flaring with the Spirit,
And to open his insight by Your Holy Spirit.
Instead of his animosity, he became Your witness.
And instead of his opposition, he became a servant for all.
- ❖ He did not despise the Jewish temple; and there You appeared to him,
And called him to set out of the Gentiles a heavenly temple.
The episode of his encounter with You became a strong excuse to his fellow Jews.
He wished every Hebrew to enjoy what he did;
And that Israel becomes a preacher to all the nations.
That is how his heart flared with such an unquenchable fire.
No riot, scourges, chains, or even death itself,
Could uproot those holy feelings from his heart.
- ❖ Shine, O Lord, with Your light unto us,
That we carry the fiery heart.

CHAPTER 23

ST. PAUL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIM

That was the second defense by the apostle Paul; now, standing before the Sanhedrim, he probably hoped to reveal to them the evangelic truth, as for they were knowledgeable of the law and prophets. Yet their ears were deaf, and their eyes were affected by spiritual blindness, and they were unable to perceive the truth.

1- Striking Paul on the mouth	1 – 5
2- A dissension in the Sanhedrim	6 – 9
3- The Lord appears to Paul	10 – 11
4- A conspiracy to kill Paul	12 – 15
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6- Sending Paul to Caesarea	22 – 25
7- A letter to Governor Felix	26 – 30
8- Paul arrives to Caesarea	31 – 35

1- STRIKING PAUL ON THE MOUTH

“Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day’ (Acts 23.1).

St. Paul defended himself before the Sanhedrim, that he had integrity and a good conscience, confirming that he had dedicated his life to God, since his birth until that day. St. Luke did not reveal why St. Paul started by that defense; whether it was because of some question or accusation by the high priest or someone else of the members of the Sanhedrim.

In an amazing courage, Paul addressed the members of the Sanhedrim, with no reference to the commander or his men present. He was as though he wished to confirm that he was standing trial before the Sanhedrim alone, rather than before civil authorities; that he loved them, and intended to present the truth to them with a good conscience. This was probably the first time that Paul stood before the Sanhedrim after his conversion to the Christian faith, before the same assembly who used to respect him in his youth, and to provide him with letters and authority to persecute the church of God. He courageously spoke according to God’s promise to the prophet Ezekiel: “Like adamant stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not be afraid of them, nor be dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house” (Ezek. 3.0).

He proclaims to them that he lived with a good conscience, not only concerning the things they accuse them of, but in all the things of his life; that he dedicated to God all his heart and life; and that he

never sought dignity or riches, but only what pleases God, which makes him, according to the Mosaic Law, a righteous and blameless man. When he persecuted the church of God, thinking that he was serving God, he was doing what his conscience told him to do. When he saw the vision on his way to Damascus, he forsook his bonds with the Sanhedrim, also as a service to God, according to his words: “for we are confident that we have a good conscience, in all things, desiring to live honorably” (Heb. 13.18). He was only preoccupied with pleasing God, regardless of any other human considerations, persisting on this since his early youth, up to the last breath of his life.

As though the apostle was saying to them that he was still Saul of Tarsus whom they knew, as an honest man, with faithful heart toward God and His people; that nothing changed in him, except his discovery of the divine truth. He still harbored the same living conscience with which he used to work to the account of the Sanhedrim; yet along the truth route, and not through the ignorance that used to prevail on him because of holding fast to the letter.

“And the high priest Amanitas commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth” (Acts 23.2).

Amanitas was the high priest between the years 48 to 58 AD, and was known for his greed, haughtiness, and arrogance.

Paul stood before the same high priest before whom his Lord stood and probably the one who struck the Lord on his mouth (John 18.22), on account that he considered both as blasphemers against God. He sought the crucifixion of the Lord Christ, for He uttered the truth, that He is the Son of God; and then he sought to kill Paul, for opening the door of faith before the Gentiles. The high priest did not bear to hear the Lord Christ proclaiming that He is the Son of God and equal to Him; and then, he did not bear to hear Paul commending himself as a Pharisee according to the law. No one should commend himself in the presence of the high priest.

It happened before that Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah struck Micaiah on the cheek because he uttered the word of God (1 Kings 22.24); and for the same reason Pashhur the son of Immer the priest struck the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 20.2). It was said about the Lord Christ, that He gives the kisses of His mouth (Songs 1.2) to those who were struck on their mouths for His sake.

The wise Solomon told us to kiss the lips that give the right answer (Prov. 24.26), and yet the wicked strike these lips. Striking on the mouth refers to the intention of the striker to mute the mouth of the one struck, on account that he utters unbecoming words. This practice, followed in the East until recently, bore a strong insult, as though the person struck is not worthy of speaking in the presence of those assembled, and should be committed to silence, because of his ignorance, insolence, or his blasphemy against the truth.

Striking Paul on his mouth might probably refer to that he is lying in the presence of the high priest, and deceiving those present, for he claims that he bears a good conscience, while he believes that Jesus is the Christ and spreads His teachings.

“Then Paul said to him, ‘God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law” (Acts 23.3).

Adam Clark says that Krebs confirms that Ananias the high priest, is the same one about whom Josephus tells:¹ that Quadratus the governor of Syria sent him a prisoner to Rome, as he caused dissensions between the Jews and the Samaritans, And having proved his innocence, he returned to Jerusalem, and resumed his duties as a high priest².

Paul’s words fell like lightening on the high priest and on all those present, as it was never heard that a Jew ever uttered such words against a high priest. It was a grave insult that never happened in the history of Israel.

Some believe that the apostle Paul did not utter those words out of anger or for revenge, but he was taken by a holy zeal that the high priest corrupts his authority, and insults the priestly work by such actions. Ananias judged contrary to the law that commanded not to strike someone unless he is tried and condemned to be worthy of being struck (Lev. 19.35; Deut. 26.2). What the apostle uttered was a prophecy, which Grotius believed was realized. As Josephus mentioned³ that Ananias , together with his brother Hezekiah were slain during the riot that took place in Jerusalem, when it was taken over by the Sicarii led by Manahem, after failing to hide himself.

As the Lord Christ called the hypocrites “whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly , but inside are full of all uncleanness” (Matt. 23.27); the apostle Paul says about the high priest, that he is like a whitewashed wall, outwardly beautiful, but hides dirt underneath. By a whitewashed wall, he probably means a wall about to fall down; and instead of repairing it on sound basis, or rebuilding it, they cover it with a layer of plaster to hide the cracks to appear intact, while it is dangerous to anyone who may lean on it or sit beside it.

St. Jerome, on the other hand, believes that what the apostle Paul uttered was out of human weakness. Being an apostle does not mean that he was without some weaknesses because of slothfulness in certain little things, like any other father, apostle, or prophet.

Responding to the Pelagians, who concentrate on the freedom of will alone, assuming that man is capable, by his complete free will, of walking in perfect virtue; **St. Jerome** presents living examples of great saints commended by God Himself, yet they suffered from weaknesses.

❖ "As if he had said, and you are yourself worthy of stripes without number. See accordingly how greatly they were struck with his boldness; for whereas the point was to have overthrown the whole matter, they rather commend him"⁴.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 1.20.6.

² Josephus. Antiq. 1.20.9.2.

³ Josephus. Jewish Wars, 2.17.8.

⁴ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 48.

❖ "By way of example let us take one proof: "I have found David, the Son of Jesse, a man after Mine own heart, who shall do all My will." There is no doubt that David was a holy man, and yet he who was chosen that he might do all God's will is blamed for certain actions. Of course it was possible for him who was chosen for the purpose to do all God's will. Nor is God to blame Who beforehand spoke of his doing all His will as commanded, but blame does attach to him who did not what was foretold. For God did not say that He had found a man who would unfailingly do His bidding and fulfill His will, but only one who would do all His will. And we, too, say that a man can avoid sinning, if he chooses, according to his local and temporal circumstances and physical weakness, so long as his mind is set upon righteousness and the string is well stretched upon the lyre. But if a man grows a little remiss it is with him as with the boatman pulling against the stream, who finds that, if he slackens but for a moment, the craft glides back and he is carried by the flowing waters whither he would not. Such is the state of man; if we are a little careless we learn our weakness, and find that our power is limited.

Do you suppose that the Apostle Paul, when he wrote "Bring the cloak that I left at Troas when you come – and the books" (2 Tim. 4.13), was thinking of heavenly mysteries, and not of those things which are required for daily life and to satisfy our bodily necessities? Find me a man who is never hungry, thirsty, or cold, who knows nothing of pain, or fever, or the torture of strangury, and I will grant you that a man can think of nothing but virtue.

When the Apostle was struck by the servant, he delivered himself thus against the High Priest who commanded the blow to be given: "***God will strike you, you whitewashed wall***". We miss the patience of the Savior Who was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and opened not His mouth, but mercifully said to the smiter, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike me" (John 18.23)? We do not disparage the Apostle, but declare the glory of God Who suffered in the flesh and overcame the evil inflicted on the flesh and the weakness of the flesh-to say nothing of what the Apostle says elsewhere: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works" (2 Tim. 4.14) "¹.

(St. Jerome)

"And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' Then Paul said, 'I did not know brethren that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people'" (Acts 23.5-6).

How could St. Paul not recognize the person of the high priest who headed the Sanhedrim; when Paul had so much relationship with the Sanhedrim in his youth, and knows so much about its members?

1- Some believe that that session was unofficial, and the high priest who presides on it was not wearing his official attire; that is why Paul did not recognize him.

¹ *Against the Pelagians. Book 3.4.*

2- Others believe that the apostle Paul did not see who gave the orders to strike him on the mouth.

3- A third group believe that the apostle mockingly uttered those words meaning that whoever does that is not fit to be a chief priest; Or that what happened made him assume that he could not be the high priest, or else he would have given him his due respect. This last interpretation is adopted by many scholars, as it is obvious that he knows for sure that he is the high priest, when he said to him: "You sit to judge me according to the law; and you command me to be struck contrary to the law" (Acts 23.3).

4- Some others believe that St. Paul was not apologizing, but was giving a justification for what he said, as though he intended to say: 'Indeed it is not fitting to speak evil of the high priest, but I do not count Ananias as such, as he got that position by bribery and corruption. The Holy Book confirmed that command, not to speak evil of the ruler of your people, whether religious or civil: "Is it fitting to say to a king, 'You are worthless,' and to nobles, 'You are wicked'" (Job 34.18)? And "Do not curse the king even in your thought" (Eccl. 10.20).

5- Others believe that when the apostle Paul realized that his response was unbecoming, he hastened to apologize.

❖ "For when he was smitten with the hand by order of the high priest, what he seemed to say contumeliously when he affirms, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall", sounds like an insult to those who do not understand it; but to those who do, it is a prophecy. For a whited wall is hypocrisy, i.e. pretence holding forth the sacerdotal dignity before itself, and under this name, as under a white covering, concealing an inner and as it were sordid baseness. For what belonged to humility he wonderfully preserved, when, on its being said to him, "Do you revile God's high priest"? He replied, "I did not know brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people'" (Acts 23.5). His response reveals how composed he And here he showed with what calmness he had spoken that which he seemed to have spoken in anger, because he answered so quickly and so mildly, which cannot be done by those who are indignant and thrown into confusion (because of the insult). ... As if he said, I know another High Priest, for whose name I bear such things"¹.

(St. Augustine)

2- A DISSENSION IN THE SANHEDRIM

"But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, 'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged'" (Acts 23.6).

The apostle cried out loudly so as to be heard by all, proclaiming that he is a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee, brought up on the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

¹ *Sermon on the Mount, 1.19.58.*

During the days of the ministry of the Lord Christ, the Pharisees were the most controversial group against Him, considering Him a Breaker of the literality of the law, and an opponent of their hypocrisy. Yet, after His ascension, as the disciples testified to the resurrection of the Lord Christ, the Sadducees became the most controversial group, for they denied the resurrection. The Pharisees sympathized with them against the Sadducees, not for the sake of faith in the Lord Christ, but to confirm the resurrection of the dead.

“And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided” (Acts 23.7).

As St. Paul expected, the Pharisees took his side and arose to his defense against the Sadducees, his opponents; the high priest, as he most probably took the side of the Sadducees, the Pharisees grew more furious.

Then, the situation changed completely; and instead of cries seeking the death of the apostle, there arose chaos and dissension in between the members of the assembly, which made the commander and his men confused as what was going on. The only one to watch that scene in complete peace was the apostle Paul.

“For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection – and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both” (Acts 23.8).

The Sadducees used to deny the resurrection of the dead, as well as both the good and evil angels, and used to believe that the souls die together with the bodies;¹ Therefore, there is no reward or punishment after life².

Although both groups were represented in the same assembly of the Sanhedrim, to deal with the major religious issues of the Jews, yet every group had its own convictions.

- The Pharisees although fanatically religious, and zealous for the law statutes; yet, at the same time, they were straightforward in their faith and convictions concerning the world of spirits, the eternal life, and the resurrection of the dead.

- The Sadducees, on the other hand, were unfaithful to the Holy Book and to the divine proclamations. Although they considered the books of Moses as magnificent history and good law, yet not on the same level of the rest of the books. They used to deny the eternal life, and the resurrection of the dead. The apparitions of angels according to them were things of imagination with no real basis; and God Himself is material.

- The Pharisees considered the Sadducees as liberals in thought, and corrupt in dogma.
- Although the Sadducees formed the great majority of the members of the Sanhedrim, Yet the Pharisees, although a minority, had a great influence on the decisions of the assembly, because the

¹ Josephus. *Antiq.* 18.1.4.

² Josephus. *Jewish Wars.* 2.8.14.

people respected them as men of intellect, and as righteous and zealous on the law and the worship in the temple.

“Then arose a loud outcry. And the scribes who were of the Pharisees party arose and protested, saying, ‘We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God’ (Acts 23.9).

The scribes who were learned scholars of the law were either of the Pharisees, or of the Sadducees. As the Pharisees group saw the development of the situation, they arose to defend Paul, to say that they found no evil in him, and that he was not an opponent to the law; and if his preaching among the Gentiles was according to a heavenly command (Acts 22.17-18), through the appearance of an angel in the temple, whoever opposes him is opposing God.

Those scribes probably recalled what the great Pharisee teacher of the Law, Gamaliel, has once said in the Sanhedrim: “Take heed to yourselves what you intend to do. . . . Keep away from these men and let them alone; for if the plan of this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God” (Acts 5.35-38).

Some of the Pharisee scribes, not only intended to prove the innocence of St. Paul, but they referred to him the enjoyment of inspiration and the exaltness of his convictions. They, not only intended to pardon him, but to support and protect him.

3-THE LORD APPEARS TO PAUL

“And when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks” (Acts 23.10).

When the situation changed from attacks against St. Paul by everyone, to fierce dissension among the members of the assembly and among the multitudes present, the commander, realizing the danger on the prisoner’s life by the Sadducee majority, commanded his soldiers to go down and take Paul by force and bring him over into the barracks.

“But the following night, the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome’ (Acts 23.11).

Whenever the affliction gets tighter and the tribulations get stronger, God presents heavenly comforts, As once the Sadducees were about to tear Paul apart, the Lord Himself appeared to him in the barracks to tell him the good news that he still had a mission to testify to Him in Rome, and that he would not be killed in Jerusalem. He did not send to him an angel, an archangel, or a cherub, but the Lord Himself came to him; as the apostle Paul was in what seems to be a very critical situation, as though his mission was about to come to an end in no time. He appeared to confirm to him that he had not yet consummated his mission. The Lord’s promise to him was not that he would not pass through temptations, or that he would live more days on earth, but the good news that he would testify to Him in

Rome. That was the desire of the apostle's heart. And it was realized, as he entered into Rome as a victorious preaching prisoner (Acts 28.30-31).

The apostle Paul entered into the prison in the fort of Antonia with no companion with him, and without a working plan in his mind. He entered into the prison, under the protection of the angels of God; he was not alone, but in the presence of the Lord, who was always with him, appearing to him, to support and guide him. As it happened to him in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth (Acts 18.9-10), He also appeared to him in the fort. He did not promise him that the two chains would fall from his hands, as that never bothered the apostle's mind, and could never bind the word in his mouth, but, on the contrary, it opened before him new ranges to testify. What indeed preoccupied the apostle Paul was to testify to the Lord Christ at the imperial palace (Acts 27.24).

The trial of the apostle turned into preaching and a testimony to the Lord Christ. After testifying before the commander, the soldiers, and the Jews with their scholars, priests and pilgrims who came from all over the world, the Lord opened to him a way to testify before Caesar of Rome, the great and elite of Rome, and the entire Gentile world.

4- A CONSPIRACY TO KILL THE APOSTLE PAUL

“And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bounded together under oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy” (Acts 23.12-13).

“Bounded together under oath”: they vowed together a holy vow (according to them), to dedicate themselves and all their energies to put their conspiracy into effect, disregarding how would they be absolved of their vow in case their act was not realized, on account that there was no chance of failure. and if it happened and they did not succeed for any unseen reason, it would be easy for them to be absolved of their vow by the religious leaders.

Once the plan to stir uproar among the multitude failed, as well as the trial before the assembly of the Sanhedrim, a group of Jews resorted to a conspiracy to barbarously kill the apostle. This group sanctified a fast and vowed, as though getting God to partake of their conspiracy to kill the apostle Paul, and to offer him a sacrifice to God. As previously proclaimed by the Lord Christ himself: “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 6.2). This group, of more than 40 persons, conspired with the high priests and the elders, to put their plot into effect (Acts 23.14-15).

It is amazing that on the same night, and probably at the same hour, the Lord appeared to confirm to Paul that he would not be killed in Jerusalem, the devil was preparing more than 40 persons to kill him. The Lord Christ is watching over His church; and the devil as well would never cease to oppose her. It is strange how evil join forces; how, as many as 40 persons would come to agree in one spirit to have someone killed, in the city of Jerusalem that they called ‘the city of God’, the city that was supposed to embrace righteousness became a dwelling place of evil and murder.

They walked in the spirit of their father the devil, the murderer from the beginning, demonstrating an amazing zeal to realize their father's will:

1-They did not stop at thinking and planning, but they hastened to act.

2-They planned together in the spirit of unity and mutual work.

3-They disregarded the care of God, vowing not to eat or drink until they would realize their conspiracy, without taking into consideration the factor of God's probable intervention.

4-They disregarded their souls and bodies, to realize their plan, whatever its cost was, even if it was their own life.

5-They put an apparently religious image over their conspiracy; as they came to meet the high priests and the elders, to inform them of their plot, not to seek their blessing or prayers, but, because they were sure of its success, they were seeking their future intervention with the authorities to spare them being arrested or tried.

6-They asked the high priests and the elders to partake of their evil, to lie to the commander and to deceive him, to bring Paul down to consummate their plot.

“They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, ‘We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul’” (Acts 23.14).

They may have secretly sent messengers on their behalf, lest their plot should be reveal.

❖ "Behold fasting the mother of murder! Just as Herod imposed on himself that necessity by his oath, so also do these. For such are the devil's (ways): under the pretext forsooth of piety he sets his traps" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you are going to make further inquiries concerning him, but we are ready to kill him before he comes near” (Acts 23.15).

They intended by killing Paul on his way to the assembly, to keep anyone from thinking that his killing was planned by the Sanhedrim.

5-EXPOSING THE CONSPIRACY

“And when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul” (Acts 23.16).

