

ACTS
for
EVERYONE

PART 2

CHAPTERS 13–28

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

To
John Pritchard and Mark Bryant
Fellow workers for the kingdom of God

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*’, he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The book of Acts, which I quoted a moment ago, is full of the energy and excitement of the early Christians as they found God doing new things all over the place and learned to take the good news of Jesus around the world. It's also full of the puzzles and problems that churches faced then and face today – crises over leadership, money, ethnic divisions, theology and ethics, not to mention serious clashes with political and religious authorities. It's comforting to know that 'normal church life', even in the time of the first apostles, was neither trouble-free nor plain sailing, just as it's encouraging to know that even in the midst of all their difficulties the early church was able to take the gospel forward in such dynamic ways. Actually, 'plain sailing' reminds us that this is the book where more journeys take place, including several across the sea, than anywhere else in the Bible – with the last journey, in particular, including a terrific storm and a dramatic shipwreck. There isn't a dull page in Acts. But, equally importantly, the whole book reminds us that whatever 'journey' we are making, in our own lives, our spirituality, our following of Jesus, and our work for his kingdom, his spirit will guide us too, and make us fruitful in his service. So here it is: Acts for everyone!

Tom Wright

MAPS

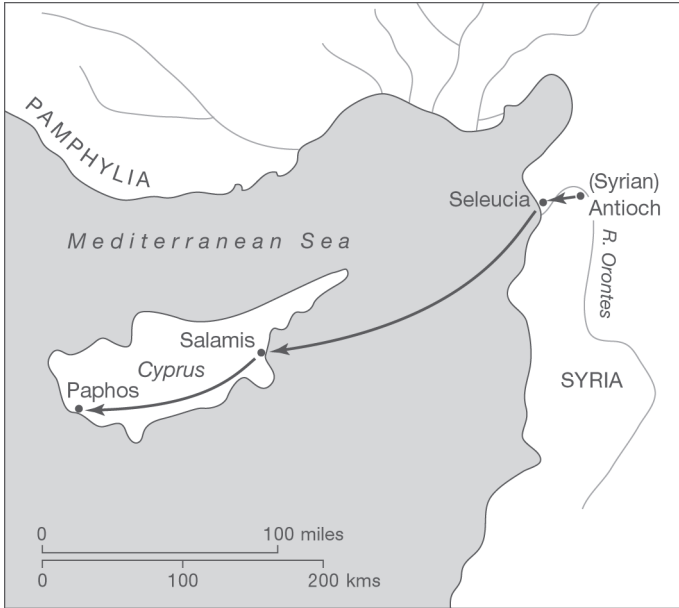
Map 1



The Eastern Mediterranean in the First Century AD



Map 2



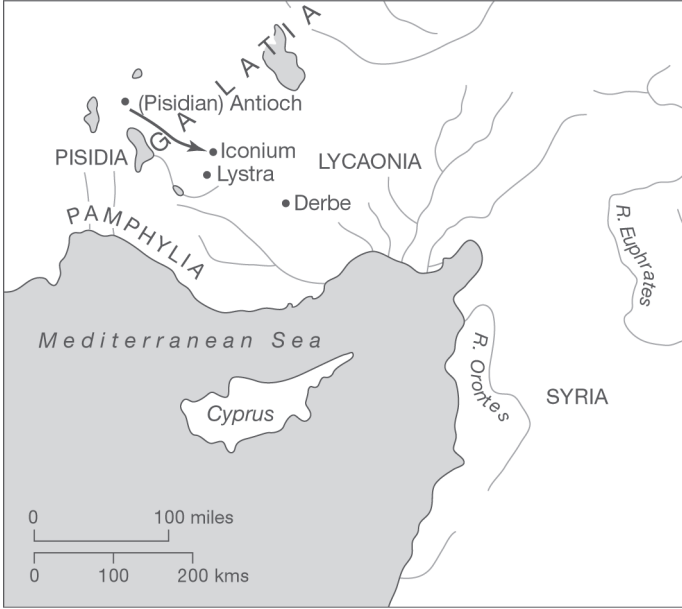
Acts 13.1ff

Map 3



Acts 13.13–25

Map 4



Acts 13.51

Map 5



Acts 14.1-7

Map 6



Acts 14.21–28

Map 7



Acts 15.1–11

Map 8



Acts 15.39-41

Map 9



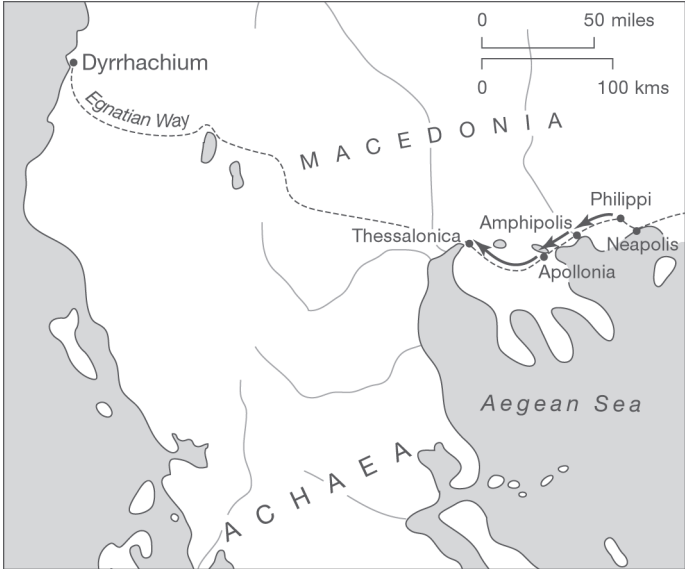
Acts 16.1-10

Map 10



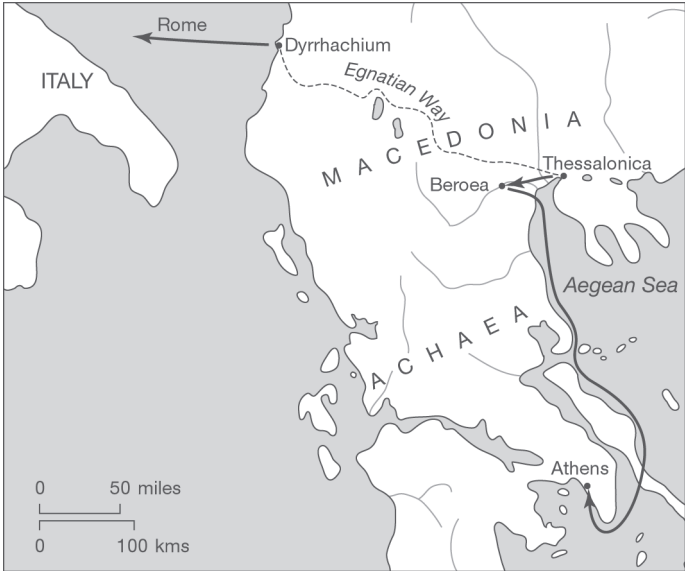
Acts 16.11-12

Map 11



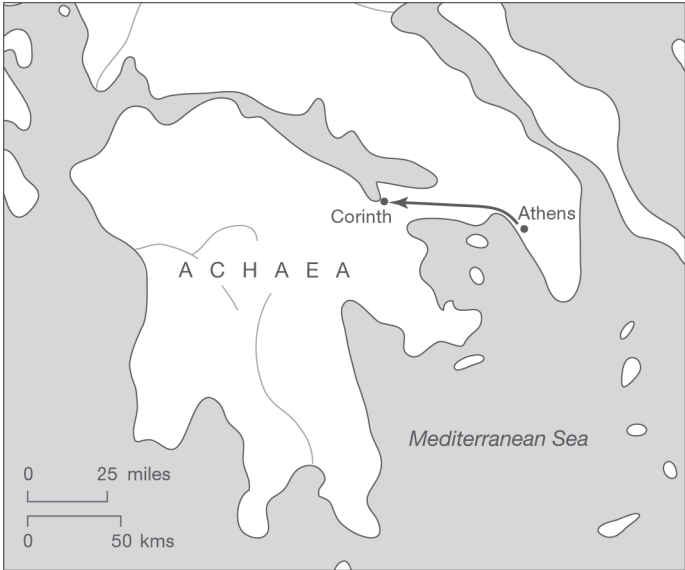
Acts 17.1

Map 12



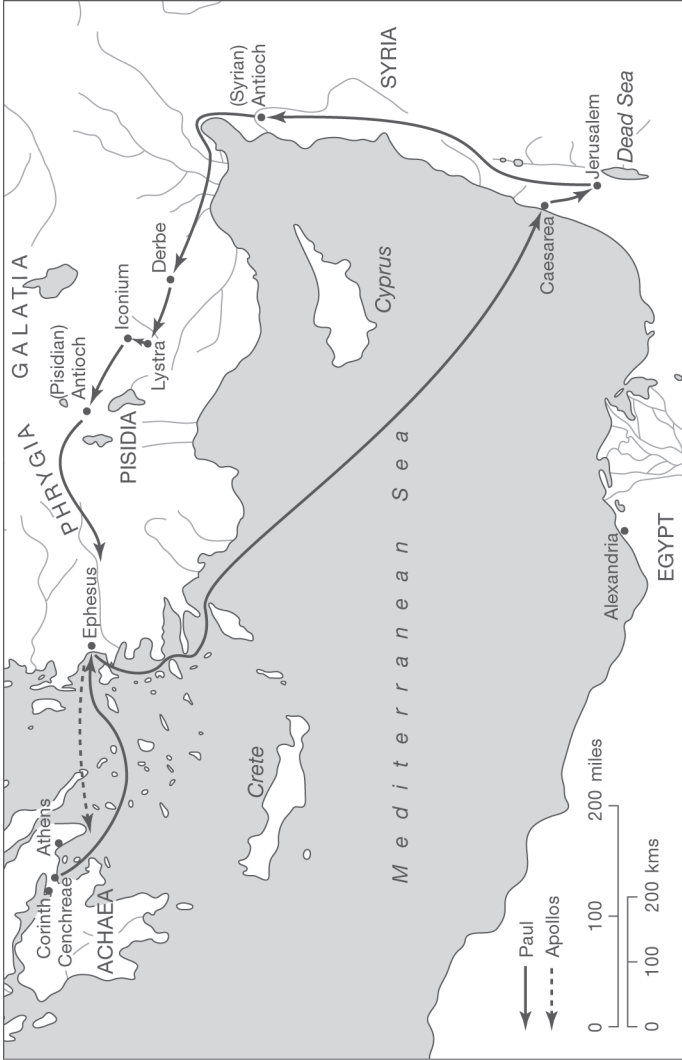
Acts 17.10–21

Map 13

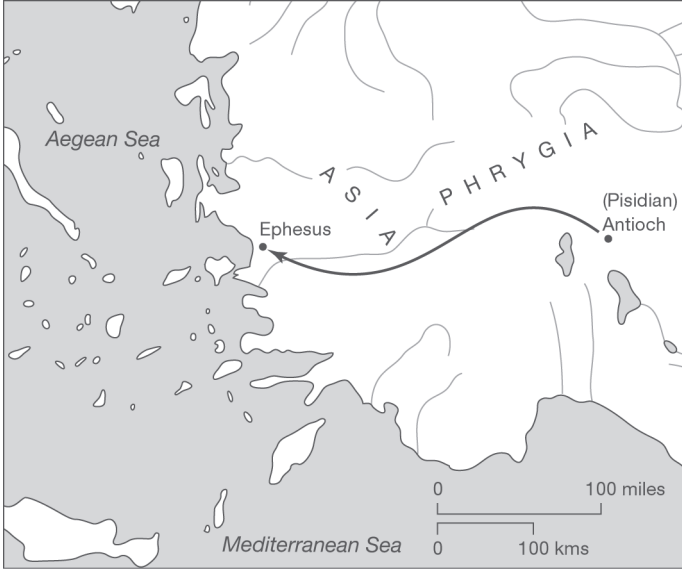


Acts 18.1

Map 14



Map 15



Acts 19.1-10

Map 16



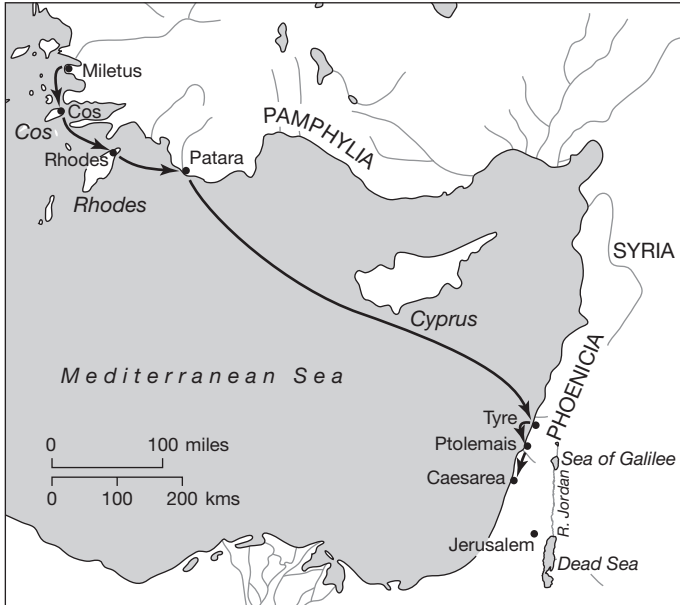
