

## **I. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW**

**A. Remember that the early NT church began in the city of Jerusalem. There important events took place (the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, outpouring of the Holy Spirit).**

**1. But Jesus had said that the Gospel must begin in Jerusalem, not end there (Acts 1:8).**

- a. God took the Gospel out of Jerusalem to other parts of Israel (Judea, and even Samaria) *by persecution*.
- b. Philip, especially, was called to bring the Gospel to the Samaritans, and to a man from Ethiopia. No doubt, that man brought the good news of Jesus to his fellow Ethiopians.
- c. And then Peter, after receiving a vision, brought the Gospel to a Gentile centurion called Cornelius.

**2. The greatest spread of the Gospel came through the missionary work of the Apostle Saul (Paul).**

- a. Saul (Paul) had not been one of the original Twelve Disciples – he had been an enemy of the church.
- b. He had persecuted the church in Jerusalem, in other cities, and even planned to destroy believers in Damascus, but God had stopped Saul when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus Road.
- c. Saul (Paul), the persecutor, had become Saul (Paul), the preacher of Jesus Christ. The Jews were angry and tried to kill him but he escaped.

**B. When the Jewish believers heard what Peter had done in preaching to the Gentile, Cornelius, they were angry and argued with Peter ("*Thou wentest into men uncircumcised and didst eat with them,*" Acts 11:3).**

**1. Eating with someone was a sign of fellowship. How could Jews have fellowship with Gentiles?**

- a. A Jew never enters the house of a Gentile! A Jew never eats with a Gentile! How could Peter *do* such a thing? Peter explained that this was the will of God: first, the vision; second, the HS had fallen upon these Gentile believers (Acts 11:17).
- b. When the Jewish believers heard this they praised God: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (v. 18).

**2. Saul (Paul) himself came down to Jerusalem to visit the church and meet the apostles.**

- a. You can imagine the reaction of the church in Jerusalem: here was a man who had until recently been persecuting, arresting and killing the believers. Was he really a changed man? Was this a trick? The believers did not trust him, and were afraid of him, and would not welcome him.
- b. Then Barnabas took Saul (Paul) and brought him to the apostles. Barnabas trusted that the Lord had truly changed Saul. He was no longer a dangerous man, but a fellow believer. And on Barnabas' recommendation the believers welcomed Saul (Paul).
- c. Saul (Paul) began to preach Jesus Christ in Jerusalem; and again, the Jews tried to kill him, so the believers in Jerusalem helped him escape to the city to Caesarea from where he went to Tarsus.

## **II. THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH**

**A. Through the persecution which had occurred before Saul's conversion the Gospel had spread. The good news of Jesus Christ went as far as the island of Cyprus and spread north to Antioch (see map).**

**1. In Antioch many of the people believed in Jesus, not only Jews, but also Greeks and Gentiles.**

- a. So great was the work in Antioch that the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to see the work.
- b. Barnabas was glad to see the grace of God at work in Antioch, but he could see that there was too much work for just one man, so Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul (Paul).
- c. Together, Saul (Paul) and Barnabas preached and taught in Antioch for a whole year.

**2. The people in Antioch gave these new believers in Jesus Christ a name: Christian.**

- a. Most likely, this was a nickname and it was not meant to be a compliment, but the name stuck because we still call followers of Jesus Christ "Christians" today.
- b. What the wicked people of Antioch meant for evil (a joke, even) God meant for good.

**B. While Saul (Paul) and Barnabas were busy preaching in Antioch and the church was growing there, God sent a prophet to the believers in Antioch to warn them. That man was called Agabus.**

1. Agabus warned the believers of a terrible famine which would be throughout the Roman empire.
2. The believers in Antioch began to collect money for the poorer believers in Jerusalem.
3. And Saul (Paul) and Barnabas travelled to Jerusalem to give the money which they had collected.