We have no clue, how the young man got to know about the ambush; but we know that God uses every possible way to disrupt the plans of the devil and his hosts. The wise Solomon says: “A bird of the air may carry your voice; and a bird in flight may tell the matter” (Eccl. 10.20). Some believe that a Pharisee member of the Sanhedrim, sympathizing with the apostle Paul, who was destroying the convictions of the Sadducees, secretly informed Paul's nephew. Some others believed that it probably

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 49.

was one of the young man's fellow students, who might have been a son or a relative of a member of the Sanhedrim, who told the young man, not for the sake of saving his uncle, but during a chat between two friends.

We do not know of any relative of the apostle Paul other than this nephew of his. We do not even know his name, or whether his mother dwelt in Jerusalem or not. But from our study of the epistles of the apostles, and in particular the last chapter of his epistle to the Romans, we feel that the family of Paul is the church as a whole, especially the ministers of the word. The church came to be his family, as he was a member in it, attached to everyone.

“Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, ‘Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him’” (Acts 23.17).

Having been admired and trusted by many of the leaders, we do not marvel that he sent for the centurion and asked him to take the young man to the commander. A centurion had a hundred soldiers under him, a centurion, and not a regular soldier, to be called by a prisoner in a prison; this is a grace from God.

“So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, ‘Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you’” (Acts 23.18).

The centurion did not hesitate to go himself to inform the commander that the prisoner Paul called him, speaking of Paul with respect.

“Then the commander took him by hand, went aside and asked him privately, ‘What is it that you have to tell me’” (Acts 23.19).

We stand amazed before the modesty of the centurion and his love of serving the prisoners with such a spirit of piety, and before the compassion of the commander who did not despise the young man, but took him by hand as a friend or as a father with his son, and asked him what he had to tell him.

We should not as well disregard the personality of that young man, who must have had on his face, the features of inner peace, together with the exalted care of God, that made him go to the barracks, meet his uncle to tell him about the conspiracy in secret, and to be taken by the centurion to the commander to speak to him, things that are difficult to happen under such circumstances.

“And he said, ‘The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat or drink till they have killed him; and now they are waiting for the promise from you’” (Acts 23.20-21).

He was probably a disciple of one of the Jewish rabbis, and he heard whispers about that issue. Then, he made sure of that fact.

6-SENDING PAUL TO CAESAREA

“So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, ‘Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me’ And he called for two centurions, saying, ‘Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night’ (Acts 23.22-23).

Having been informed of the conspiracy, the commander decided to send St. Paul under strong escort to the governor in the capital, away from the Jewish leaderships in Jerusalem. The procession moved at the third hour of the night (9 o’clock PM). He acted thus to save the life of Paul, because he was a Roman citizen.

The two centurions with their 200 soldiers, seventy horsemen, and 200 spearmen, marched in a procession to protect Paul on his way out of Jerusalem to the governor at Caesarea. That awesome procession (dexiobolous in Greek) was meant to impress the conspirators, and let them have no hope of ever reaching the prisoner, however their zeal might have been.

“And provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor” (Acts 23.24).

The word ‘mounts’ (Kteenee) refers to a horse, a camel, or a donkey; the latter being the most used in Judea at that time. It is obvious that St. Paul was respectfully treated, as he was not put in a cart for prisoners, or made to walk on his feet, but was provided with mounts to reach Caesarea safely and comfortably. The distance between Jerusalem and Caesarea was about 60 miles.

Felix the governor: Whose name was Anthony Felix, a slave released from servitude by Antonia, mother of Emperor Claudius, was so very beloved by Claudius, that he set him a governor on Judea. Eusebius called him ‘Claudius Felix’. He successively married three women from the royal family, one of them was Drusilla, referred to later in Acts 24.24. Tacitus said about him that he reigned with the authority of a king, and with the meanness and arrogance of a slave¹. According to Clark, he was an unjust governor, evil, mean, and greedy.

Undoubtedly, the commander knew much about Felix the governor and his meanness. However, he realized that if Paul fell into the hands of Felix it would be better than to fall in the hands of the chief priest and the Sanhedrim. The commander may have also feared that Paul would be killed, so he would have been accused of being negligent or of taking a bribe to let a Roman citizen be killed.

7-A LETTER TO GOVERNOR FELIX

“He wrote a letter in the following manner: Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him worthy of death or chains. And when it

¹ History v. 9.

was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell” (Acts 23.25-30).

8-PAUL ARRIVES TO CAESAREA

“Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris” (Acts 23.31).

Antipatris: a city between 35 and 40 miles far from Jerusalem, and according to Josephus, about 17 miles from Jaffa. It was formerly called ‘Kafr Saba’, about 26 miles far from Caesarea. Herod the Great changed its name to Antipatris, in honor to his father Antpater. It lies in a fertile plain and had many springs.

- ❖ "Like some king whom his body-guards escort, so did these convey Paul; in such numbers too, and by night, for fear of the wrath of the people"¹. Arriving like this in such a great military procession, made of Paul in Caesarea, a famous character.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ "The soldiers also made Paul famous in Caesarea, his coming with so large a force"².

“The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, I will hear you when your accusers also have come’, And he commanded him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium” (Acts 23.32-35).

As Cilicia was a Roman colony, the Roman governor could investigate the case without consulting a local counterpart. When Jesus appeared before Pilate Pontus, he sent him to Herod Antipas who was the governor of Galilee, as Jesus was a Galilean. But in the case of Paul, there was no need for consulting a governor from outside of Caesarea.

Felix kept Paul in a prison at Herod’s palace, where Herod prepared a hall for justice, with a joining prison.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 23

STRIKES ON THE MOUTH OR HOLY KISSES

- ❖ Having uttered the truth,
Your apostle was worthy of kisses from Your divine mouth.
Yet, he was also struck by the wicked.
The daily kisses of Your mouth absorb all my being,
And make me ignore all the strikes of the wicked.
- ❖ Boldly, Your apostle told the Hypocrite high priest off;
He counted him as a whitewashed wall that covers corruption.
He was not ashamed of disregarding him as a chief priest,
Because he is corrupt and a corruptor of the truth.
- ❖ Let the world uproar against us,
But keep Your care with us,
You are the Comforter and Protector of Your ministers.
- ❖ Let the world persist on getting rid of us,
With Your grace, You turn their evil into edification for us.
You scatter the counsel of the wicked.
You expose their hidden secrets.
Let them plan as much as they want.
Our life is in Your hands, and not in theirs.
We are borne on the eternal arms.
You will definitely realize Your mission through us, O Savior of the world.

CHAPTER 24

TRYING ST. PAUL BEFORE GOVERNOR FELIX

It was a bitter surprise to the conspirators, as well as to the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrim, when the high priest asked the Roman commander Lysias to bring Paul to be tried before the Sanhedrim, and Lo, the commander shook his shoulder, saying: 'The case is moved to Felix the governor at Caesarea. Paul is now before the governor.'

Their plan to kill him on the way had failed.

1- Tertullus presenting his accusation against Paul	1 – 9
2- Paul's defense.	10 - 21
3- Felix adjourning the proceedings.	22 - 23
4- Paul's sermon before the governor and his wife	24 - 26.
5- Felix is fired.	27.

1- TERTELLUS PRESENTING HIS ACCUSATIONS AGAINST PAUL

Having sent St. Paul to Felix the governor at Caesarea, the civil capital at that time, he most probably told the high priest and the religious leaderships in Jerusalem, the opponents of St. Paul, to present their accusations at Caesarea.

“Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders and a certain orator named Tertullus. These gave evidence to the governor against Paul” (Acts 24.1).

So as not to lose any more time, the high priest and the elders followed the apostle Paul, taking with them an orator named Tertullus to give the accusations against Paul at Caesarea. As we notice, the Jewish leaderships had no business of more priority than opposing Jesus' name, and getting rid of every preacher of His name.

Their hatred and prejudice was so great that the high priest himself left the temple, Jerusalem the city of God, and all the commitments of his job, to go himself to Caesarea to present the accusations against the apostle Paul. He forgot his dignity as the high priest, according to Malachi: “You have departed from the way; ... Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people” (Mal. 2.8-9).

The high priest and a delegation representing the assembly of the Sanhedrim, to go to Caesarea, was intended as pressure on the governor; that the matter before him was serious, touching the interests of the entire Jewish nation.

It seems that the high priest and the elders felt so inferior in their own sight, and unable to present their accusations against the apostle Paul, that they took with them the orator named Tertullus.

Their coming down, after only five days, reveals their haste to get this business behind them. Most probably, Lysias the commander did not contact them directly after sending Paul to Caesarea, lest they should follow him and cause disturbance, but waited until the procession arrived to the capital. Besides, the high priest discussed with the priests and the elders, whom to take with them to present the case.

Tertullus: A Roman name, most probably a Roman attorney hired by the Sanhedrim to help them, as they were ignorant to a great extent of the Roman law, the Roman procedures of justice, and the Roman language.

“And when he was called upon, Tertullus began his accusation, saying Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your foresight, we accept it always and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness” (Acts 24.2-3).

Here, Tertullus speaks in the present pleural tense; either because he was a Jew, which is doubtful, or because he was speaking on behalf of those who hired him: the assembly of the Sanhedrim, the representative of the entire Jewish nation, on the religious side.

Tertullus began his address by words of flattery and hypocrisy, as Felix was well known for his violence, wickedness, and greed¹. although, because of this violence, security in the Jewish nation was established to a certain extent. He managed to arrest a group of robbers led by someone called ‘Eliazar’, whom he sent to Rome;² and that Egyptian false prophet, who led 4000 persons to the wilderness (Acts 21.38), and threatened the peace of Judea; and put an end to some riot that happened between the inhabitants of Caesarea and Syria³.

Tertullus considered getting rid of Paul as a good work, to be counted as an extension of the good achievements of Felix to the account of the Jewish nation, as Paul was, according to him, one of the creators of dissension who threaten the peace of the people.

“Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us” (Acts 24.4).

No one was ignorant of how much the high priest and the elders hated the Roman governor, as they considered him a yoke over their necks. Despite their hearts, filled with animosity towards the Romans, yet in their hatred of the name of Jesus, as they previously told Pilate, that they had no king except Caesar. Now they counted Felix as a good person who took care of their interests, for the sake of the realization of their goal; which is, getting rid of St. Paul.

That man whom they commended as a good man, and whom, in his presence, as well as in his absence, they thanked him for taking care of their interests, is described by the historian Josephus,⁴

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 20.162-5.

² Josephus. Antiq. 20.8.

³ Josephus. Jewish Wars. 2.13.2.

⁴ Josephus. Antiq. 20.8.5.

concerning the case of Jonathan the high priest, as unjust and violent; as well as by Tacitus¹ and Suetonius².

“For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24.5).

In the name of the high priest and the entire assembly of the Sanhedrim, Tertullus presented three serious accusations against the apostle Paul: The first concerning the general security of the state, being a creator of dissension among all the Jews; The second touches the integrity of the Jewish religion, as a defiler of the temple, and a breaker of the law; And the third, as being a ringleader of a new sect called the Nazarenes.

“A plague” that corrupts the ethics of others; He did not say that he carried the plague, but he himself was the plague, the same way the Christian faith and the Christians were always described.

“A creator of dissension”: They claimed that he proclaimed teachings against the Law of Moses, and the Jewish traditions and customs, something that causes dissension and disturbance among the Jews. The Greek word ‘prootostateen’ is a military term, as though Paul was the highest commander of the army of the sect of the Nazarenes. Some believe that the expression ‘creator of dissension’ is a concealed hint of a more serious accusation, that his deeds would also create dissension between the Jews and Rome, an accusation that does not apply at all to the apostle Paul, who often refers to his Roman citizenship.

“A sect”: ‘haireseos’ in Greek, meaning a ‘heresy’, meaning that they are diverted from faith.

So they turned the truth upside down: Paul, as a preacher of the gospel of Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, calls for submission to authority, and calls for keeping the law in the perfection of its spiritual concept, seeking love toward the enemies and opponents.

❖ "They thought this likely to tell as a reproach-" of the *Nazarenes*:" and by this also they seek to damage him-for Nazareth was a mean place. And, "***we have found him***," they say: see how maliciously they calumniate him: (**found him**), as if he had been always giving them the slip, and with difficulty they had succeeded in getting him: though he had been seven days in the Temple!"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law” (Acts 24.6).

This accusation, that he brought Greeks into the holy place (Acts 21.28), Paul denied and refuted (Acts 24.18).

¹ History 5.9.

² Life of Claudius. Ch 28.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

“But the commander Lysias came by, and with great violence took him out of our hands” (Acts 24.7).

They are accusing commander Lysias of using great violence against them; and if not for him, they would have judged Paul properly. They also thus turned the truth upside down, as they actually conspired to kill him without trial.

“Commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him” (Acts 24.8).

Some believe that the speech of Tertullus was much longer than that, and that St. Luke only included the broad lines or a summary of it.

“And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so” (Acts 24.9).

We do not know if their testimony was taken individually; or they just assented collectively.

2- PAUL’S DEFENSE

“Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: ‘Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself’ (Acts 24.10).

This is the third defense for the apostle Paul as they came in the Book of acts, and were characterized by the spirit of moderation and wisdom. In them, the promise of the Lord Christ was realized; that when they stand before kings and rulers for His sake, they would get then what to say.

The apostle Paul did not resort to words of commendation or flattery, the way the orator Tertullus did; but he presented a modest commendation to Felix the governor, as far as his experience of the Jewish nation is concerned, which would certainly lead to a just trial. Felix and Comanus were partners in the governance. Then, when the latter was fired because of his incompetence, Felix was left with the full authority. This happened seven years before the trial of the apostle Paul, a period long enough to give Felix a reasonable experience in the affairs of the Jewish nation, if compared to those of the governors before him¹. Because St. Paul was completely aware of the kind of person Felix was, he commended him with what was true, with no exaggeration or flattery.

A judge: came to mean a ‘magistrate’ who practices justice generally.

“I do the more cheerfully answer for myself”: This is the language of a daring man who does not fear death, who has complete confidence in his innocence, whatever the turn of the situation would be.

The apostle was not shaken by the words of the hired orator, or gave them any importance, but addressed the governor with due respect, showing signs of cheerfulness, rather than confusion or fear.

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 20.7.7.

- ❖ "This is not the language of flattery, his testifying to the judge's justice: no, the adulation was rather in that speech of the orator, "Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace." If so, then why are you seditious? What Paul sought was justice. "Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation," He says, "I do the more cheerfully answer for myself" Then also he enforces this by the length of time: that (he had been judge) "of many years" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship" (Acts 24.11).

Some believe that these twelve days since Paul went up to Jerusalem were:

- The first day he came to Jerusalem (Acts 21.15)
- The second day, he spent with the apostle James and others (Acts 21.18)
- Six days he spent to fulfill his vow (Acts 21.21-26).
- The ninth day (the seventh of his vow), when an uproar took place, and he was rescued by the commander Lysias (Acts 21.27-22.29).
- The tenth day, he stood before the Sanhedrim (Acts 22.30-23.10).
- The eleventh day, When a conspiracy to kill him was discovered, he was sent on the same evening to Caesarea.

The apostle Paul did not include the days he spent in prison, but only the days during which he could be accused of creating dissension in Jerusalem, as it was not possible to do that while he was in prison. So the twelve days since he went down to Jerusalem ended up to very little time during which he could do what they say.

The apostle clarified that he went down to Jerusalem to worship, not to create any dissension.

"And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone, nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city" (Acts 24.12).

How could Tertullus' accusation be true, that he created dissention, when he did not dispute with anyone, or incited a crowd, in the temple or in the city? He was in the temple fulfilling a vow, and keeping fellowship in worship with his people.

- ❖ "And the accusers indeed use the term "*a ringleader of a sect*" as if it were a case of fighting and insurrection; but see how mildly Paul here answers" ².

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me" (Acts 24.13).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

He bears all love, zeal, for the salvation of his “brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom. 9.1-3).

“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the god of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets” (Acts 24.14).

Concerning the second accusation by Tertellus, that he is the ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, he responded as follows:

1- If Tertellus mockingly called them “Nazarenes” to belittle them, the apostle Paul disregarded the title, and did not enter into a meaningless dispute.

2- The apostle did not deny his membership in what they called a sect, as he is proud of being referred to the Christians.

3- His reference to them is actually an extension of worship according to their fathers, whom he called “my fathers”. By entering into the temple, he proved his worship according to this thought.

4- What they called a sect believes in what came in the law and the prophets; and what he proclaims concerning the Lord Christ is a realization of the prophets.

5- The goal and hope of this group is the enjoyment of the resurrection from the dead (Acts 24.15).

6- What they call a sect or heresy is actually the ‘Way’, by which mankind crosses over to God, and enjoys fellowship with him.

7- The apostle clarified the definition of the Christian faith, by saying, ***“So I worship the God of my fathers, believing ...”*** (Acts 24.14); binding both the worship and the faith together.

“I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24.15).

Here he refers to the Pharisees as believers in the resurrection of the dead.

❖ "The accusers were separating him (as an alien), but he identifies himself with the Law, as one of themselves"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (Acts 24.16).

In humility, the apostle did not claim to be perfect, but he is walking along the way, always striving, examining his conscience both toward God and men. What preoccupies him is not proving his innocence before justice, but before God, who knows what lies within the conscience of man. He always seeks enlightenment, and strives to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.

“Now, after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation” (Acts 24.17).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

How could he be accused of creating dissension, when, for so many years he did not come up to Jerusalem; And then going up, he brought alms and offerings, because of the famine that came over the nation.

Some comment on St. Paul's journey to Jerusalem to bring alms and offerings to the saints there, saying that in Jerusalem, there were saints who sold all their possessions and brought their proceedings at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4.34-35), dedicating themselves to prayers, reading, and learning. It is clear from saying in another place: "Now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints" (Rom. 15.25), that, for the sake of them being saints, Paul comes to encounter with them personally, hoping that they would receive his gift, revealing how "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20.35).

- ❖ There were poor saints everywhere. And Paul intended to motivate the spirit of giving in the Romans, abundantly to all¹.

(The scholar Origen)

- ❖ The Gentiles, dedicating themselves completely to the ministry of God, not preoccupying themselves with the things of this world, present an example of good behavior before believers. So the apostle wants us to sympathize, be merciful, become committed to giving, and practice good works with a content heart, Because who seeks mercy from God is committed to be himself merciful, proving that he has a reason for his hope. If man is merciful, how more so would God be, who says: "Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5.7)².

(Ambrosiaster)

"In the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a multitude nor with tumult" (Acts 24.18).

- ❖ "Why then did you come up? What brought you here? To worship, he says; to do alms. This was not the act of a factious person"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"I say what the blessed Apostle Paul says in nearly all his Epistles; and he makes it a rule for the Churches of the Gentiles that, on the first day of the week, that is, on the Lord's day, contributions should be made by every one which should be sent up to Jerusalem for the relief of the saints, and that either by his own disciples, or by those whom they should themselves approve; and if it were thought fit, he would himself either send, or take what was collected. Also in the Acts of the Apostles, when speaking to the governor Felix, he says, "Now, after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation. In the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple". **Might he not**

¹ Commentary on Rom. 15.25.

² Commentary on Paul's Epistles (Rom 15.27).

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.

have distributed in some other part of the world, and in the infant Churches which he was training in his own faith, the gifts he had received from others? But he longed to give to the poor of the holy places who, abandoning their own little possessions for the sake of Christ, turned with their whole heart to the service of the Lord. It would take too long now if I purposed to repeat all the passages from the whole range of his Epistles in which he advocates and urges with all his heart that money be sent to Jerusalem and to the holy places for the faithful; not to gratify avarice, but to give relief; not to accumulate wealth, but to support the weakness of the poor body, and to stave off cold and hunger"¹.

(St. Jerome)

“They ought to have been here before you to object if they had anything against me” (Acts 24.19).

If I was accompanied by any non-Jew foreigner into the temple, they should have brought them to testify against me before you.

St. Athanasius the apostolic² used the phrases that came in the Book of Acts (Acts 24.18-19, 25.16) in his defense concerning fleeing before the followers of Arius, the heretic.

“Or else let those who are here themselves say if they found any wrongdoing in me while I stood before the council” (Acts 24.20).

A very daring request the apostle presents: that, if they have not brought any gentile to testify that I brought him into the temple, let them present any practical evidence of their accusations.

“Unless it is for this one statement which I cried out, standing among them, concerning the resurrection of the dead, I am being judged by you this day” (Acts 24.21).

The apostle St. Paul intended to draw their attention to the fact that he was being tried for only one thing, that he cried out before their council, for preaching the resurrection of the dead.

Why did the apostle refer to that? **St. John Chrysostom** says that whoever is preoccupied with the resurrection of the dead shall never create any dissension³.

¹ *Against Vigilantius*, 13.

² *Defense against the Arians*, 82.

³ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 50.*

3- FELIX ADJOURNING THE PROCEEDINGS

“And when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, ‘When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case’” (Acts 24.22).

Felix was aware of that Way: the faith in the Lord Christ, probably through his wife Drusilla (Acts 24.24). And having heard from both Tertullus and Paul, he commanded Paul to be kept in jail, until he investigates the case more, when commander Lysias comes.

Felix might have had knowledge about Christianity, more than the high priest and those with him have assumed. In Caesarea was found Cornelius the centurion, who accepted the faith together with his household on the hands of the apostle Peter. He may have probably got in contact with some Christians, and experienced their faithfulness, honesty, and good behavior.

The high priest and those who were with him were disappointed because they expected the governor to issue a sentence against Paul on the spot.

❖ "Observe on all occasions how the governors try to keep off from themselves the annoyance of the Jews, and are often compelled to act contrary to justice"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or to visit him” (Acts 24.23).

The apostle undoubtedly had many friends in Caesarea, who could serve him, come to him, and listen to him; yet, he had also as many opponents. So being put in prison was according to the divine will for his safety.

Some believe that Felix commanded Paul to be put in prison for the following reasons:

1- Although he knew for sure that the apostle was innocent, yet, in order to satisfy the Jewish leaderships, he put Paul in prison; although he did not convict him to death according to their wish.

2- He probably expected from the apostle’s friends who were not few, to give him a bribe to set him free.

3- He intended through meeting him and others, to investigate the issue more thoroughly.

4- PAUL’S SERMON BEFORE THE GOVERNOR AND HIS WIFE

“And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning faith in Christ” (Acts 24.24).

It is obvious that the governor admired the apostle Paul, as shown by giving him the liberty to meet his friends in prison, and by sending for him to hear him together with his wife on a familial level, to hear him concerning the Christian faith, about which he had some knowledge. He probably sent for

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 51.

him on his wife's request, who was curious to know something about that 'Way', from the apostle himself.

Drusilla: a Jewish lady, the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa, who was devoured by worms. Because she was married before, then forsook her husband to live with Felix as an unlawful wife; she was considered by the Jews as an adulteress. She was more preoccupied with acquiring intellectual knowledge than with the enjoyment of a holy life of faith. She was said to have been engaged to Epiphanus the son of King Antichus, if he consented to be circumcised, then annulled the engagement when he declined. Then her brother, the younger Agrippa gave her in marriage to Isis the king of Amisa, who consented to be circumcised. But when Felix the governor of Judea saw her, he fell in love with her, and sent to her Simon, his friend, a Cyprian Jew, who pretended to be a magician, to make her forsake her husband to live with Felix without marriage, contrary to the laws of her fathers, to avoid the envy of her sister Bernisky, who treated her badly because of her beauty. Some believe that Felix hoped that the prisoner would soothe Drusilla, and would put her heart at ease, concerning her life with Felix¹.

“Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, ‘Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you’ (Acts 24.25).

The apostle did not flatter the governor Felix and his illegal wife, but strongly testified to the gospel of Christ, and talked about righteousness, chastity, and the judgment to come. The governor was terrified, and could hear no more. His conscience hurt him, and he probably was apprehensive, lest his talk should influence Drusilla, and lead her to repent and forsake him.

What a big difference between the prison keeper in Philippi, who asked: “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16.31) and the terrified Felix, who, instead of seeking salvation, said: ***“Go away for now, when I have a convenient time, I will call for you”*** (Acts 24.25). He was so absorbed in his pleasures and lust, and did not have time for the salvation of his soul.

It was strange that Drusilla was not terrified by the speech of the apostle Paul. Some believe that, being a Jew, she assumed that, by offering sacrifices, and practicing some rites, she could attain forgiveness for the sin she lived in. Her mind, heart, and conscience were so blunt, to be affected by any words of righteousness, chastity, and the judgment to come.

St. Augustine believes that the speech of the apostle concerning the righteousness and chastity included three things: Refraining from doing evil, doing good, and hoping for the everlasting reward².

❖ "Observe how Paul immediately discourses not only about faith, nor about remission of sins, but also about practical points of duty"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 20.7.1-2.

² Sermons on N.T. Lessons, 58.2.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 51.

St. John Chrysostom compares between St. Paul, who, although in chains, yet he seemed as someone of inner authority; and Felix, who, although a governor and a judge, yet he bore no features of leadership before his prisoner. A true believer would never be terrified by others, whatever their authority is, but would himself, bear authority and awe.

❖ "Let us not therefore think it a great thing, if men fear us. For, in the first place, **no man indeed is frightened at us**: and, secondly, it is no great thing (if they were).

Virtue is a great good: and see how great. ...

Do you think yourself O man, because you are in power? And what sort of power? Say, was it conferred by appointment? (If so,) of men you have received power: appoint yourself to it from within.

For the ruler is not he who is so called, but he who is really so. For as a king could not make a physician or an orator, so neither can he make a ruler: since it is not the (imperial) letters nor the name that makes a ruler.

Let any man build a medicine-shop, let him also have pupils, let him have instruments too and drugs, and let him visit those who are sick: are these things sufficient to make a physician? By no means: but there is need of art, and without that, not only do these things profit nothing, but they even hurt: since it were better that he who is not a physician should not even possess medicines. He that possesses them not, neither saves nor destroys: but he that possesses them, destroys, if he knows not how to use them: since the healing power is not only in the nature of the medicines, but also in the art of the person applying them.

Such also is the ruler: he has for instruments, his voice, anger, executioners, banishments, honors, gifts, and praises; he has also for medicines. The law; has also for his patients, men; for a place to practise in, the court of justice; for pupils, he has the soldiers: if then he does not know the science of healing, all these profit him nothing. The judge is a physician of souls, not of bodies: but if this art of healing the bodies needs so much care, much more that of healing the soul, since the soul is of more importance than the body.

Then not the mere having the name of ruler is to be a ruler: ... **Those are rulers, who bear rule over themselves.**

For there are these four things, soul, family; city, world: and the things form a regular progression.

He therefore that is to superintend a family, and order it well, must first bring his own soul into order; for it is his family: but if he cannot order his own family, where there is but one soul, where he himself is master, where he is always along with himself, how shall he order others?

He that is able to regulate his own soul, and makes the one part to rule, the other to be subject, this man will be able to regulate a family also: but he that can do this by a family, can do it by a city also: and if by a city, then also by the world"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ “I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts. I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings; and will not be ashamed” (Ps. 119.45-46). He says he would do that even before horrible kings, would talk to them with great certainty. ... In the certainty of righteousness, the great Elijah accused Ahab of being evil (1 Kings 18); so also did the inspired Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar: “Therefore, O King; Let my council be acceptable to you; Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor” (Dan. 4.27). So also did the inspired Paul when he addressed Agrippa, Festos, and Felix (Acts 24-26). Martyrs have so challenged the evil kings².

(Father Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus)

“Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him often, and conversed with him” (Acts 24.26).

Although he got terrified by the speech of St. Paul, the love of money and of vain glory have corrupted his life; therefore he sent often for the apostle Paul, in the hope that he would give him some money to release him. Although the governor was convinced of the innocence of the apostle, and of his right to be released; And although the bribe was a crime according to the Roman law; yet he could not help that point of weakness.

Many of the Roman rulers considered their positions as a source of huge riches, on the expense of justice.

5- FELIX IS FIRED

“But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound” (Acts 24.27).

Paul preferred to remain in prison for two years than to pay a bribe to be released. The historian Josephus says that, because Felix had no popularity, he intended to do the Jews a favor by leaving Paul bound, hoping that they would not complain against him to the emperor, after he leaves his position.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

² Comment. On Ps. 119, article 24.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 24

A PRISONER WITH AUTHORITY

- ❖ St. Paul has acquired You,
To become a king with authority,
Having carried You in him O the King of kings.
- ❖ When he entered into the temple to fulfill a vow,
The multitudes were shaken, and feared him.
Although he was bound as a prisoner, he daringly addressed the multitudes.
Because of him, the council of the Sanhedrim was disturbed;
Dissension and disputes happened between them.
- ❖ He was taken to Caesarea,
The high priest felt that his throne is shaken;
And the council of the Sanhedrim felt that their authority collapsed.
- ❖ To confront Paul, the helpless prisoner,
The council hired an outspoken Roman orator,
With the hope to overcome the authority of Paul.
- ❖ The high priest and his men used every possibility,
To shake the posture of Your apostle Paul.
On the tongue of the orator, they used words of flattery to the unjust governor,
Hoping to draw from his mouth a word of conviction against Paul.
They accused Paul of serious crimes;
Yet Paul kept his inner peace.
With authority and courage, he did not flatter the governor;
He gave him his due of dignity,
Yet no word of flattery came out of his mouth.
- ❖ Paul captivated the heart of the wicked Felix.
He brought to him his unlawful wife, hoping that he would pacify her conscience;
But Felix himself got terrified by his words of grace.
I wonder, who of them is the governor, and who is the prisoner?
Felix the governor is terrified before the prisoner!
Felix, for he is actually a prisoner of sin and evil.
He could not stand before the righteousness of Christ in Paul.
Paul was a prisoner bound in chains,

Yet he talked to the governor like someone with authority.
He did not justify for him his unlawful marriage,
Or paid him a bribe to be released.
The prison and the chains have not corrupted his inner freedom.
What a prisoner with authority!

CHAPTER 25

PAUL APPEALING TO CAESAR

The apostle Paul spent two years in prison with no trial, as a favor to the Jews. The relationship between the Jewish leaderships and Felix the Roman governor was characterized by so many troubles, that he tried hard to please them, even after he was removed from his job. And now Festos came to replace him; and he probably marveled why someone could be kept in prison all that time without trial.

1- Festos in Jerusalem	1 – 5
2- Paul defending himself in Caesarea	6 – 9
3- Paul appealing to Caesar	10 – 12
4- Consulting king Agrippa	13 – 22
5- Paul before a great gathering	23 – 27

1- FESTOS IN JERUSALEM

“And when Festos had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem” (Acts 25.1).

Procius Festus was a governor, more appreciated than Felix, and of more justice and vitality. But Palestine in those days was a place of much disturbance and troubles; and Festos died on the job before he could do any thing to make it more secure.

He came first to Caesarea, the capital of the state; And as Jerusalem was the religious capital, he made his first visit to it, after only three days of his arrival to Caesarea, as to form a better relationship with the religious leaderships who were under him, and in order to get acquainted with the affairs of the state from the religious aspect.

“Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul, and they petitioned him” (Acts 25.2).

There was nothing to preoccupy the hearts and minds of the Jewish leaderships, and no subject to talk to the new governor about, except getting rid of St. Paul. Although Paul was in prison for the last two years, yet their hatred toward him was still at its peak.

The high priest at that time was Ismael, the son of Fabi, who was appointed by King Agrippa,¹ but some believe it was still Ananias.

“Asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem – while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him” (Acts 25.3).

¹ Josephus. Antiq. 20.8.8.

We did not hear that Paul ever petitioned the governor to release him, or sent to him anyone on his behalf.

They made use of Festos' ignorance of those things, to apply pressure on him, to do them favor, by summoning Paul to Jerusalem to be tried at the location where he is supposed to have committed his crimes, while they intended to kill him on his way before reaching Jerusalem. That must have been through a motivation by the forty Jews who vowed to kill him.

They asked him for a favor, which is usually asked for the benefit of the one accused, but here it is sought against him.

“But Festos answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly” (Acts 25.4).

The new governor found no cause to send the prisoner to be tried by the Sanhedrim, yet he commanded him to be well guarded, and said that he was going shortly to Caesarea to take over that trial himself. He probably rejected their petition when he realized that he is a Roman citizen, and so he was not to be tried by the Jewish Sanhedrim, but by the Roman governor himself, who is responsible for the life of the Romans.

He promised them to do this job as soon as possible to please them; and he probably sought the trial to be held in the capital of the state, as respect to Justice there. He told them that they would rather send those who have authority among them to Caesarea, where he was ready to listen to all. He probably feared of the possibility of disturbances during the trial in Jerusalem, that could not be controlled while he was away from Jerusalem.

“Therefore”, he said, “let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him” (Acts 25.5).

He clarified that his rejection of their request is not a defense of Paul; He sought from them to prove his guilt, and he would then punish him.

2- PAUL DEFENDING HIMSELF IN CAESAREA

“And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought” (Acts 25.6).

The next day of his arrival to Caesarea, he had nothing to preoccupy his mind, after an experience of ten days in Jerusalem, except to start his governorship by taking care of this business. On another aspect, the Jewish leaderships did not give him a chance to postpone it, having followed him on the same day of his arrival. Therefore, he held a session on the next day.

The governor sat on the judgment seat to try a case that touched the security of the state, and commanded Paul to be brought to defend himself.

“And when he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove” (Acts 25.7).

They stood about, which indicates that they were not few, intending by their number to apply pressure over the governor, that the case has its importance to Jerusalem, and also to terrify the accused prisoner, Paul. Yet “they were like bees; they were quenched like a fire of thorns” (Ps. 118:12). According to **St. John Chrysostom**, All the chains were broken through hope in God; they were as though bees, swarming, to finish him up, but they failed to reach their goal. As you see, the name of God is a mighty weapon, and a support that could not be opposed, that overcame them all¹.

And **Father Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus**, says about himself that they hoped to overcome him with great ease, like igniting fire in thorns, but in the name of the Lord he avenged them. His hope prevailed over their hope. He sought the Lord against them, by whom He had conquest².

As they did with Felix, they presented a list of very serious accusations against Paul, nothing of which they could prove (Acts 24:5-19).

“While he answered for himself, ‘Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar, have I offended in anything at all’ (Acts 25:8).

He probably gave the same answer he previously gave to Governor Felix (Acts 24:10-21) on the same accusations.

1- He did not violate the Mosaic Law, or spread teachings contrary to the law, for faith does not annul the law but consummates it. Preaching Christ realized the goal of

The law, and spiritually consummated it.

2- He did not violate the sanctity of the temple, or the worship or ministry in it, for preaching the gospel realizes the enjoyment of the temple of the heart, which

Solomon’s temple symbolizes.

3- He did not do any thing wrong against Caesar or the government, but he actually exhorted the believers to submit to authorities.

“But Festos, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, ‘Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?’” (Acts 25:9).

Lacking the experience of the Jewish affairs, Festos intended to do the Jews a favor, so he asked Paul, if he was willing to be tried before him in Jerusalem, where his crimes were allegedly committed. That was not a command by the governor, but was a suggestion, which the governor hoped Paul would accept.

3- PAUL APPEALING TO CAESAR

“Then Paul said, ‘I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know’” (Acts 25:10).

¹ On Ps. 118.

² Commentary on Ps. 118. (6).

Paul rejected the suggestion, for he knew that the Jews would certainly find a way to kill him, as they already planned to. He did not want to place his life in the hands of those who hated him.

He, as a Roman citizen, ought to be tried before the Roman governor at the capital of the state, where it is done in Caesar's name, and under his authority, by his men or deputies.

“For if I am an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying; But if there is nothing to these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar” (Acts 25.11).

The apostle proclaims that he would not try to escape justice, or the application of the law. If he deserved death, he would not object to dying; he would cheerfully submit to his punishment. And courageously, he appealed to Caesar.

❖ "Here now he reproved him, that he too wished to sacrifice him to the Jews: then, on the other hand, he relaxes (the sternness of) his speech: "If, ***I am an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying***". I utter sentence against myself. For along with boldness of speech there must be also justness of cause, so as to abash (the hearer). "***But if there is nothing to these things of which these men accuse me , no one***" however he may wish it-"no man may sacrifice me to please them." He said, not, I am not worthy of death, nor, I am worthy to be acquitted, but, I am ready to take my trial before Caesar. At the same time too, remembering the dream, he was the more confident to appeal. And he did not say, you cannot, but, 'No one can sacrifice me', that it might be no affront to him"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

Paul "appealed" to Caesar: A Roman legal term that implies putting the case on hold, and moving it to Caesar himself, which is equivalent to resorting to the 'Supreme Court' in this country. That right was reserved for the Roman citizens, to protect them against the injustice of non-Roman rulers.

“Then Festos, when he had conferred with the council, answered, ‘You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you shall go’” (Acts 25.12).

Festos conferred with a legal council, for he was confused; on one aspect, he had nothing to write to Caesar concerning a specific charge; there was no evidence of any crime against the state, nor against anybody, committed by Paul, that warrants punishment. And if he had left him to the Jews, they would have certainly killed him, a Roman citizen, for whom he was responsible to protect. And on another aspect, the apostle Paul refuses to be tried by the Jews, who have already condemned him to death. And when Agrippa the second, king of the province of Chalcis, came, Festos found a chance to use his experience in the affairs of the Jews and Christians. The king welcomed this and sought to listen to Paul.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 51.

- ❖ "Then let us not think that ill designs against us are a grievous thing. So long as we do not make ill designs against ourselves, **no one will be able to have ill designs against us**: or rather, people may do this, but they do us no hurt; nay, even benefit us in the highest degree: for it rests with ourselves, whether we shall suffer evil, or not suffer evil. Lo! I testify, and proclaim with a loud voice, more piercing even than the sound of a trumpet-and were it possible to ascend on high and cry aloud, I would not shrink from doing it-him that is a Christian, none of all the human beings that inhabit the earth will have power to hurt. And why do I say, human beings? Not even the Evil Spirit himself, the tyrant, the Devil, can do this, unless the man injure himself; be what it may that any one works, in vain he works it. For even as no human being could hurt an angel, if he were on earth, so neither can one human being hurt another human being. But neither again will he himself be able to hurt another, so long as he is good"¹.
- ❖ "For in no other way do we hurt ourselves, than by hurting another, and our greatest sins become such from our doing injury to ourselves. So I that for this reason also the Christian cannot be hurt, namely, because neither can he hurt"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

By such a decision, the governor could relieve himself of the pressure of the Jews, who deeply hated him, if he chose to release Paul, and could have thwarted any possibility of disturbance. At the same time, as Paul, being a Roman citizen, appealed to Caesar, no governor could afford to break the law.

4- CONSULTING KING AGRIPPA

“And after some days, King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festos” (Acts 25.13).

They came to congratulate Festos for becoming a governor of Judea.