## **III. PERSECUTION UNDER KING HEROD**

**A. The first persecution of the church in Jerusalem was by the Jewish leaders, but when the chief persecutor (Saul [Paul]) was converted the churches had some peace. Then Herod the King began to attack the church**

**1. All the kings in the Bible named Herod were wicked men.**

- a. First, there was Herod the Great. He had killed the babies in Bethlehem when Jesus was born
- b. Second, there was Herod Antipas. He had imprisoned and then beheaded John the Baptist.

c. Third, there was Herod Agrippa. He is the Herod we consider now.

2. **Herod first arrested and killed James with the sword. Most, likely he beheaded James.**

- a. This James was the brother of John. He was first of the apostles to die. John would be the last of the apostles to die.
- b. Perhaps we might think that God would rescue James from prison. James had been in prison (with the other apostles) before but this time it was God's will for James to die.
- c. This does not mean that God hated James or loved James less than the other apostles, but God had no more work for James to do. James had finished his life and it was time for James to go to heaven. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15).
- d. It is not God's will, remember, always to rescue His people from persecution. Often, God brings His people through persecution but not even persecution can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:35-39).

3. **Herod saw that the Jewish leaders were pleased with the death of James so he arrested Peter.**

- a. This was around the time of Passover so Herod did not kill Peter immediately. He kept Peter in prison and planned to kill him after the Feast.
- b. To make sure that Peter could not escape (because Peter and the others had escaped before) Herod set soldiers to guard Peter: there were sixteen soldiers and Peter was chained to two soldiers, who would know if Peter moved. Outside the door of the prison other soldiers stood guard. Herod was sure that *this prisoner* would not escape!

**B. In the middle of the night, Peter was asleep, when suddenly the prison was filled with light.**

1. **God had sent an angel to rescue Peter.**

- a. Peter was asleep, because he knew that no-one could harm him. He was not lying awake worried about what would happen to him the next day. He was not afraid to die because he knew the Lord Jesus.
- b. The angel woke Peter up, but did not wake up the soldiers. The chains fell off Peter's hands.
- c. The angel told Peter to get dressed and follow him. Peter did so, and the gates of the prison opened before him until the angel led him out into the streets of Jerusalem.

2. **When Peter realized what had happened he made his way to the church. God's people were gathered in an upper room belonging to Mary, the mother of John Mark. And they were praying.**

- a. They were probably not praying for Peter's release, but more likely they were praying that God would give Peter courage to die for the glory of God. But God is able to do above what we pray (Eph. 3:20-21).
- b. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Who could that be? Perhaps, it is some of Herod's men. But the knocking continued so a girl was sent to listen at the door. She was called Rhoda.
- c. "Let me in," said a familiar voice. Rhoda recognized Peter. Rhoda was so filled with joy that she ran to tell the others without letting Peter in. They did not believe her, but Rhoda insisted that it was Peter. Peter kept knocking and finally they let him in. Peter told them what had happened. There was great joy.

3. **There was no joy among the soldiers the next morning when they discovered that Peter was gone.**

- a. None of the sixteen soldiers could explain it: the soldiers were there; the chains were there; the doors were locked! But Peter was gone!
- b. Herod in his fury had all the soldiers put to death: that was the punishment for allowing a prisoner to escape (Acts 12:18-19).

**C. Herod's miserable death**

1. **Soon after this Herod went from Jerusalem to Caesarea and there he gave a speech.**

- a. Herod dressed in his royal robes and sat upon his throne. The people wanted to please the King. They said, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man" (Acts 12:12).
- b. Herod was pleased with their calling him a god, and he did not stop them (remember what Peter had done when Cornelius tried to worship him); he did not give God the glory but loved the praise of men.

2. **God was angry with wicked Herod. God is always angry when men do not give Him the glory.**

- a. God sent an angel of the Lord to kill Herod. As he was speaking Herod began to feel terrible pain in his bowels, and he had stop his speech.
- b. His men carried him away and he died a very painful death as worms ate him! (Acts 12:23).
- c. In this way, God destroyed a wicked persecutor of His church. Remember, God is always protecting His church. He loves His church and everything He does He does for our good (Rom. 8:28).