King Agrippa: His mother was Cypros³. He is the son of Herod, whose title was Agrippa, who killed the apostle James, and intended to kill the rest of the apostles; he was devoured by the worms. He was the grandson of the Great Herod, who ordered the massacre of the children of Bethlehem at the time of the Lord Christ's birth, when the Magi (the wise men) came to bring the infant Jesus their presents. The historian eusebius called this king ‘Agrippa Junior’, who was appointed by Emperor Claudius, as king over Chalis and Trachonitis, mentioned in (Luke 31.1). When his father died, he was in Rome in Emperor Claudius' company, who had the intention to hand him all the authority of his father; but his council advised him not to do that, on the ground that it is not wise to give such a huge kingdom to an inexperienced young man.

¹ *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 51.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 51.*

³ *Josephus. Jewish Wars. 2.11.6.*

Lightfoot tells that, according to Jewish authors, this king Agrippa, at the end of the year of the liberation of slaves, as the law was read, stating that the children of Israel may not set a foreigner a king over them, who is not their brother, he cried, not having been a descendent of Israel. When the congregation saw tears running over his cheeks, they cried out, saying, ‘Be of good cheer, O king Agrippa, You are our brother’, having been a Jew by religion, although of a foreign race.

Bernice: She was the king’s sister, a widow. After the death of her father Herod, she attached herself to her brother, who assumed that he would be more famous through her. For a while, and for the second time, she married Polemon, king of Pontes and a part of Cilicia, then got divorced, to go back to her brother Agrippa. The historian Josephus accused her of having a shameful carnal relationship with her own brother Agrippa¹.

“When they had been there many days, Festos laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, ‘There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix’ ’About whom the chief priest and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him’” (Acts 25.14-15).

Being a Roman, with little knowledge of what was going on among the Jewish religious circles, he listened to the members of the Sanhedrim, and was deceived by their religious positions, and by their appearance of Piety, assuming that they were honest in their accusations against Paul. But Agrippa, being himself a Jew, was aware of that atmosphere of hypocrisy, envy, and hatred.

“To them I answered, ‘It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction, before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has the opportunity to answer for himself, concerning the charge against him’” (Acts 25.16).

It seems that Festos was almost convinced with what the Sanhedrim claimed; but he could not condemn Paul to death without a trial. Appian, in his *Roman History*, says that it is not the custom of the Romans to convict somebody before he answers for himself². and in Tacitus's history, it is said that the defense attorney never banned from presenting every thing possible to prove the innocence of the accused³. the entire world testified to the justice of the Roman law.

“Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed” (Acts 25.17-18).

That was not expected by Festos, who was almost swayed by the violent attitude of the Sanhedrim. He wondered how Felix chose to leave Paul in prison two years without a crime he has committed.

¹ Josephus. *Antiq.* 20.7.3.

² Philo. *De Praesi. Rom.*

³ *History*, 2.

“But had some questions against him about their own religion and about one Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive” (Acts 25.19).

As Festos most probably did not believe that Jesus has risen, and expected Agrippa to join him in this view, he so mockingly spoke of Jesus. That issue of resurrection of the dead was rejected by the majority of philosophers and statesmen.

“And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and their be judged concerning the matters” (Acts 25.20).

Although Festos did not intend to commit Paul to go to Jerusalem to be judged before the Sanhedrim there, yet he hoped Paul would voluntarily consent to do that, which reveals his doubts about Paul’s innocence from the religious side, beside that he probably wished to get away from that issue altogether.

“But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar” (Acts 25.21).

Augustus or Caesar those days was Nero. The expression Augustus Sebastos was a reference to greatness and dignity, a title that was first used by Caesar Octavianus, who was an emperor during the days the Lord Christ was born. The title Augustus Caesar continued to be used for the emperors who followed him.

“Then Agrippa said to Festos, ‘I also would like to hear the man myself’. ‘Tomorrow’, he said, ‘You shall hear him’.” (Acts 25.22).

King Agrippa revealed his longing to hear the apostle Paul, probably to satisfy his curiosity, having heard much about him, his preaching about Jesus, the crucified and risen from the dead, as well as about the Christians.

“So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festos’ command Paul was brought in” (Acts 25.23).

Because King Agrippa probably found in that an opportunity to parade his glory, he entered the hall of justice with such a great pomp. That procession actually did not get him any true glory or special dignity; as amid that glorified outer appearance, many of those present were aware of his sinful relationship with Bernice, and were wondering with sarcasm, how the king can marry his own sister!

In the same city where the worms have eaten up their father, when he believed the flattery of the people and counted himself as god, his son and daughter came with their corrupted life, to receive glory from the people.

“The commanders”, (chiliarchs in Greek), means leaders of a thousand, referring to the highest military ranks.

The apostle Paul actually found in it a marvelous opportunity to testify to the Lord Christ before such a great assembly, attended by a king, a governor, commanders, statesmen, and dignitaries of Caesarea the political capital of the country.

The prisoner Paul stood as a preacher, calling all to enjoy the divine light, as though he was giving a sermon to some catechumen to prepare them for the Christian faith. When the governor tried to refer that Paul was mad and beside himself, Paul courageously responded to him. And when the king tried to confront the arrow that the apostle struck in his heart, Paul answered that he prays to God that he would share with him what he enjoys, except for the chains on his hands.

❖ "See what an audience is gathered together for Paul. Having collected all his guards, the governor is come, and the king, and the tribunes, "with the principal men," it says, "of the city." Then Paul being brought forth. See how he is proclaimed as conqueror"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

5- PAUL BEFORE A GREAT GATHERING

“And Festos said, ‘King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, You see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer’ (Acts 25.24).

Matthew Henry wondered how Bernice felt, when Festos addressed the king, her unlawful husband, and the men present, using the term ‘men’ in a way distinguishing them from women!

“But when I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him” (Acts 25.25).

This statement condemns Festos himself; if he confesses his belief in his innocence, why had he not released him?

“I have nothing certain to write to my Lord concerning him. Therefore I brought him out before you, and especially before you, king Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place, I may have something to write” (Acts 25.26).

There was no crime St. Paul has committed, that was to be punished by the Roman law.

Few years before that time, neither Augustus nor Tiberius, would have consented to be called by anyone as ‘Lord’, as though he was a master dealing with his slaves, but then, it became as one of the imperial titles to address the emperor.

“For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him” (Acts 25.27).

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

Festos admitted that he finds it unreasonable to send a prisoner to the emperor without sending with him the sheet of accusations against him. Yet he did not admit that it is unreasonable to leave a righteous man in prison. He feared Nero, not God!

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 25

TWO PROCESSIONS TO THE GATHERING

- ❖ Your apostle remained two years in prison,
But the word of God in his mouth and on his tongue could never be chained.
The high priest and the Sanhedrim remained in consistent agitation!
They would not have rest, as long as Your ministers worked,
Even when they were in chains.
- ❖ Nothing of the affairs of their country preoccupied them,
Except to get rid of the apostle Paul.
They applied pressure on Festos since the first day he was appointed a governor.
As for Paul, he quietly appealed to Caesar,
In order to testify to You in Rome.
- ❖ King Agrippa and his sister, and unlawful wife, Bernice, longed to hear the apostle.
- ❖ Festos arranged for them a great gathering at Caesarea.
Where the worms had previously devoured their father alive,
The son and the daughter entered with a great pomp.
They entered in a magnificent procession.
Yet the corruption of their life, and the unlawfulness of their relationship,
Could never be amended by the processions of the entire world!
- ❖ The prisoner Paul, on the other hand, also entered,
Surrounded by the procession of purity and holiness,
While the heavenly creatures praised the work of God in him.
- ❖ Two processions: One of them seen, but would soon be dismissed,
And another procession, although unseen, yet bears a song,
A praise to the Lamb of God, who works in the life of His believers.

CHAPTER 26

PAUL'S FIFTH DEFENSE

The Apostle Paul presented five defenses for himself, which, in their essence, were not as such, but preaching and testimony to the gospel of Christ. His defense did not bear some kind of fear or worry of sufferings, even of death. It did not either bear hatred against his opponents; but he found it an opportunity to express his desire for the salvation of the entire world, especially of his opponents.

On the other hand, the Lord Christ confirmed the right of a Christian to defend himself, when he admonished the one who struck him during his trial, saying: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike me" (John 18.23)? At the same time, he was on his way to be crucified even for the sake of him who struck Him.

The first defense: by the apostle Paul was on the top of the flight of stairs, on his way with the commander of the garrison to the fort to be tried (Acts 22.1-21).

The second defense: was before the multitudes in the presence of the commander (Acts 23.1).

The third defense: Before governor Felix, in response to the accusations presented by the orator Tertellus in the name of the Sanhedrim (Acts 24.10-21).

The fourth defense: Before governor Festos at the beginning of his governorship (25-28).

The fifth defense: Now, in that great gathering in the presence of King Agrippa, Festos, and the prominent men of the state.

1- Given the permission to speak for himself	1
2- A zealous Jew	2 – 8
3- Opposing the name of Jesus	9 – 11
4- Jesus appearing to him	12 – 15
5- A divine call to preach	16 – 18
6- Repentance as the theme of his preaching	19 – 23
7- Accusing Paul of madness	24 – 27
8- His impression on the king	28 – 29
9- The gathering is dismissed	30 – 33

1- GIVEN THE PERMISSION TO SPEAK FOR HIMSELF

"Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You are permitted to speak for yourself'. So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself" (Acts 26.1).

Because Agrippa was the most dignified of those present, being called a king, although he had no authority over Festos, yet of older age, he opened the session of justice. He therefore gave the permission to Paul to speak for himself. He was given the permission to defend himself, something he

was denied by the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrim. It even happened that, when he tried to defend himself, the high priest instructed those around him to strike him on his mouth (Acts 23.2).

Paul did not begin speaking before he got the permission from the king. He did not ask for an attorney to defend him; but, with the spirit of power, he stretched his hands, a reference that fear had no place in him, but as though he was completely free.

Although Paul appealed to Caesar, when the king permitted him to speak, he did not say, 'I shall not speak except before Caesar', as he found it an opportunity to testify to the gospel of Christ before that gathering, beside practicing his gospel through submitting to those of authority in the spirit of obedience and submission in the Lord.

Some see in stretching his hands bound by the two chains, a jest of greeting to the king, beside being a sign used by speakers when addressing the multitudes. While he was addressing the king, he was confirming that he was also addressing all those present, and was seeking their attention to his words.

Having presented his defense, he did not expect to be released, as he has appealed to Caesar, beside the fact that he was longing to go to Rome to testify to the gospel of Christ there. He knew for sure that that gathering was intended to find something for Festos to write on the sheet of his accusation, to send to Rome. St. Paul, on the other hand, was only preoccupied with preaching.

2- A ZEALOUS JEW

“I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews” (Acts 26.2).

The apostle expressed his gratitude that the king permitted him to speak for himself before him, especially that the king was an expert in the Jewish ways of thinking and Jewish customs, although he was appointed by the Jews, and was a pro-Roman.

St. Paul, although a man of suffering, his life tends toward the joy of the Spirit. Feeling the hand of God always working in his life, here he proclaims his happiness to speak for himself before the king. It is a gift from God to testify and preach the gospel of Christ. He bore a joyful look to all events, even if he was unjustly bound by chains and put in prison. And as he wrote to the Philippians: “I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel; so that it became evident to all, ... that my chains are in Christ” (Phil. 1.12-13).

“Especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently” (Acts 26.3).

In his defense on previous occasions before Roman governors, who had no true knowledge of the Jewish customs and thoughts, they were not preoccupied with listening to his case, or were incapable of realizing what is beyond the violent stand of the Jews against him.

But Agrippa was a serious scholar in the Old Testament and its prophecies, beside the Jewish customs and traditions. As he accepted the Jewish belief, he was more capable than other rulers, of realizing that Jesus was the anticipated Messiah.

“The questions which have to do with the Jews”: the topics of discussions that took place between the different sects of the Jews, especially between the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes.

After giving him his due respect as a king and commending him as a unique scholar among the rulers of the Jewish thought, he begged him to hear him patiently, as he was going to speak in some detail.

“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation in Jerusalem, all the Jews know” (Acts 26.4).

Here the apostle Paul presents his life as a true witness to his seriousness in searching for the truth. Although he was born in Tarsus, outside his nation, yet since his youth, he was sent to Jerusalem to be taught at the school of Gamaliel (Acts 22.3). Since his early days, his life was conformed to the Jewish thought, based on serious study at the greatest religious school, at the feet of the greatest teacher of the law. His thoughts, views, and behavior proved to be conforming to the teachings of Gamaliel, as all the Jews testified.

His early beginning since his childhood was not unknown or vague, or was he taught in a school, foreign to the Jewish thought, but inside Jerusalem, and under the leadership of the great teacher Gamaliel.

“They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that, according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Acts 26.5).

All the Jews knew that he was only a Jew by birth, but he was a Pharisee, a scholar in the Jewish thought, and very particular in all aspects of his behavior, in strict literality: ***“according to the strictest sect of our religion”***; he would not be slothful in the commitment to the law in the least of things. He was not just a Pharisee in thought and knowledge, but also in behavior ***“He lived a Pharisee”***.

He was not like the rest of the apostles, of no academic knowledge of the Jewish thought, who were raised as simple fishermen; but he was a serious scholar in both intellectual and behavioral aspects. He was a man of ethics and behavior, righteous concerning the law as a Pharisee, never drank wine, committed adultery, or confiscated what belonged to others; He lived a blameless life.

“And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers” (Acts 26.6).

He was straightforward in his faith as well as in his life, believing in the resurrection of the dead, in the existence of angels, and lives with the hope for eternal life, contrary to the Sadducees, for the hope of the promise made by God to the fathers – the enjoyment of resurrection, which is the hope of the Pharisees, opposed by the Sadducees.

That hope was realized by the resurrection of the crucified Messiah, as the apostle Paul does not separate between the hope for resurrection and the hope for Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

“To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope’s sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews” (Acts 26.7).

If there was a sect called the Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection, the fathers and all the twelve tribes were living on this hope which has been now realized; and because of it, the apostle Paul stood accused by the Jews.

All the tribes earnestly served God night and day, “for this hope’s sake”. Sacrifices were offered day and night; and rites of worship were practiced daily, not for any other reason but to get to enjoy the resurrection, that would not be realized except through the Messiah risen from the dead.

❖ "Jesus, who has both once risen Himself, and led His disciples to believe in His resurrection, and so thoroughly persuaded them of its truth, that they show to all men by their sufferings how they are able to laugh at all the troubles of life, beholding the life eternal and the resurrection clearly demonstrated to them both in word and deed" ¹.

(The scholar Origen)

“Why should it be thought incredible by you, that God raises the dead” (Acts 26.8).

This does not mean that king Agrippa did not believe in the resurrection of the dead; But it is obvious that the apostle Paul was addressing all present, and, in those moments, he probably turned his face to the audience, to ask them why they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. If they believed that God created every thing from nothing, would He be unable to raise the dead!

3- AN OPPOSITION TO THE NAME OF JESUS

“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 26.9).

If those present do not believe in Jesus, risen from the dead, this is not strange, as he himself, as he testified, put in his heart to do his utmost best, and dedicate all his energies to oppose Jesus of Nazareth, violently and consistently. That was not provoked by anyone, but was a belief deep within him; that is why he says, “*I myself thought*” that what he was doing was a duty dictated by his own conscience, “*I must do*”, for the sake of his God, his religion, and his nation.

Here the apostle reveals what is behind the persecution of Christians all along the ages; the hidden motive is the conviction of the opponents, that they are offering a service to God, religion, and the country. Christianity, in the sight of many, is still a crime against God and the state. The persecution is actually directed against the name “*that of Jesus of Nazareth*”, as belief in His name is a belief in His Person.

¹ *Against Celsus 2.77: Drewery 132.*

“This I also did in Jerusalem; and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26.10).

If the Book of Acts only mentioned the martyrdom of St. Steven by the Sanhedrim, It is obvious from the words of the apostle that many others were killed later on, through a vote on those who were in prison, in which Saul of Tarsus took part.

Here St. Paul calls the Christians as saints.

- ❖ Whoever is purified from evil and sin is called a saint. Absence of evil from man is a greater perfection for the soul, that brings pleasure to God.

(St. Anthony the Great)

- ❖ Saints are like a group of trees: each bears a different kind of fruit; but they all are fed by the same source. The practices of a certain saint may differ from those of another; but it is the same Spirit working in all.

(An elder)

“And I punished them often in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26.11).

The goal of persecution has been blaspheming the name of Jesus of Nazareth, through denying that He is the anticipated Messiah. Saul of Tarsus considered faith in Jesus of Nazareth as a plague, that should be eradicated from Judea.

4- JESUS APPEARING TO SAUL

“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, At midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me” (Acts 26.12-13).

The apostle Paul confirms that the light was “from heaven”; it was not during the night, but at midday, which indicates that it was not man-made or fabricated. It was publicly displayed, not within the limits of a certain house. It was shining brighter than the sun, as though “the sun was ashamed” before it (Isa. 24.23).

It was not the product of the imagination of Saul of Tarsus, or an illusion; it shone around him and those who journeyed with him. It was not in a vision in his own place, or in a dream, but publicly along the road before all who were with him.

“And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 26.14).

The light was not like a lightening that shone for a moment or moments, but was something that affected all those who were in Paul's company beside him. All fell to the ground; while a conversation in the Hebrew language took place between the Lord Christ and Saul of Tarsus.

In the Old Testament, God used to proclaim Himself through dense darkness and dark cloud, in order to draw people's attention to listen to Him, as though through an exalted tent surrounding the divine glory (2 Chron. 6.1). God spoke to Abraham through a great darkness (Gen. 15.12). But now, after the divine Word came down incarnated, the divine proclamations became through divine exalted light.

We notice in the speech of the Lord Christ through that exalted divine light, the following:

1- He spoke to him in the Hebrew language, that Paul the preacher to the Gentiles, who is eloquent in the Greek language, would never forget.

2- He called him by his name twice, saying, 'Saul, Saul', in the middle of the way, where no one knew his name.

3- He revealed to him his great sin: "*Why do you persecute me?*" that He would know what is in his heart, that he is not persecuting the Christians for some crime they committed, but for the sake of Jesus' name to whom they got attached, and that any opposition to a believer is directed toward Jesus Christ Himself.

4- He seeks from him to re-evaluate his situation, as there is no comparison between the capabilities and the authority that Saul carries, and Jesus of Nazareth. He was as though kicking against the goads.

"So I said, 'Who are you Lord? And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 26.15).

Saul took it for granted that Jesus was buried in the tomb, and that His disciples stole His body and reburied in another tomb. He did not expect, while persecuting the name of Jesus, to see Him in His divine light admonishing Him. No power could draw him to the Person of Jesus, being the Messiah, like that amazing encounter with Him personally. Then, he was convinced by what the disciples claimed that He rose and ascended, and that He is in His divine glory. That was enough for him, not only to believe in Him, but also to testify to Him, as a minister and a preacher.

5- A DIVINE CALL FOR PREACHING

"But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness, both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you" (Acts 26.16).

The Lord Christ, who appeared to him in His divine glory, called him to testify to the gospel, and to preach among the Gentiles. What he was doing is not according to a human call, or in a human zeal, but according to a divine call. If Saul and those around him fell to the ground when the light of the Lord

shone on them, the Lord Himself is calling him to rise and stand on his feet, to shake them from the dust of his sins (Isa. 52.2).

“I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you” (Acts 26.17).

Saul took the task of preaching from the Lord Christ Himself. He revealed to him that it would be a difficult task, as he would find opposition from the Jews as well as from the Gentiles; and that will endanger his life extensively, but Jesus Himself promised to deliver him.

“To open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26.18).

It is as though the apostle Paul said, ‘we who were previously in the darkness’, realizing as though he was in a tomb, and then was risen by the Lord Christ.

The goal of preaching is for the hearts to enjoy enlightenment, being the eyes that are able to see the light of the truth. Sin and ignorance shut the eye of the heart from seeing the light; whereas the work of the gospel is to enlighten the eyes (Eph. 1.18). Through the enlightenment, the believer is transformed from the darkness of idolatry and sin, to the light of faith and the enjoyment of righteousness. As the darkness is the symbol of ignorance and sin, the Gentiles were said to sit in darkness.

- ❖ The light is that of faith working in us, according to God’s predistened plan.
- ❖ Light is the truth; and a brother is not merely a relative, but he is also one of Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ By a great medication, by the baptism of the Word, we are purified from all our sins, and would instantly become justified. It is through the grace of enlightenment that we, once we are converted, do not remain as we were before we got cleansed, as knowledge emerges together with the enlightenment, and shines on the mind. We, who were before without knowledge, became instantly learned, as learning lead to faith. faith is given to us by the Holy Spirit in Baptism¹.
- ❖ As we are baptized, we get enlightened; and as we are enlightened, we get adopted; and as we get adopted, we become perfect. ... This work is called by several names: ‘grace’, ‘enlightenment’, ‘perfection’, and ‘washing’. ... It is enlightenment, as through it we can see the holy light of salvation; through it, we can clearly behold God².

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

Those sitting in the darkness are enslaved by the authority of Satan, and in need to move to the kingdom of God, where freedom, forgiveness, and the enjoyment of the sanctified life together with the

¹ Kay’s Writings of Clement of Alexandria, p437. Heg. Pachum, St. Mary’s Monastery (El-Moharak Monastery), (Bishop Gregorius). The Spiritual Values ... in the Sacrament of Baptism. P.47.

² Paed. 1.6.

saints, are, through the obedience to God. By faith, the believer realizes his authority in Jesus Christ over Satan and all his hosts.

- ❖ Satan shoots at me with arrows; but I have a sword. He has a bow; whereas I, being a soldier, bear a heavy weapon. Let us learn from his style: he bears a bow because he cannot approach us; he shoots at us from afar¹.
- ❖ The plan of Satan is not to draw us away from the blessings we have, but to draw us to a steep rocky cliff. Yet God with His love did not fail to care for mankind. He revealed to Satan how he is foolish in his attempts. He revealed to man the greatness of God's care for him. Through death, God granted man the eternal life. Whereas Satan drew man away from paradise; God led him to heaven. Benefit then is far more than loss².
- ❖ You have lost paradise, Yet God granted you heaven to confirm His compassion. He revealed to Satan that even if he plotted thousands of plans against mankind, that would be of no avail, because God always leads us to a greater dignity.
You have lost the paradise of Eden, Yet God opened heaven before you.
You have fallen under judgment, in labor for some time; then You were granted life forever.
God commands the earth to provide you with thorns, whereas the soil of the Spirit would provide you with fruits. Do not you mark how gain is greater than loss?³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

- ❖ Satan and the forces and rulers of darkness, since the commandment was broken, sat in Adam's heart and body, as though on their throne. That is why the Lord came and took a body from the Virgin; for if he chose to come down to us in His deity, without a body, who could bear that? That is why he addressed men through the body as a tool, by which He could destroy the spirits of evil, who occupied a seat in the body: He sat on the throne of the mind and thought. The lord purified the conscience, and took over for Himself, the throne of the mind, the thoughts, and the body⁴.
- ❖ It is as though God says to Satan, 'I redeemed the body that the first Adam sold to you, and annulled his debts by My cross. When I went down to Hades, I commanded the Hades, darkness, and death, to release the imprisoned souls of Adam's children. Being greatly terrified, they did according to His command⁵.

(St. Makarius the Great)

¹ *Baptismal Instructions*, 3.11.

² *Baptismal Instructions*, 2.7.

³ *Sermon in Gen. 7*, PG 5.614 C–D.

⁴ *Sermon 5.6*.

⁵ *Sermon 10.11*.

“And an inheritance among those who are sanctified”: Faith in the Lord Christ is a call, not only to get forgiveness of sins, but also to enjoy adoption by God; when the believer becomes a holy son to God, who has the right of inheritance together with those who are sanctified.

Thus, the apostle is offering an indirect invitation to the king, and all those present, to enjoy faith in the Lord Christ, to gain:

- 1- The inner enlightenment.
 - 2- The return from darkness to light.
 - 3- The liberation from the authority of Satan, to gain freedom in God.
 - 4- The forgiveness of sins.
 - 5- The adoption to God, and the enjoyment of inheritance together with those who are sanctified.
- In all that, God has no benefit for Himself, but all benefit is for the believers.

❖ "He shows the evils which possess unbelievers, "Satan, darkness;" the good things belonging to believers, light, God, "the inheritance of the saints" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

6- REPENTANCE IS THE THEME OF HIS PREACHING

“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (Acts 26.19).

Having become sure that Jesus is the Christ, and of His resurrection and ascension to Heaven, It was impossible for the apostle Paul to linger in testifying to Him. He felt an obligation to commit himself instantly to minister to Him, as the Lord Christ did not leave for him any chance to doubt or disobey.

“But declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do work befitting repentance” (Acts 26.20).

Here, the apostle presents a summary of his preaching works, in obedience to the Lord Christ. What he did in Damascus, Jerusalem, throughout the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles, is nothing but obedience to the divine voice.

❖ "He not only exhorts them to repent, but also to show forth a life worthy of admiration². and see how everywhere the Gentiles are admitted into connection with the people (Israel): for those who were present were of the Gentiles. ... Observe: having left the post of defendant, he took up that of teacher"³.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

² Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

³ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

“For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple, and tried to kill me” (Acts 26.21).

Because governor Festos could not have realized the reason of the animosity of the Jews toward Paul, the apostle revealed that what he practiced is proclaiming the consummation of what God had already promised their fathers, concerning them and the Gentiles, something that offended the Jews, because of their hatred toward the Gentiles, and their rejection of any fellowship in faith with them. They are proud of being the chosen people of God.

“Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come” (Acts 26.22).

The apostle ends his defense by confirming that what he was preaching is no other thing than what was already proclaimed by the prophets and Moses, concerning the passion of the Lord Christ, His resurrection, and shining His light on the Jews and the Gentiles.

What the apostle uttered here before the king and the governor is the same he uttered before the small and the great, and before the poor and the illiterates. Like his Lord, he despises no one. And, at the same time, he does not flatter the great and rich, the kings, the governors, and the rulers.

“That the Christ would suffer, that he would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26.23).

The Jews should have properly understood the prophecies, and realized that the Messiah was to suffer (Isa. 53.1; Dan. 9.27), and that He would become “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15.20; Col. 1.18).

7- ACCUSING PAUL OF MADNESS

“Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad’” (Acts 26.24).

Why did Festos think that Paul is driven to madness?

1- His strong zeal concerning salvation.

2- His concentration on the Person of Jesus of Nazareth and His gospel. Those things, according to him, are signs of mental disorder.

3- He probably assumed that what Paul said about his vision was pure imagination.

Some suggest that Festos was annoyed, because the apostle Paul addressed all his talk to King Agrippa, and disregarded him.

“But he said, ‘I am not mad, most noble Festos, but speak the word of truth and reason’” (Acts 26.25).

With the spirit of power, the apostle Paul confirms that he is not mad, but is uttering the truth, which Festos could not know because of his ignorance of the prophecies.

- ❖ The prophet says: “For with you is the fountain of life. In Your light we see light” (Ps. 36.9). Those who drink from the riches of the house of God, from the river of His Joy, would flourish, as did the great David, when he exited the scope his own self to those of joy and exalted happiness, as he saw the unseen beauty, and cried out by his voice, led by the holy power, saying: “Why should the Gentiles say, ‘Where now is their God?’” (Ps. 115.2)? By this expression, David describes the very great riches of God, that surpass expression. And Paul, the new Benjamin, says in his joy and great happiness: “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you” (2 Cor. 5.13). Likewise, Paul referred to Festos, saying: “I am not mad, most noble Festos, but speaks the words of truth and reason” (Acts 26.25)¹.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“For the king before whom I also speak freely, knows these things, for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26.26).

He resorts to King Agrippa as a witness that he is not beside himself; as though, politely and wisely, he is confirming to Festos, that his assumption is set on his ignorance of the prophecies, and his lack of knowledge of the word of God. The king, on the other hand, having a vast knowledge of those things, could follow and understand what the apostle was saying.

“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe” (Acts 26.27).

The apostle Paul probably realized that, because King Agrippa did not want to put governor Festos in an awkward position, he did not defend the apostle Paul, did not enter with him in details concerning faith, and did not respond to his question: “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?”

The apostle Paul cleverly used that chance to make King Agrippa, when he returns to his palace, revise the prophecies that refer to the Person of the Lord Christ.

"I was not one of Christ's disciples: among those who fought against Him, was I. Whence also he is a witness who has a right to be believed, because he, a man who was doing numberless things, makes war on the believers, persuading them to blaspheme, stirring up all against them, cities, rulers, and by himself doing all this of his own accord, was thus suddenly changed. Then again the witnesses, those who were with him: next he shows what just cause he had to be persuaded, both from the light, and from the prophets, and from the results, and from the things which have now taken place. See accordingly, how both from the prophets, and from these particulars, he confirms the proof to them. For that he may not seem to be broaching some novelty, although he had great things to say, yet he again takes refuge with the prophets."²

(St. John Chrysostom)

8- HIS INFLUENCE ON THE KING

¹ *Homilies on Song of Songs, 10.*

² *Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.*

“Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian’” (Acts 26.28).

It was not possible for Agrippa to deny that he believes in the prophets of the Old Testament; and that their prophecies were realized in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. It was likewise, not possible for him to reject the vision St. Paul enjoyed on his way to Damascus. He almost accepted the Christian faith. We may notice the following concerning him:

- ❖ He was a proselyte Jew, unlike Festos the Roman governor.
- ❖ He did not share with the Jews their opposition to the apostle Paul.
- ❖ He was described by the historian Josephus as being gentle, honest, and clean-handed. He did not bear animosity toward the Christians, although he did not seek to be a Christian, yet he probably was mentally convinced of faith in Christ. On the other hand, some believe that the king said it sarcastically.

“And Paul said, ‘I would to God, that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for those chains’” (Acts 26.29).

The apostle Paul reveals his flaring zeal for the salvation of the king and all those present; yet, because he believed that accepting the faith needs a grace from God, he resorts to praying for the sake of their salvation. He also, revealing the extent of the happiness he enjoys in Jesus Christ, wishes that no one should be deprived of partaking of it.

At the same time, the apostle did not wish for anyone to partake of his chains. Although he is proud of these chains; yet, as a successful leader, he finds pleasure in the fellowship of passion with the Lord Christ, but he seeks comfort for others.

- ❖ "Such is a soul winged with heavenly love. For if those who cherish the foul (earthly passion which men call) love, think nothing either glorious or precious, but those things alone which tend to gratify their lust, they think both glorious and honorable, and their mistress is everything to them; much more do those, who have been taken captive by this heavenly love, think nothing of the cost. ... As for trials, he so despises them, both scourges and imprisonments, as though the body in which he suffers these things were another's and not his own, or as though he had got a body made of adamant: while as for the sweet things of this life, he so laughs them to scorn, is so insensible to them, as we are insensible of dead bodies, being ourselves dead. He is as far from being taken captive by any passion, as the gold refined in the fire and purified is free from alloy. For even as flies would not dart into the midst of a flame, but fly from it, so the passions dare not even to come near this man. ... Observe him then, how he felt towards the whole world. “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6.14). I am dead to the world, and the world is dead to me. And again: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2.20)" ¹.

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 52.

(St. John Chrysostom)

9-THE GATHERING IS DISMISSED

“When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice, and those who sat with them” (Acts 26.30).

When Paul finished his defense, the king, the governor, Bernice, and the counselors, stood up to discuss the case between themselves.

“And when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, ‘This man is doing nothing worthy of death or chains’ (Acts 26.31).

They all realized that St. Paul broke no law, and was not worthy of death or chains. He could have been released; but as he has appealed to Caesar, certain legal procedure had to be followed.

Most probably, Festos, helped by King Agrippa, wrote a statement to Caesar, including the accusations by the Jews against Paul, and their own recommendation to free him.

“Then Agrippa said to Festos, ‘This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar’” (Acts 26.32).

❖ "See how again also they pass sentence in his favor, and after having said, "You are beside yourself" (Acts 26.24), they acquit him, as undeserving not only of death, but also of bonds, and indeed would have released him entirely, if he had not appealed to Caesar. But this was done providentially, that he should also depart with bonds. "I suffer trouble" He says, "As an evildoer, even to the point of chains" (2 Tim. 2.9). For if his Lord "was numbered with the transgressors" (Mark 15.28), much more he: but as the Lord did not share with them in their character, so neither did Paul"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ Hom. On Acts. Hom. 53.

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 26

A DEFENSE OR PREACHING

- ❖ The great procession set forth to the great assembly,
Presided by King Agrippa and governor Festos,
Together with men of the state.
They came to find something to write to Caesar,
On a sheet of accusation to send on with the prisoner.
- ❖ The prisoner Paul was brought bound by two chains,
Surrounded by two soldiers, one on each side.
He entered to proclaim to those present the exalted love of God,
And to proclaim the realization of the prophecies by the early fathers and the prophets.
- ❖ He entered as though into the lectern of a church,
With a heart leaping with joy,
For having that opportunity to testify to his Savior,
A unique opportunity to testify, he or other apostles, would not dream to have.
- ❖ To prepare for this assembly,
He prayed the night before for the sake of all the listeners,
To enjoy the inner glory which he enjoys,
To be like him, except for those chains in his hands.
He prayed for them to have the inner freedom, as well as the outer peace.

CHAPTER 27

TO ROME

The Evangelist St. Luke parades the journey of the prisoner St. Paul, not only to reveal the extent of dangers he faced, but rather to reveal the personality of Paul, the prisoner and the leader. The prisoners were taken severely guarded by soldiers led by a centurion. Yet the apostle did not feel that he was a humiliated prisoner, but as an ambassador of Christ, to testify to Him before all those who were on board the ship.

That journey, despite all the horrible dangers associated with it, has been a good opportunity to preach the gospel. All those on board felt the blessing of having the apostle Paul in their midst, and came in touch with God's work in their life through him. He gave them some touches of Joy and thanksgiving to God.

Although the centurion, the soldiers, the prisoners, the passengers, and the crew, were almost all idol worshippers; yet the apostle Paul, with his love for mankind, prayed in their name to God, delivering everything to Him. This is the true pure love.

1- From Caesarea to Myra	1 – 5
2- From Myra to Fair Havens	6 – 8
3- From Fair Havens to Malta	9 – 44

1- FROM CAESAREA TO MYRA

We have no idea, how long the apostle Paul debated with king Agrippa, who wanted to give him an unconditional release, except that Paul has appealed to Caesar; and in such case, he as a Roman had to be sent to Rome for trial. St. Luke wrote this journey in some detail, revealing its importance in realizing his goal: the rejection of the gospel by the Jews, and the opening of the door of faith before the Gentiles in the capital of the empire.

“And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustus Regiment” (Acts 27.1).

The last time for St. Luke to say “We” was in (Acts 21.18), when he was in St. Paul's company, as he arrived in Jerusalem. It is to be assumed that the Evangelist St. Luke has been in Caesarea during the period St. Paul was in prison. Now St. Luke accompanies him in his journey to Rome, together with Aristarchus of Thessalonica, who came to Jerusalem with St. Paul from Thessalonica (Acts 19.29, 20.4).

This journey started from Caesarea, from a port south of Tarsus.

“So entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us” (Acts 27.2).

The ship sailed along the southern coast of Asia Minor, passing by the sea ports and the coastal cities.

Paul's friends, Luke and Aristarchus, were not ashamed of his chains, but counted it an honor for them to accompany him willingly in this journey, to share with him the dangers of the sea, and to risk their life for the sake of their love for him, and of the ministry of preaching.

“And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly, and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care” (Acts 27.3).

The first port they reached was Sidon at Phoenicia, about 17 miles north of Caesarea, that could be reached easily in 24 hour sailing by sea. It is the last city on the coast of Phoenicia.

As many opponents as God allowed His apostle Paul to have, He provided him with those in whose sight he found favor, like governor Felix (Acts 24.23), and the centurion Julius, who most probably was aware of his case, and listened to his defense before Agrippa, and was convinced of his innocence. The apostle had friends in many of the cities he passed through in his journeys, especially on his way to and from Jerusalem, who provided him and those who were with him, with provisions for their long, hard, and risky journey.

Although Paul was the centurion's prisoner, yet he dealt with him as a righteous friend, and a man who cared for the salvation of souls. That officer presents to us a living portrait of someone who does not misuse his authority, but walks with the spirit of piety.

“When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary” (Acts 27.4).

During the fall season, north-west winds blow on the Mediterranean Sea, especially on its eastern side. They had to divert under the shelter of Cyprus to a certain extent, to avoid the contrary wind, then went around the island from the east in a large curve off Cilicia and Pamphilia along the coast, so that they then, headed west, to make use of the same wind, to push the ship forward instead of backward.

If the wind had been more favorable, they would have sailed directly, leaving Cyprus behind on their right; but because it was not that favorable, they diverted under its impact to a different direction, to have Cyprus on their left. The crew was committed not to venture directly into the sea, but, under the impact of the western wind, they sailed under Cilicia and Pamphilia, until they reached Myra, a city of Lycia, a large port that receives large ships, especially those that carry grains from Alexandria to Rome. There, they changed the ship and got on board of an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy.

To take it easy with the wind, for the safety of the ship, they sailed with the wind southward toward an island 20 miles south-west of Crete, to take shelter.

"Under the shelter of Cyprus": they sailed near its coast in under to avoid the danger of the wind.

Lycia was a province south-west of Asia Minor, bordered by Phrygia and Pamphilia on its north, the Mediterranean Sea on its south, Pamphilia on its east, and Carala on its west.

- ❖ "See how God does not innovate or change the order of nature, but suffers them to sail into the unfavorable winds. But even so the miracle is wrought. That they may sail safely, He did not let them go out in the (open) sea, but they always sailed near the land. ... See how the life of the saints is thus interwoven throughout: escaped from the court of justice, they fall in with shipwreck and storm" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphilia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia” (Acts 27.5).

Myra had its blessed reputation among the Greeks, because St. Nicolas the Intercessor of Greece, especially the seamen, and the people of Myra, was a citizen of Myra. The Russians stole his body and carried it to St. Petersburg during the revolution of Greece, and sent to the people of Myra a valuable icon in its place.

The port of Myra is called Andriace, one of the most important ports, in Asia Minor, where the grain-laden ships from Alexandria to Rome, with their route parallel to the coast from Phoenicia to Asia Minor, used to come. The big ships then, set forth from there to Italy, where the current heads to the west, beside the prevailing wind, were.

2- FROM MYRA TO THE FAIR HAVENS

“There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board” (Acts 27.6).

This big ship probably had to divert its route toward the coast of Asia Minor, on its way to Rome, because of the storms and the contrary winds.

“And when we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone” (Acts 27.7).

Cnidus was 130 miles far from Myra, a port on the coast of Asia Minor, west of Myra. Their route was parallel to the coast, yet their slow speed was because of the contrary north-west winds, that made them reach the port with great difficulty. They had to head southward to get the help of the same wind. Although the water current was heading west, yet the north-west wind was contrary to it. So they sailed south toward Crete, around the cape of Salmone, the farthest point on the east of Crete, then sailed south of Crete, parallel to the coast, until they reached the Fair Havens (Acts 27.8). Here, they faced the same difficulty they suffered before during their journey from Myra to Cnidus.

The ship sailed slowly for several days because of the west wind, until they reached Cnidus, the port of Caria, and had to sail south of Crete, as it previously did south of Cyprus, and hence found great difficulty to reach Salmone, the eastern coast of Crete, and to reach the Fair Havens.

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.

“Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lycia” (Acts 27.8).

They had to sail all around the eastern coast of the island, as it was not possible to sail directly from the island to the main land.

The Fair Havens: South-east of the island of Crete, so called by the Geographer Steven, and ‘The beautiful gulf’ by the crews of the Dutch and French lines. It had no city of its own, but there was a famous city by the name of Lycia close to it.

3- FROM THE FAIR HAVENS TO MALTA

“Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the fast was already over, Paul advised them” (Acts 27.9).

“The fast was already over” is an expression referring to the fact that it was not the time to sail, whatever the reason is, as it was the beginning of the month of October, and, according to experienced travelers, sailing then was a great risk.

It is clear that, when they started their journey, they hoped to reach their destination before the onset of the dangerous time of sailing, but that was not realized.

Some scholars, like **St. John Chrysostom**, believe that the fast here is a Jewish fast, the great ‘Day of Atonement’ (Lev. 23.27), on the tenth day of the seventh month (about the end of September), following the autumn equinox, when sailing becomes dangerous.

“Saying, ‘Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” (Acts 27.10).

Paul was not a regular prisoner, but like a retired captain with sailing experience, especially as far as ship wrecks are concerned (2 Cor. 11.25-26). But the ruler of the air, the devil, shut the ears of all to listen to his council, to add new troubles to Paul.

St. Paul had much experience in sea travel, who mentioned among his sufferings, that times he faced ship-wreck (2 Cor. 11.25). Besides, nobody can deny that the apostle, was told by the Holy Spirit what would happen to the ship.

There is no doubt that the cargo (the grains sent to Rome) had its special value, not material-wise, but because Rome needed it.

“Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship more than by the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 27.11).

The centurion assumed that the helmsman and the owner of the ship, with their long experience, beside their interest in the safety of the ship and its cargo, would have more experience than Paul, so he was persuaded by them. Although the centurion was compassionate toward Paul, and admired him, yet he did not heed to his council.

“And because the harbor was not suitable to winter in the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete opening toward the south-west and north-west, and winter there” (Acts 27.12).

As the Fair Havens was not suitable to winter in, they preferred to sail toward Phoenix, west of Crete, although it is a summer and not a winter resort, and not a proper harbor, but more like a beach, open to cold winds.

“When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete” (Acts 27.13).

The wind previously coming from the west was contrary and dangerous, but changing to a soft and gentle breeze gave them hope that sailing was not that dangerous, especially along the coasts of Crete, until they reach Phoenix to the west, as they hoped.

All of a sudden, the contrary north-west wind stopped, and a soft gentle south breeze came. This happens because of the fluctuations in the air pressure. Yet these breezes are usually of temporary nature, and would soon be replaced by the north-west winds again.

“But not long after a tempestuous head wind arose, called ‘Euroclydon’” (Acts 27.14).

All of a sudden, the gentle south wind transferred into a stormy wind opposite to the direction of their journey. It is called ‘Euroclydon’. Some believe that it refers to something like a hurricane that makes the ship as though under the mercy of a whirlwind; that is called nowadays ‘laventers’. It is derived from Levant, meaning "orient".

St. Paul became in a situation similar to that of the prophet Jonah. But whereas Jonah was fleeing from the face of the Lord, Paul was bound to testify to the Lord. Whereas Jonah refused to preach to the Gentiles, Paul, on the other hand, did his best to testify to the Lord Christ before the Gentiles.

“So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive” (Acts 27.15).

The ship, caught by that violent storm, became like a toy, and the crew, eventually stopped trying to regain control, and surrendered their life to the unmerciful wind. But the apostle Paul, on the other hand, in the name of all those on board, delivered the matter in the hands of God, believing that all of them were carried on the eternal arms.

“And running under the shelter of an island called ‘Clauda’, we secured the skiff with difficulty. When they had taken it on board, they used cables to under gird the ship; and fearing lest they should run aground on the ‘Syrtis sands’ they struck sail and so were driven” (Acts 27.16-17).

They could not control the large ship; they could hardly control the boat. This does not mean that they reached the coast.

Clauda: a small island, 20 miles south-west of Crete.

“And because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship” (Acts 27.18).

The next day, they started to cast the cargo, especially the grain, overboard, realizing that wealth would not save them, but represents a heavy load on the ship of life, that could end up in bringing it down in the waters of this world, according to the words of the wise Solomon: “Riches kept for their owner to his hurt” (Eccl. 5.13).

It is amazing how the people of this world easily cast overboard everything they possess in order to save their temporal life; whereas they find it very difficult to offer a little portion of it to their poor and needy brothers, for the sake of their eternal life. Whoever looks forward to eternity with its glories would not preoccupy himself with worldly affairs; but, according to the apostle Paul, “You accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven” (Heb. 10.34).

Any reasonable man would destroy the ship with everything on it to save his life, while many prefer to destroy the ship of their faith, and their good conscience, for the sake of temporal objects.

Like what the crew of that ship did, we, in the midst of the storms of this world, are committed to lighten down our heavy cargo, to become light like a bird soaring in air, not to be described like Pharaoh and his soldiers, who “sank like lead in the mighty waters” (Exod. 15.10).

“On the third day we threw the ship’s tackle overboard with our own hands. Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up” (Acts 27.19-20).

What made the situation worse was that darkness dwelt over them, making them for many days unable to differentiate between night and day, and unable to recognize their exact location and directions to decide on the right route toward safety.

This is the way of the soul which loses its sight of the Lord Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. It would not enjoy His light, and would not become “the daughter of the day”. And also when it loses the sight of the true children of God as glittering stars, when it does not find before it living role models of faith to follow their lead. Here, the situation becomes very dangerous, when man does not realize, by the light of the Holy Spirit, the reality of his soul, or his location, and loses the sight of his Savior, the beauty of his church and the splendor of its saints.

That dangerous situation destroyed the mentality of the crew. The outer darkness reflected on them an inner destructive darkness, that of despair; and ***“All hope that we would be saved was finally given up”*** (Acts 27.20). Into their souls crawled the most dangerous enemy that destroys the life of man in this world, and let him lose his eternity, through despair, that when it enters, it would be accompanied by all the rest of sins; and the demons would find in his heart a throne to sit on.

“But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, ‘Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss’ (Acts 27.21).

Amid those horrible circumstances, they brought the sails down, to limit the impact of the violent wind and started to lighten the ship of its 1000 tons cargo, to keep the ship from being torn apart by the blows of the mighty waves. On the third day, they threw the Ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. They ran frantically everywhere and knocked each other down, screaming loudly, while the ship started filling with water. The cold wind, the heavy rain, and the pitch darkness added to their misery.

And amid that horrible atmosphere, the apostle Paul stood, fasting and praying to his God, to realize His divine promise to grant him all those who sailed with him, in order to consummate his mission by standing before Caesar to testify to his Lord and Savior. Some believe that all on board shared in this fast, not as a rite of worship, but, as a result of tribulation and bitterness, and the exhausting continuous strife to save themselves and the ship; they did not preoccupy themselves with food or drink.

The apostle rebuked them, because they disregarded his council, although then they started to listen to him, saying that he has got a divine promise concerning their safety.

❖ "For Paul is sailing even now with us, only not bound as he was then: he admonishes us even now ... Let us obey Paul: though we be in the midst of a tempest, we shall surely be freed from the dangers: though we remain without food fourteen days, though hope of safety may have left us, though we be in darkness and mist, by doing his bidding, we shall be freed from the dangers. Let us think that the whole world is a ship, and in this the evildoers and those who have numberless vices, some rulers, others guards, others just men, as Paul was, others prisoners, those bound by their sins: if then we do as Paul bids us, we perish not in our bonds, but are released from them: God will give us also to him"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship” (Acts 27.22).

This good news is not from him, but is a divine gift.

Amid the bitterness of tribulation, Paul was like one of them, fasting and working, casting the cargo overboard, and doing his best to save the ship. But now, having enjoyed that divine promise, he stood in the midst of them, not as one of the prisoners, but as a good council who brings joyful news. He took away from them the spirit of despair, and brought them that of hope, and a comfort from heaven.

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.

“I urge you to take heart”; As God is the source of joy to those in heaven and on earth; so He grants the believers, not only to rejoice, but also to make many joyful. For stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong, and whom I serve” (Acts 27.23).

When the apostle Paul was in danger of death, and when he got a divine promise to be saved together with those who were with him, there was nothing to preoccupy him, but his preaching ministry, that was the goal of his life. He had no fear of death, or was preoccupied with his temporal safety, but with dedicating all his being to God his Savior.

He did not say, “... to whom we belong, and whom we worship or serve”, but, “To whom I belong, and whom I serve”; as he was going to Rome, not for a business trip, but to appear as an ambassador and a witness to the Lord Christ.

He gave them the good news about God, Whom the apostle worships, to whom he has dedicated his life, and is referred, who sent him His angel to speak in His name.

“Saying, ‘Do not be afraid Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you” (Acts 27.24).

The apostle Paul reveals God’s plan for him, For the sake of testifying to the gospel before Caesar, God would save him, and grant him all those who were with him as a special gift. Here Paul reveals how much he longs to preach, even in the imperial palace, and reveals God’s work through His ministers. Having dedicated his heart to the gospel of Christ, his presence in the ship was a great blessing; and for the sake of realizing his mission, God granted him the life of all who were sailing with him.

The apostle Paul certainly did not fear death, but, most probably, he was sharing with those who were sailing with him, their fear and suffering. He lived his whole life counting himself bound with the bound, weak with the weak, and kindling for the sake of every soul that tramples.

Whoever walks with the righteousness of Christ will never fear or be disturbed. Fear is a feature of wicked unbelievers; whereas the believer, if he gets disturbed, this would be in partaking of the pains of the weak.

For Paul's sake, God saved 276 persons on board that ship; For the sake of Lot, God did not destroy the city of Zoar (Gen. 19.21); and if there were ten righteous men, God would have spared Sodom of burning (Gen. 18.32).

If Paul had been among the wicked through his own choice, he would have perished together with them; But because he was among them for the sake of ministry, and not out of slothfulness or wrong lusts, God saved them for his sake, and he became a blessing for them; God granted them to him as a divine gift personally for him.

❖ "If (here was) a ship in danger and suffering wreck, and prisoners were saved for Paul's sake, consider what a thing it is to have a holy man in a house.

For many are the tempests which assail us also, tempests far more grievous than these (natural ones), but He can also give us to be delivered, if only we obey holy men as those (in the ship) did, if we do what they enjoin. For they are not simply saved, but themselves also contributed to other men's believing.

Though the holy man be in bonds, he does greater works than those who are free.

And look how this was the case here. The free centurion stood in need of his bound prisoner: the skilful pilot was in want of him who was no pilot-nay rather, of him who was the true pilot.

For he steered as pilot not a vessel of this (earthly) kind, but the Church of the whole world, having learnt of Him Who is Lord also of the sea; (steered it,) not by the art of man, but by the wisdom of the Spirit. In this vessel are many shipwrecks, many waves, spirits of wickedness, "Trouble on every side; outside were conflicts, inside were fears" (2 Cor. 7.5). So that he was the true pilot" ¹.

❖ "But this that he says, "God has granted you all those who sail with you", is not spoken boastfully, but in the wish to win those who were sailing in the ship: for (he spoke thus), not that they might feel themselves bound to him, but that they might believe what he was saying. "God has granted you;" as much (as to say), they are worthy indeed of death, since they did not listen to you: however this is done out of favor to you" ².

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me" (Acts 27.25).

The apostle, as what he was going through is the work of God Himself, was utterly sure that he would stand before Caesar, not to defend himself, and regain his freedom, but to testify to his Savior.

"However we must aground on a certain island. But when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near an island" (Acts 27.26-27).

Some believe that the term 'the Adriatic Sea' does not refer to the Adriatic Sea in particular, but to the eastern part of the Mediterranean, toward Italy, Greece, and North Africa, including also the Adriatic Sea.

"And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings and found it to be fifteen fathoms. Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come" (Acts 27.28-29).

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.

² Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.

The fathom is six feet. Some measure it from the middle finger of the left hand to the middle finger of the right one.

Dropping four anchors was to secure the ship against such a violent storm.

“And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow; Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 27.30-31).

The ship was most probably an official one; and the centurion had the right in managing the ship.

Although the apostle Paul has got a divine promise that God has granted him all the souls on board the ship; yet that does not mean for him to get slothful, but he had to think and get moving, to do every thing possible to be saved. The divine promises are certainly realized for those who positively respond to the divine work, and do their best according to the pleasure of God. The free salvation does not mean for man to get slothful and not serious; that is why the apostle Paul speaks to us about “faith working with love”.

- ❖ "The sailors however, were about to escape, having no faith in what was said: but the centurion does believe Paul, for he says, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved”. So saying, not on this account, but that he might restrain them, and the prophecy might not fall to the ground. See how as in a church they are instructed by the calmness of Paul's behavior, how' he saved them out of the very midst of the dangers. And it is of providential ordering that Paul is disbelieved, that after proof of the facts, he might be believed: which accordingly was the case"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off” (Acts 27.32).

Thus, they committed the sailors to stay in the ship, and to work to bring it to shore.

“And as day was about to dawn, Paul implored them all to take food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day you have waited and continued without food, and eaten nothing’ (Acts 27.33).

Paul was not any more the prisoner who moans under chains, but became in the sight of all, the real captain of the ship, their wise counselor, their compassionate father, the shepherd of their souls, the intercessor for them before God, and the one who cares for their provisions.

That does not imply that they ate nothing during the fourteen days; but having been under that great tension, waiting for probable death, they were not preoccupied with eating or drinking proper meals, but were having quick snacks just to keep themselves alive.

“Therefore I urge you to take nourishment, for this is for you survival, since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you. And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat” (Acts 27.34-35).

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.

The apostle Paul was not embarrassed, while among the pagan prisoners, soldiers, and centurion, to give thanks to God before eating, for His work with him and with them all.

- ❖ "Observe, his giving thanks after all that had happened strengthened them. For this showed an assured mind that they would be saved" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves” (Acts 27.36).

The behavior of St. Paul, and his strong faith in God’s work, radiated joy on all: the crews, soldiers, prisoners, and passengers.

“And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship” (Acts 27.37).

Having eaten, they got strong enough to cast the wheat cargo overboard. As there was no more hope of saving it, beside being soaked with sea water, and no more fit for consumption, this would make the ship lighter, and capable of sailing through shallow waters, with no danger of getting stranded in the sandy bottom, and hence of reaching the shore.

Responding to Vigilantius who denied the feasibility of the prayers of those who had fallen asleep, for the sake of those still striving on earth, depending on the verse: "A living dog is better than a dead lion".

- ❖ "If Apostles and martyrs while still in the body can pray for others, when they ought still to be anxious for themselves, how much more must they do so when once they have won their crowns, overcome, and triumphed? A single man, Moses, oft wins pardon from God for six hundred thousand armed men (Exod. 30.32); and Stephen, the follower of his Lord and the first Christian martyr, entreats pardon for his persecutors; and when once they have entered on their life with Christ, shall they have less power than before? The Apostle Paul says that two hundred and seventy-six souls were given to him in the ship (Acts 27.37); and when, after his dissolution, he has begun to be with Christ, must he shut his mouth, and be unable to say a word for those who throughout the whole world have believed in his Gospel? Shall Vigilantius the live dog be better than Paul the dead lion? ... The truth is that the saints are not called dead, but are said to be asleep" ².

(St. Jerome)

“So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea. Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible” (Acts 27.38-39).

Unable to recognize their exact location, once they saw a bay with a beach with no rocks to break the ship, they decided to run the ship onto it.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.*

² *Against Vigilantius, 6.*

“And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile losing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the main-sail to the wind and made for shore” (Acts 27.40).

They let go the four anchors which they let down in the sea (27.29). The Greek expression bore the indicating the probability of cutting them off the ship, through cutting their chains, leaving them fixed in the depth of the sea. They also loosened the rudder ropes, in order to be able to direct the ship towards the shore.

"Rudder" came in the Greek text in the plural form, which shows that the ship had more than one rudder.

“But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground, and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves” (Acts 27.40-41).

❖ "But some one may say: why did he not save the ship? That they might perceive how great a danger they had escaped: and that the whole matter depended, not on the help of man, but on God's hand saving them independently of a ship. So that righteous men, though. They may be in a tempest, or on the sea, or in the deep, suffer nothing dreadful, but even save others together with themselves"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“Now the soldiers plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape” (Acts 27.42).

According to the Roman way, the prisoners in such situations are killed lest they should escape, in which case the guards would be accused of negligence or collaboration. According to the guards, killing the prisoners would save them from grave responsibility. Whereas God's mercy came on everyone, and all including the guards, were saved from sure death; yet that was how they felt toward the prisoners, who in their sight, were worth nothing.

“But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land” (Acts 27.43).

The centurion, so compassionate to Paul, having got in touch with his wisdom and holy behavior, intended to save him whatever the cost may be. And for the sake of Paul, the righteous, he saved the lives of all the prisoners.

“And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it was that all escaped safely to land” (Acts 27.44).

Thus, the divine promise to Paul was realized, through God's exalted mercy.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 53.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 27

WE LET HER DRIVE !

- ❖ Paul was brought among the prisoners on board the ship;
Yet he was the secret helmsman.
He occupied the last place, while he was the first in God's sight.
- ❖ God granted him favor in the sight of the centurion,
Who allowed him to join his friends in Sidon.
- ❖ By the Spirit of God, the apostle revealed to them the probable dangers,
But they counted him as a prisoner who has no experience with the sea.
- ❖ When the wind got furious, and the storm got tempestuous,
The apostle prayed to God with contrition.
In the name of those who were with him: Luke, Aristarchus, as well as all the pagans on board:
The centurion, the soldiers, the prisoners, the passengers, and the crew,
He delivered the lives of all into the hands of the Almighty.
- ❖ He was not angry because they did not listen to his council,
But he prayed with humility to God for their sake.
He is truly a father who sees in everyone very beloved children.
He felt pain, as everyone lost all hope in getting saved.
But he found in Christ, the true Helmsman of the ship, a source of joyful hope.
- ❖ God sent His angel to him,
To give him the good news that he granted him all those who sailed with him;
No one of them would perish.
He granted him all of them, because of his love to all.
He saved them all, to let Paul stand before Caesar,
To testify to the gospel in the imperial palace.
- ❖ In the midst of the bitter tribulation, he brought the spirit of hope and joy;
He took bread and gave thanks to God before all,
Then urged them to eat with the joy of heart.
Like his Lord, he is the source of joy to all.

CHAPTER 28

THE JOURNEY OF ST. PAUL TO ROME

Now, as the time for St. Paul the prisoner drew near to arrive at Rome, despite the troubles he suffered during this journey, he was only preoccupied, once he reaches Rome, with testifying there to the Lord Christ, as he did among those who were with him on board, and testifying to the gospel of Christ everywhere he would go.

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1- IN MALTA

“Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta” (Acts 28.1).

The apostle Paul did not plan to come to the island of Malta, But God allowed for the storm to happen, that he would testify to the gospel of Christ there.

Malta, or Melita, is most probably derived from the Greek word, meaning honey, having been before a rich source of this material. Yet some believe that the origin of the word is Canaanite, meaning a refuge and it was inhabited by Phoenicians.

The island is 17 miles long from east to west, 10 miles wide from north to south, of 60 miles circumference, and is 60 miles far from the coast of Sicily.

There is another island by the name ‘Melida’ in the Adriatic Sea close to the coast of Illuricum.

Having escaped and found themselves in Malta, St. Paul did not preoccupy himself with hastening to reach Rome, despite his longing to minister there; But he counted it as God's will to send him to that island for an evangelic mission, as it is obvious in the present chapter.

St. Paul had no plan of work, but in complete surrender, God was working through him. His life was flaring with the testimony and the work to the account of God's kingdom, day and night.

- ❖ Some nights were spent by Paul without sleep by his own choice; and others were so spent by necessity, when he was passing through bitter troubles, and committed to pray seeking the help of God. Other times, he was teaching all day and night. When he reached the island of Malta, he was wet and cold and exposed to danger, before the natives come to help him¹.

(Ambrosiaster)

2- THE KINDNESS of THE INHABITANTS OF MALTA

“And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling, and because of the cold” (Acts 28.2).

The inhabitants of Malta were no doubt civilized people, although called ‘natives’ (or barbarians) by the Greeks and the Romans, as their language was not understood by them. The word ‘barbarians’ meant ‘foreigners’. Along its history, it submitted to the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Carthaginians, and the Romans. Having been inhabited after the Phoenicians by some people from Cartage, the language of the inhabitants of Malta has been North-African mixed with other languages.

What is a better hospitality for a group of 276 individuals who suffered long of cold wind and dense rain, together with mighty waves and pitch darkness, than to kindle a fire to warm them up and to dry their clothes? Under those circumstances, that crowd gathered together around the fire, as though around a banquet richer than food or drink. The natives did not ask those people about their nationalities or their religions, but with great compassion, they received them all.

We marvel before the natives of Malta, who, although themselves pagans, have not despised the prisoners, but did their best to accommodate everyone with no discrimination between an officer and a prisoner, or between a ship captain and a passenger. God has provided St. Paul with a new motive to minister among the Gentiles, through the kindness, care, and love, shown to him by the Roman centurion, something he did not find among his kinsmen the Jews. And here, he finds unusual kindness from the natives of the island, for free.

He had the same experience of the prophet Jonah when he was on board a ship, and the pagan crew showed piety, and asked the prophet to pray to his God. And when they found out that he was the cause of the disaster they were facing, they tried hard to save him despite his appeal to them to throw him into the sea. Yet there is a great difference between a prophet fleeing from the ministry among the Gentiles, because of his love for his people; and an apostle whose heart accommodates everybody whatever his race is.

- ❖ "Let those be ashamed that say, do not do good to those in prison: let these barbarians shame us; for they knew not who these men were, but simply because they were in misfortune (they were kind):

¹ *Comm. On Paul's Epistles (2Cor. 11.27).*

thus much they perceived, that they were human beings, and therefore they considered them to have a claim upon their humanity" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 54.*

3- A VIPER FASTENING ON THE APOSTLE'S HAND

“But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand” (Acts 28.3).

Having been wet and cold after their tribulation, everyone was in need of a nice fire, more than of food and drink; especially that, according to the council of the apostle Paul, they ate before leaving the ship. St. Paul gave himself no special privilege, having been the cause of their good fortune, but joyfully he got busy gathering bundles of sticks to lay on the fire for the sake of the comfort of all.

Together with his care to use every opportunity to testify to the Lord Christ, whatever the circumstances are, St. Paul has got the spirit of activity and work to serve others. Although he was unjustly bound, his mentality was so intact that ***“gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them down on the fire”***.

The viper, after being in a state of hibernation because of the severe cold, once it got warm by the fire, it jumped to get fastened on the apostle's hand.

“So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, ‘No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live’”(Acts 28.4).

According to those natives, the divine justice has to take its course, that death to a murderer should come to him through the same guilty hand that stretched to shed blood. They were taught this by the natural law; yet their verdict was in haste, as what happened with the apostle was never expected by them or by anyone else.

“Justice” for some pagans was represented by the daughter of the god ‘Jupiter’, whose work was revenging against the unjust, and condemning those guilty of crimes.

Pagans are wrong to assume that divine justice has to be realized in this world. Some murderers live longer, and enjoy better and stronger health, despite their unbelief in the great day of the Lord, when they would fall under judgment. They are also wrong to assume that everyone who is hurt or harmed is definitely under a just punishment; and that sickness and temptations only come on sinners.

It is not just the pagans who believe this; even the prophets, also assuming that divine justice should take place in this world, at certain times marvel when they see the wicked prosper. The Psalmist says: “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a native green tree” (Ps. 37.35). But this would not last long, as “Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more” (Ps. 37.36).

They talked about St. Paul as someone already dead, as no one in that situation would ever live.

“But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm” (Acts 28.5).

“He shook off the creature” The Lord allowed that to give the opportunity to Paul to preach to the Lord Christ who grants us the authority over the serpents. The apostle shook the creature off with no disturbance or asking for help, because Christ, the Grantor of life and conqueror of death is inside him.

- ❖ “You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra; the young lion and the serpent you shall trample under foot” (Ps. 91.13). He has chosen the strongest and deadliest animals to express the devilish work in all forms of evil, as the lion and cobra refer to might and violence, while the serpents refer to extreme evil. Yet several of God’s men confirmed His promise, like the prophet Daniel who shut the mouths of lions, and the inspired Paul who was not harmed by the viper. We should not also forget the righteous Noah, who lived among the animals and was kept from any harm. And there are numerous examples of God’s men who chose a life of monasticism among wild beasts, not harmed through their hope in God¹.

(Father Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus)

- ❖ That is why, and for a reasonable reason, the Lord became like a “deer”, and so are those who carry His word, of whom He says: “In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and **if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them**” (Mark 16.17-18). This was proved when a viper jumped from a bundle of sticks and fastened its fangs on Paul’s hand; and as the natives saw it hanging from his hand, they assumed that he is definitely dead (Acts 28.3-6); and when he shook it off him into the fire, and stood unharmed, they assumed that he is some kind of god, or, with God’s grace he is super human. Look at the deer as it drags the serpents out of its places of hiding, “by the Spirit of God in its nostrils”; And at the apostle Paul when he, “greatly annoyed turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her’; and he came out that very hour” (Acts 16.18). Look at the “Deer”, as he came to the water brooks (of baptism), that became pure through the holy fountain, casting away all poisons of persecution. Look at the “deer”, the Lord Jesus, as He came to John the Baptist, who said to Him, “I have need to be baptized by You, and are you coming to me”? But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Permit it to be so now’” (Matt. 3.14-15). Having said that, He went down eagerly into the water, **having been thirsty for the salvation of mankind**².

(St. Ambrose)

- ❖ The evil spirits have no authority to harm anyone, which is obvious in the case of the blessed Job, whom the devil could not attack, except within limits allowed by God. ... These spirits themselves admitted that, when, according to the gospel, they said to the Lord Christ, “If you cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine” (Matt. 8.31). **So, if they have no authority to enter into the dumb unclean animals except by permission from God, how could they enter into man who is created according to God’s image?!**

If those enemies (the demons) have authority to harm and to tempt us, no monk could have lived alone in the wilderness. ... That is demonstrated more clearly in the words of our Lord and Savior, who

¹ *Comment. On Ps. 91.*

² *The Prayer of Job and David, B.4, 1.5.*

said to Pilate, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19.31)¹.

- ❖ It is obvious that the unclean spirits are not capable of finding their way into the bodies of their victims, unless they reign first on their minds and thoughts, to deprive them of fear from God, thinking, and contemplating in Him; after which they can dare to approach them as someone with no divine protection, bind them with ease, and find a dwelling place in them, as though they have the right to possess them².

(Father Cirinus)

There are two things that preoccupy the heart of a preacher of the gospel of Christ: To enjoy the fellowship with God, and to destroy the hosts of darkness. As much as the heart of a believer opens for the dwelling of God, enjoys reconciliation with Him, and carries the new nature, the devil would not have authority on him. This is our preaching: The conquest by God over Satan and all his hosts.

“However they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead; but after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god” (Acts 28.6).

What men see as a curse, God sees as a grace; what the devil tried to add to the sufferings of the apostle, including probable death, has turned into glory to God and more honor to Paul. Through that viper by which the enemy intended to put the apostle Paul to shame and disgrace, and to get rid of him, a door to preaching and testimony was opened before him, and he stayed in that island to minister to its people.

It is claimed that the apostle Paul has cursed that viper, and consequently there are no serpents or snakes ever since in Malta.

According to their experience, the natives expected to see Paul swelling up falling dead; and when this did not happen, they counted him as a god, capable of overcoming death. They used to worship unknown gods, and did not expect from them something greater than what they saw from Paul.

Having rebuked Satan, saying to him: “Away from Me Satan”, the Lord Christ granted His disciples the spirit of victory and conquest. That is why, with no hesitation or haughtiness, Paul shook away the viper into the fire to burn. He granted us the authority to do the same thing to temptations, not fearing them.

4- HEALING PUBLIUS’ FATHER

“Now in that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days” (Acts 28.7).

¹ *Debates with the Desert Fathers. 22.7.*

² *Debates with the Desert Fathers. 24.7.*

In the excavations of this island, a rock with the name of ‘Publius’ engraved on it, as the leading citizen of the island, was found¹. Yet we are not sure if he was a native, or a representative of Caesar, acting as governor.

“And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him” (Acts 28.8).

Publius' father was sick of a fever and bloody flux.

“So when this was done, the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. They also honored us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary” (Acts 28.9-10).

The natives of the island and their leaders looked at the apostle Paul and those who were with him as a gift from heaven to them, through whom they enjoyed many blessings and heavenly comforts, beside signs of healing.

- ❖ "See how all this is done for the sake of Paul, to the end that the prisoners should believe, and the soldiers, and the centurion. For if they were very stone, yet from the counsel they heard him giving, and from the prediction they had heard him making, and from the miracles they knew him to have wrought, and from the sustenance they by his means enjoyed, they must have got a very high notion of him"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

5- IN AN ALEXANDRIAN SHIP

“After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship whose figurehead was the Twin Brothers, which had wintered at the island” (Acts 28.11).

The ship was broken up in the first half of the month of November; and after three months, in mid February, the breezes of early spring started to be felt, and to indicate that sailing would be safe.

Ships at that time used to be named by the figurehead on it, which was the ‘Twin Brothers’ in the case of that Alexandrian ship.

The ‘*Twin Brothers*’, a translation of the Greek word ‘Dioscuri’, meant the (sons of Zeus), referring to two twin brothers considered as gods, believed to be the intercessors for seamen, who protect them against dangerous storms. Their names are Castor and Pollux, sons of the god Zeus or Jupiter from Lyda the wife of Tindarus the king of Sparta. After their death they departed to heaven, and were granted divine authorities concerning the affairs of seamen and the commitment to protect them.

“And landing at Syracuse, we stayed three days” (Acts 28.12).

Syracuse is the main city in Sicily, located on its south-east.

¹ W. Conybeare. *Life and Epistles of Paul*. Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1987. p.660, n. 3.

² *Homilies on Acts*. Hom. 54.

“From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli” (Acts 28.13).

As the wind was not favorable, they were committed to circle round, going backward to reach Rhegium.

Rhegium: An Italian city facing Messina in Sicily, used to be affiliated to the kingdom of Calabria, called nowadays Reggio.

They spent one day in this city, during which he preached. It is claimed that a fish came to the shore to listen to him. Amazed by several miracles he did, the inhabitants of this city accepted the faith and were baptized, and Paul ordained one of his companions in the journey, by the name of Steven, a Bishop on them. All that was realized in a single day.

After one day, the south wind blew; and the next day, they came to Puteoli.

Putioli, meaning (wells), is a sea port close to Naples, famous for its hot springs; it is called nowadays ‘Pozzuoli’ or ‘Pozzolana’, eight miles north-west of Naples.

“Where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And we went toward Rome” (Acts 28.14).

Christian brethren came to them; we have no knowledge how they came to believe; but what we know is that God works, and have unknown witnesses everywhere. Have they heard about the apostle Paul, and came to encounter with him, and to find comfort in him? Or did he hear about them, and called them, so that all would enjoy the fellowship together? The spirit of love prevailed among the Christians in the entire world; and every believer found comfort in fellowship with his brethren in Jesus Christ.

They invited the apostle Paul to stay with them seven days, probably to attend together with him the day of the Lord, not expecting to see him again. It is amazing that the centurion who was in charge of Paul and the other prisoners consented to this. He probably had in Puteoli some friends or some work to take care of; or he found in it an opportunity to listen to the apostle Paul before delivering him to Rome.

“And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as Api Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage” (Acts 28.15).

The brethren in Puteoli probably sent to Rome to inform them beforehand of the coming of the apostle Paul.

The Church of Rome came out to receive the prisoner Paul. Some of them came to Api Forum, 50 miles far from Rome; and others came to the Three Inns, 30 miles far from Rome. The church was not ashamed of coming out to honor that amazing prisoner, the true witness to the gospel, not fearing the authorities, but counted it as a double honor.

Api Forum was a city famous for its one-storey hotels and its market for the seamen, and was a center for those coming from all over the world. In it, the Christians found a chance to encounter and get

acquainted with brethren from everywhere in the world, to whom they gave hospitality, and with whom they celebrated the liturgy of the Eucharist.

As the news of the coming of the apostle Paul spread, many came to see him, who have previously got to know him, or became disciples through him, as he had (given birth) to them in the gospel of Christ, as well as many who heard about him but have not seen him before. The first of those who came were probably Aquila and Priscilla, about whom he wrote in his epistle to the Romans: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house" (Rom. 16.3-4).

The last chapter in his epistle to the Romans came to reveal the existence of holy congregations, or several churches, but not a centralized church in Rome. Those congregations had strong relationship with the apostle Paul, with no dissensions or divisions among them, as it was in Corinth. The apostle mentioned five of those congregations:

- 1- The church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (Rom. 16.5).
- 2- The church of the household of Aristobulus (Rom. 16.10).
- 3- The church of the household of Narcissus (Rom. 16.11).
- 4- Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, and Hermes, and the brethren who were with them (Rom. 16.14).
- 5- Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympus, and all the saints who were with them.

In the same chapter, other individuals were mentioned, who probably were not yet affiliated to a certain church.

The Three Inns was a city 10 miles far from Api Forum.

So the Christians of the two cities came and set forth together with the apostle Paul to Rome, talking about the joyful work of God amid the sufferings, along 17 miles until they came to Rome. Their hearts rejoiced for the exalted works of God, and the experience of all amid the fellowship of crucifixion with him.

- ❖ "Rome received him bound, coming up from the sea, saved from a ship-wreck-and was saved from the shipwreck of error. Like an emperor that has fought a naval battle and overcome, he entered into that most imperial city. He was nearer now to his crown. Rome received him bound, and saw him crowned and proclaimed conqueror. There he had said, I will rest together with you: but this was the beginning of a course once more, and he added trophies to trophies, a man not to be overcome"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 55.*

The apostle found comfort in his encounter with the believing brethren and was not preoccupied with what he heard of the arrogance and violence of Emperor Nero. He got in touch with the exalted love of God all along the dangerous journey, as well as with that of the congregation of the Church of Rome, so he offered thanksgiving to God who works consistently for the edification of His kingdom. He was encouraged to see the crowd of believers, and gave thanks to God who is working everywhere, especially in the capital of the empire that reigned on the world at that time. He heard about them, and now when he saw them in the warmth of faith, “He thanked God through Jesus Christ for them all” (Rom 1.8).

“**And took courage**”: An amazing expression by St. Luke, who offered God a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Was the apostle in his service in need for someone to give him courage? He joyfully entered into Rome; and having encountered with souls rejoicing in the Spirit, not preoccupied with his chains, but with the gospel of Christ, he took more courage. He found in them loving friends with whom to talk, as fellow travelers in his journey to heaven on the joyful road of the cross.

6- ALLOWING PAUL TO DWELL BY HIMSELF IN ROME

“Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard, but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him” (Acts 28.16).

“Now we came to Rome”: And so the divine promise to Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, to testify to the Lord Christ before Caesar, in the capital of the Gentile world, was realized. Although he came as a prisoner, yet he was not preoccupied with defending himself, but with working to the account of the kingdom of Christ. The apostle felt that he had a marvelous journey; although it was apparently a journey of sufferings, yet it was actually one of glories, that was recorded in heaven. It set many free of the bonds of darkness, and brought many to the light. In it, he experienced the passion together with Christ and enjoyed the power of His resurrection that has overcome death.

The apostle Paul finally came to the end of his journey. God realized to him his wish to preach in Rome, for which he longed, even though he entered it as a prisoner. He did not come to the capital like many of the emperors or leaders, preceded by magnificent processions, but entered into it to set together with its people a heavenly procession with a rejoicing Spirit.

God gave him favor in the sight of the centurion, the way He did when He gave favor to the prisoner Joseph in the sight of the keeper of the prison (Gen. 39.21).

The centurion delivered the prisoners to a captain of the guard by the name of ‘Barrus Afranius’¹. But God granted Paul grace in the hearts of his captors, to captivate the hearts of people by the love of Christ. Hearts opened to him, and the authorities allowed him to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him, not far from the general camp in the heart of Rome called ‘Praetorium’, close to the palace of Palatine, where Caesar dwelt. There, he stayed two years, during which he gained many

¹ Tacitus. History 12.42.1.

from Caesar's household, as it came in his epistle to the Philippians, saying, "All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household" (Phil. 4.22). As he also wrote: "So that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ" (Phil. 1.13). According to the church tradition, Paul baptized Nero's wife, whom he later killed, and through her he drew many of Nero's household.

Some believe that St. Paul came to Rome to encourage the church against the persecution of Nero. **St. John Chrysostom** tells about a lady in the imperial household. When she accepted the faith on the hand of the apostle Paul, and forsook her life of corruption, Nero was furious and ordered Paul to be imprisoned and killed.

All St. Paul's troubles turned to his benefit, to the account of the kingdom of God. He gained the centurion, as well as many of those who were with him on the ship; And in Rome, he was allowed to dwell by himself together with the soldier who was guarding him, that also turned to be for his benefit, as the presence of such a guard protected him from probable aggression. And so Paul experienced the hand of God who makes "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8.28). The presence of the apostle Paul in Rome, under such protection, together with giving him the liberty to receive visitors, presented to him chances to preach in a secure atmosphere, as no revolt could happen against him in the capital where the emperor dwelt.

❖ "For this is a marvelous thing that not by the things which seem to be for our security, but by their very opposites, all comes to be for us. And that you may learn this-Pharaoh commanded the infants to be cast into the river (Exod. 1.22). Unless the infants had been cast forth, Moses would not have been saved, he would not have been brought up in the palace. When he was safe, he was not in honor; when he was exposed, then he was in honor. But God did this, to show His riches of resource and contrivance. The Jew threatened him, saying, "Do you intend to kill me?" and this too was of profit to him. It was of God's providence, in order that he should see that vision in the desert, in order that the proper time should be completed, that he should learn philosophy in the desert, and there live in security. And in all the plottings of the Jews against him the same thing happens: then he becomes more illustrious. ... You see that trials in every case bring forth great good even in this life, much more in the life to come"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

7- AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE LEADERS OF THE JEWS IN ROME

"And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews; So when they had come together, he said to them, 'Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans'" (Acts 28.17).

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 54.

The Jews in Rome: The first Jews to come to Rome were the Maccabee Jews in the year 168 AD, followed by many to set for themselves the first synagogue there. In Jerusalem, they were represented by the synagogue of the Libertines; namely, the Liberals or the Liberated, as they were brought to Rome as captives by Pompey, after his invasion of the east in the year 63 AD. They eventually got their freedom, grew in number and prosperity, and were joined by many rich Jewish traders, who cared to send regular help to their home country. Many of them gained the Roman citizenship like the historian Josephus, and had some influence on Rome. Seneca the philosopher says that the subjugated gave their subjugators the laws. Although many Romans converted to Judaism, yet Italy used to hate the Jews. That hatred grew until they were expelled, then soon returned to become more prosperous, to enjoy freedom and equality in rights, and to have seven synagogues in Rome.

Even in Rome, the capital of the world of the Gentiles at that time, the apostle Paul was faithful to his principle, that is to preach “first to the Jews then to the Greeks”. That is why he testified first before the leaders of the Jews, of whom some were persuaded by the things which were spoken (Acts 28.24).

- ❖ "Such was the eagerness of the brethren, it nothing disconcerted them, that Paul was in bonds"¹.
- ❖ "After three days he called the chief of the Jews, that their ears might not be preoccupied. And what had he in common with them? For they would not (else) have been like to accuse him. Nevertheless, it was not for this that he cared; it was for the teaching that he was concerned, and that what he had to say might not offend them"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

The apostle Paul called the leaders of the Jews for the following reasons:

1- To tell them that he was still proud to be referred to them, and that he would never take a position against his people, whatever the case might be.

2- Although he appealed to Caesar; yet he had to do that, as he was delivered to the Roman authorities in Jerusalem, and there were plots to kill him.

3- As he used to do, he intended to begin his preaching among the Jews, then to go to the Gentiles. Although he came in chains to Rome, he was proclaiming to the Jews the evangelic truth, confirming that the gospel of Christ is the goal of the sound Jewish tradition. He did not take a position contrary to the fathers, to the prophets, or to the law, as they falsely accused him.

He addressed them with the spirit of brotherhood, as a friend, and as one of them, saying: “*Men and brethren*”.

“Who, when they had examined me, wanted to let me go, because there was no cause for putting me to death” (Acts 28.18).

¹ Homilies on Acts. Hom. 54.

² Homilies on Acts. Hom. 54.

The apostle made it clear that he did not commit any crime that warrants death, as even the Romans themselves testified to that. He did not say anything against the law or the prophets; But their accusations concentrated on his friendship with the Gentiles, and his desire to open before them the door of salvation, as they embraced hatred toward the Gentiles (Gal. 2.12). Here he was addressing Jews who lived among the Gentiles, in Rome, the capital of the Gentile world.

“But when the Jews spoke against it, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation” (Acts 28.19).

With the Spirit of a Christian who bears love toward his opponents, he did not appeal to Caesar to accuse his accusers, or to accuse his nation.

- ❖ "See what friendliness of expression "my nation:" he does not hold them as aliens. He does not say, I do not accuse, but, “not that I had anything of which to accuse my nation”, although he had suffered so many evils at their hands. But nothing of all this does he say, nor make his speech offensive: neither does he seem to be sparing them as matter of favor. For this was the main point, to show that they delivered him prisoner to the Romans, when those ought to have condemned him”¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

“For this reason therefore I have called for you, to see you and speak with you, because for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28.20).

Although he talked to them, while he was bound by a chain to the soldier guarding him, yet he did not care, as he has put sufferings beneath his feet. And here he proclaims to them that he is bound with this chain for the sake of preaching the Messiah, for whom the fathers and prophets had for so long waited, and finally he came.

“And they said to him, ‘we neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren who came reported or spoken any evil of you But we desire to hear from you what you think; for concerning this sect, we know that it is spoken against everywhere” (Acts 28.21-22).

Some scholars believe that those leaders had not said the whole truth; they truly said that they had not received any letters or persons from Jerusalem who reported any evil of him. Yet they undoubtedly came in contact with Christians in Rome, and got to know the thoughts of St. Paul from them, as many of the leaders of the church in Rome met the apostle, got to know him in other cities, or accepted the faith on his hands. The leaders of the Jews probably hid that, to hear by their own ears the thoughts of the apostle.

Until then the Jews, as well as the Romans, considered Christianity as one of the sects of Judaism, and not a religion independent from it.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 55.*

8- A DAY OF TESTIMONY TO THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

“So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging , to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the law of Moses and the prophets, from morning till evening” (Acts 28.23).

Here, St. Luke reveals the role of the apostles and their work to testify to the Lord Christ, from the Old Testament, revealing the truth about the kingdom of God.

As someone of authority, by whom the Holy Spirit works, having been unable to go to the synagogues to encounter with the Jews in public places, they came to him in groups. For a whole day, he had nothing to do except to testify for the kingdom of God, and to confirm that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah.

❖ "See again how not by miracles but by Law and Prophets he puts them to silence, and how we always find him doing this. And yet he might also have wrought signs; but then it would no longer have been matter of faith. In fact, this (itself) was a great sign, his discoursing from the Law and the Prophets"¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

"Teaching the one salvation which from prophecy to the Gospel is perfected by one and the same Lord"².

❖ It is said that the blessed prophets are our eyes, as they had previously seen through faith the secrets of the Word, and had become ministers to these things pertaining to the successive generations. They not only talked about the past things, but also proclaimed the present and the future things. ...

As those have flourished by the Holy Spirit, and were honored by the Word Himself; and so were like musical instruments; and the Word for them was like the instrument ‘plectrum’, by which they worked together in harmony. The Word (Christ) exhorts them to proclaim the will of God. They were not talking by themselves, or according to their will³.

(Father Hippolytus)

9- A DISSENSION AMONG THE JEWS

“And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved” (Acts 28.24).

The apostle Paul spoke to them very clearly; yet they were divided among themselves. And as the Lord Christ said: “I came to send fire on the earth” (Luke 12.49, 51). And as the apostle Paul also says that the gospel of Christ bears the aroma of life to life, as well as the aroma of death to death (2 Cor. 2.16). Some of them received the light; while others shut their inner eyes against seeing it.

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 55.*

² *Stromata. 2.6.*

³ *Hippolytus. Treatise on Christ and antichrist. 2.*

“So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: ‘The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers. Saying, ‘Go to this people and say: Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive. For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears. Lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them’” (Acts 28.25-27).

The secret behind not hearing the truth and not seeing the divine light is their evil will, as they “refused to hear and to see” (Zech. 7.11-12). They close their ears and shut their eyes. Although they may hear by their carnal ears, yet those of their hearts cannot hear. They may see with their carnal eyes, yet the eyes of their heart are blind. They coveted their spiritual sickness, and were afraid that God may heal them. They are like Babylon, whom God wanted to heal, but as she rejected that (Jer. 51.9), God would not compel her.

The apostle Paul, by the Holy Spirit, quoted the words of Isaiah (Isa. 6.9-10).

“Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it” (Acts 26.28).

Here, the Book of Acts reached its climax. Its goal is to confirm that the Lord Christ has come for the salvation of the entire world, and is not confined to the Jews.

As the Jews rejected Jesus and did not receive him a king on them, but brought him out to the cross to get rid of Him; the leaders of the Jews, likewise, even after His resurrection, either in Jerusalem or in Rome, having embraced the same intention, and having persisted on rejecting Him, the door of faith has been opened wide before the Gentiles.

Here the apostle to the Gentiles proclaims that the rebellion of the Jews against the Lord Christ and his gospel was then consummated; and consequently the gospel had to cross over to the Gentiles to find in them a place to dwell.

The apostle Paul does not know the word ‘despair’: If a certain group rejects salvation, he goes to another. He believes that Jesus has not been crucified in vain; that His work will certainly bring on abundant fruits; and no opposition can break down his will, or can deprive him of his zeal to preach.

❖ Who is she, that was previously barren and desolate? She is obviously the church of the Gentiles, who has been lacking the knowledge of God. Who is she, the one with a husband? She is obviously the synagogue of the Jews. Now the barren has more children, as the Jews were just one nation; whereas the congregations of the Gentiles spread to the cities of the Greeks and the barbarians, and covered the land, the sea, and the entire world.

Notice how Sarah presented by her work (giving birth to Isaac), and the prophets by their prophecies, what has been realized to us (the enjoyment of many the sonhood to God). Notice that the one Isaiah called ‘barren’, Paul proved her to have many children, something that symbolically happened with Sarah, who, after being barren became a mother to many children.

Anyhow, this was not enough for Paul, who proceeds to demonstrate how the symbol conforms to the truth, adding: “*As for us brethren, we are, like Isaac, the children of the promise*”, by which he means that the church that had no knowledge of God, once she knew Him, she surpassed the synagogue who was previously fruitful¹.

❖ "But if He is of all, then He takes care of all; and if He cares for all, then He saves all alike by faith"².
(St. John Chrysostom)

“And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves” (Acts 28.29).

There had a great dispute between those who accepted the faith, and those who rejected it.

¹ in Galat., Chapter 4.

² in Rom. Hom 7.

10- ST. PAUL PREACHING FOR TWO YEARS IN ROME

“Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him” (Acts 28.30).

❖ The two chains and the guard could not hinder Paul from doing his work; and as he was not committed to work with his bound hands, food and drink were provided to him by law. And thus the chains turned into a cause for more success to the preaching. He wrote: “But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel; so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ” (Phil. 1.12-13).

❖ "It shows the freedom he had now: without hindrance in Rome, he who had been hindered in Judea; and he remained teaching there for two years" ¹.

(St. John Chrysostom)

❖ "He enters Rome in bonds, that he may free those who are in the bonds of error and superstition. Two years he dwells in his own hired house that he may give to us the house eternal which is spoken of in both the testaments (the old and the new ones)" ².

(St. Jerome)

“Preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28.30).

St. Luke left us at the end of the book without telling us what was the destiny of St. Paul, as what preoccupied him was not to write a biography of St. Paul, but to reveal his ministry and preaching. All along two years, despite his limited freedom to move around, he could receive all who came to him, in the presence of the Roman guard.

St. Paul most probably wrote his epistles to the Philippians, the Ephesians, the Colossians, to Philemon, to Timothy (the second), and probably to the Hebrews, during those two years in Rome.

In the tradition, it also came that after he was pronounced innocent, he set forth from Italy to preach in Spain (according to **St. Cyril of Jerusalem**), then to Crete, then together with Timothy to Judea. From there he went to visit the churches in Ephesus, to end up again in Rome, where he gained the crown of Martyrdom in the days of Nero in the year 64 AD or a while after.

❖ From Rome he set forth with the gospel to Spain, to end up again in Rome, where he was beheaded³.

(Father Theodoret Bishop of Cyrus)

¹ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 55.*

² *Letter 71.1.*

³ *Epistle to the Philippians, 1.25.*

According to the apostle Paul, those two years were so fruitful, that many believed even within the imperial household (Phil. 1.12-14).

- ❖ "(I wish to see) the dust of the heart, which a man would not do wrong to call the heart of the world, and a fountain of countless blessings, and a beginning, and element of our life. For the spirit of life was furnished out of it all, and was distributed through the members of Christ, not as being sent forth by arteries, but by a free choice of good deeds. This heart was so large, as to take in entire cities, and peoples, and nations. "Our heart is wide open" (2 Cor. 6.11). Yet even a heart thus large, did this very charity that enlarged it many a time straiten and oppress. For he says, "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I write to you" (2 Cor. 2.4). Paul's heart was Christ's. It is a speech about love"¹.
- ❖ "Would that it were now given me to throw myself round the body of Paul, and be riveted to the tomb, and to see the dust of that body that through which Christ uttered"².

(St. John Chrysostom)

St. John Chrysostom ended his homilies on the Book of Acts, by saying the following about St. Paul:

"His Acts you have seen in part; such are they all throughout, teeming with dangers.

He was a heaven having in it the Sun of Righteousness, not such a sun (as we see): so that that man was better than the very heaven. ...

So that one would not err in calling Paul's heart both a sea and a heaven, the one for purity, the other for depth. He is a sea, having for its voyagers not those who sail from city to city, but those from earth to heaven: if any man sails in this sea, he will have a prosperous voyage. On this sea, not winds, but instead of winds the Holy and Divine Spirit wafts the souls which sail thereon: no waves are here, no rock, no monsters: all is calm. ... He who wishes to descend into this sea, needs not divers, needs not oil, but much loving-kindness (filanqrwpiaj): he will find in it all the good things that are in the kingdom of Heaven. He will even be able to become a king, and to take the whole world into his possession, and to be in the greatest honor; he who sails on this sea will never undergo shipwreck, but will know all things well. ...

let us emulate Paul, and imitate that noble, that adamant soul: that, advancing in the steps of his life, we may be enabled to sail through the sea of this present life, and to come unto the haven wherein are no waves, and attain unto the good things promised to them that love Him, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and Holy Ghost together be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen"³.

¹ *Hom 32 in Rom. in Morali PG 60 .697.*

² *Hom. 32 in Rom. PG 60 .678 ff.*

³ *Homilies on Acts. Hom. 55.*

AN INSPIRATION FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 28

A PREACHER WHEREVER HE GOES

- ❖ All on board the ship were saved.
The vision to Your Saint Paul was realized;
Yet in humility, he did not boast that he was the cause that they were saved from destruction.
But with the spirit of love, he gathered together bundles of sticks to help warming everyone up.
His actions, even those very simple,
Went in harmony with his words and teachings.
He testified to You with his words as well as with his practical love.
- ❖ A viper fastened to his hand and bit him.
He was presumed by the natives to be a murderer and a shedder of blood,
That his hand that stretched to kill was bit by the viper.
Everyone waited for the divine justice to come over him and kill him;
But there he is shaking the viper away with confidence.
After counting him as a murderer who would not escape from the hand of God;
They thought of him as a god, whom the viper could not kill.
He revealed the secret of Christ who dwells in him.
- ❖ He testified to his Christ before the ruler of the island, by healing his father.
The island then turned into a hospital,
And Paul became a physician who offered the Lord Christ as a medication for the soul and body.
- ❖ He entered into Rome with joy.
When the brethren saw him in chains,
They blessed him for his fellowship in crucifixion together with his Christ.
- ❖ He cared for his Jewish brethren.
And having rejected him, as they did to his Lord,
He started to preach strongly among the Gentiles.
- ❖ Blessed are you, O the amazing in preaching.
You knew no limits to preaching.
You saw in every man, Christ the Savior of souls.
You wished to bear in love all mankind.
You wished to embrace them, to carry them by the Holy Spirit of God to the bosom of the Father.

AN APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 28 ON THE

DESOLATION OF JERUSALEM¹

The Book of Acts ended with the captivation of St. Paul in Rome, where he spent two years, testifying to the Lord Christ in the Roman capital and even in the imperial palace. He gained many souls, as a sign of the opening of the door of faith wide before the Gentiles. Here is a summary of the events that took place in Jerusalem up to the desolation of the city in the year 70 AD.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

After the Jews had rejected the faith in Jesus being the Messiah the Savior, some deceiving personalities appeared, who claimed to have a message from God to liberate the Jewish nation from the Roman occupation, something that never preoccupied Jesus. After drawing many Jews to them, they were eventually killed together with their followers.

Animosity between the Jews and the Romans grew more and more: the Jews felt humiliated to pay taxes to a foreign nation. Moreover, certain Roman leaders defiled the temple, by setting statues in it. The people rebelled against the governors, and corruption and chaos prevailed on all levels.

Roman governors successively followed one another, with one goal: to collect riches at the expense of the people, until the injustice of Jesus Flores and his incredible corruption became a cause of a general uprising against the Romans. The war started in the fortress of Mesadda, close to the Red Sea, where some Jewish worriers attacked and killed all the Roman garrison by the sword. Then, the rulers of the Jews declared mutiny against the Roman authority; The Jewish priests refused to go on offering sacrifices for the sake of the success of the Roman emperor; and the people started to attack and kill the Roman soldiers wherever they found them. The Syrians joined forces with the Romans against the Jews, and war began between the two sides.

Hearing the news, Sestius Callus, the Roman governor of Syria, set forth with a great army toward Jerusalem. Although the Jews killed many of them, yet the Romans managed to break into the lower part of the city and set it on fire.

When Sestius returned to his camp, the Jews were encouraged. Many of them set forth to the camp, killed many of his soldiers, and confiscated huge amounts of military equipments, that encouraged them to continue fighting. At that time, many of the Jewish people fled to the mountains, including the Christians, according to the commandment of the Lord Christ (Matt. 24.15-16); those were saved from the following war, as the city was sieged.

¹ Cf. *The Holy Bible Associations in the East, Beirut. Commentary on the New Testament. 1977. P.170-171.*

When Sestios informed Nero of what happened, he sent Spasianus, his greatest commander at that time, leading an army of sixty-thousand men, to regain the forts that were taken over by the rebels. The Jews fiercely defended those strongholds, including that of Jutbata, which was protected by Josephus the Jewish historian and priest, whom the Jews set as a ruler over Galilee. When the city fell, Josephus wrote down the history of his nation and its bitter fall. The Romans then took over the rest of the strongholds of Galilee, in spite of the great courage of the Jews during the siege.

In the winter of the year 68/69, the Romans took over Berea, Idocea, and the southern part of Judea. However, Sepasianus did not hasten toward Jerusalem, but informed his leaders that he intends to wait a while, as dissension has taken place among the Jews in Jerusalem; they were divided into several parties, each of which took over a sector of the city, and started to fight each other. Then, a kind of civil war occurred, that wiped out their strength, and cooled down their zeal.

Spasianus had to go back to Rome because of the troubles that preceded ascending the throne of the empire, and delivered the responsibilities and leadership of the war to his son Titus. Titus sieged Jerusalem during the Passover of the year 70 AD, when about two million Jews assembled there to celebrate the feast. When the provisions in the city ended, a great famine took place, and the prophecy concerning it mentioned in (Deut. 28.48) was realized. It was claimed that about 600, 000 persons perished; and when Titus tried to convince the Jews to surrender, the heads of the different parties refused, and killed everyone who showed any tendency to surrender.

Because of the natural hard geographical location of Jerusalem, the Romans found great difficulty in forcing their way into the city; they entered first through its outskirts, then through its lower part, then the temple, which was a stronghold. Finally, after five months of the beginning of the siege, they forced their way through the upper part of the city. Titus was interested in keeping the temple as a magnificent piece of work to be proud of; but a soldier started a fire contrary to orders, that destroyed the whole temple, except for the holy golden vessels. Many were killed, and many were taken captives, and sent to work in mines in Egypt and in other places.

As the words of the Lord Christ concerning the desolation of Jerusalem and the temple were realized and the state of Israel has utterly fallen, the church in the whole world became independent of the Jews; and many Christians realized the necessity of setting themselves free of the literal Jewish rites.