Acts 20.1-12

Map 17



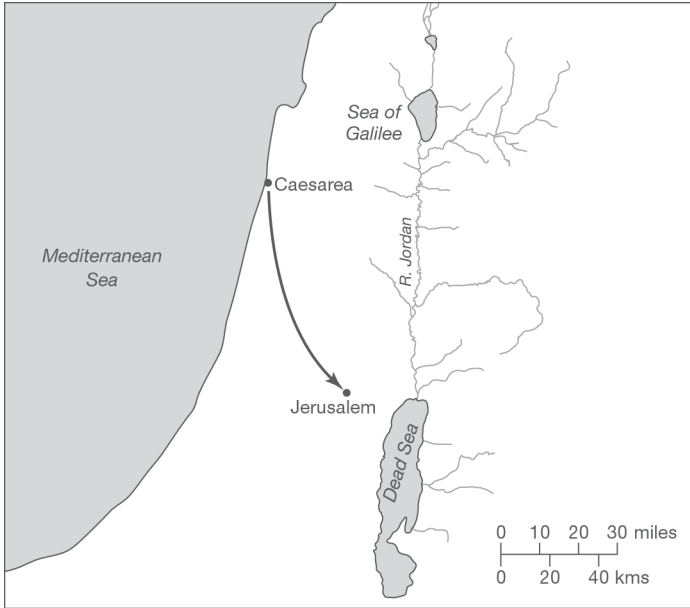
Acts 20.13–27

Map 18



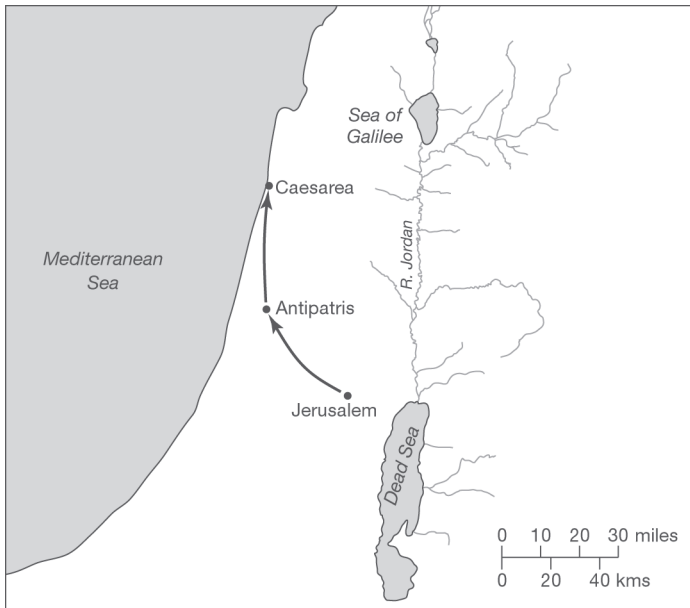
Acts 21.1–14

Map 19



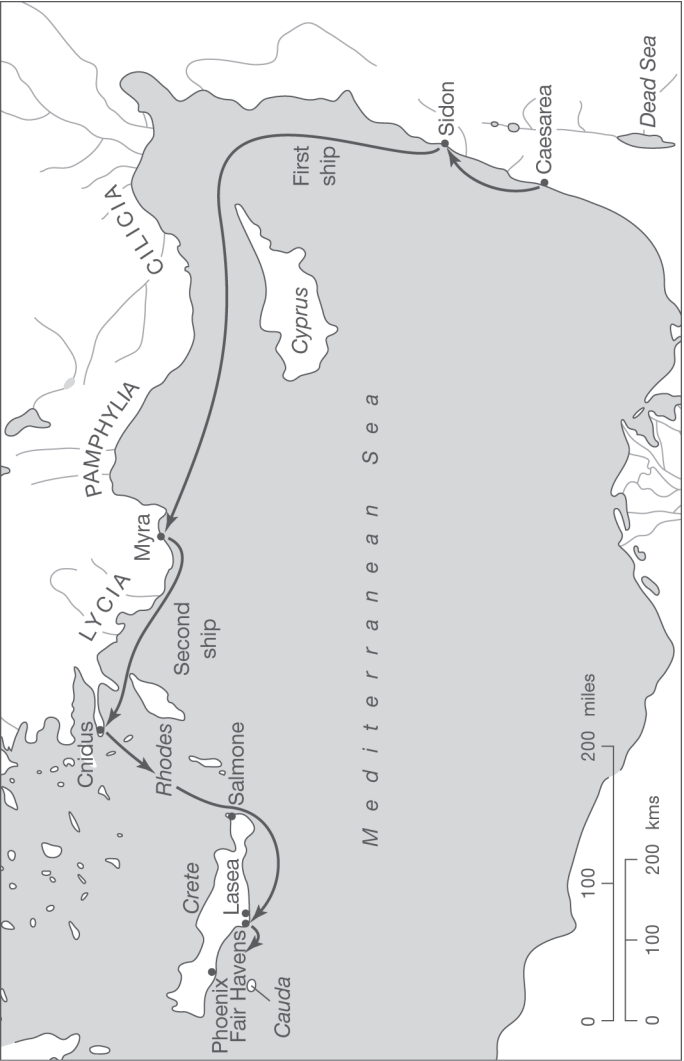
Acts 21.15–17

Map 20



Acts 23.23–35

Map 21



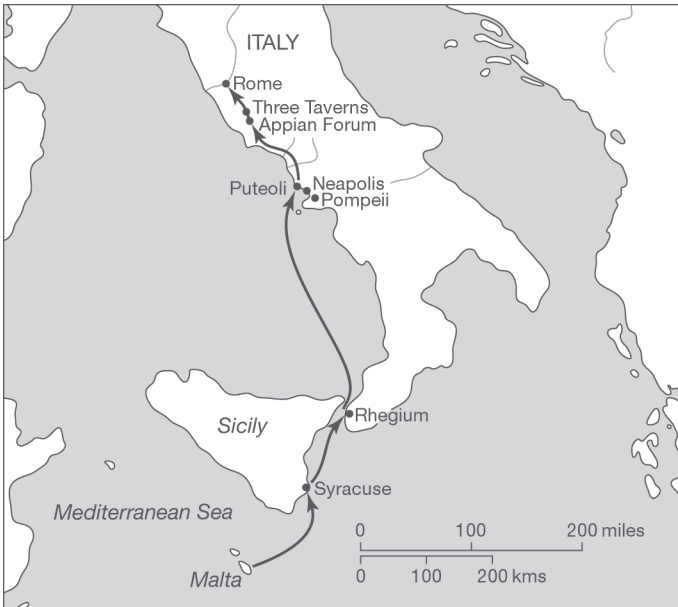
Acts 27.1-12

Map 22



Acts 27.13–32

Map 23



Acts 28.11–22

ACTS 13.1–12

Mission and Magic (See map 2, page xvi.)

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Symeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen from the court of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. ²As they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the holy spirit said, ‘Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ ³So they fasted and prayed; and then they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴So off they went, sent out by the holy spirit, and arrived at Seleucia. From there they set sail to Cyprus, ⁵and when they arrived in Salamis they announced God’s word in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their assistant. ⁶They went through the whole of the island, all the way to Paphos. There they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷He was with the governor, Sergius Paulus, who was an intelligent man. He called Barnabas and Saul and asked to hear the word of God. ⁸The magician Elymas (that is the translation of his name) was opposing them, and doing his best to turn the governor away from the faith. ⁹But Saul, also named Paul, looked intently at him, filled with the holy spirit.

¹⁰‘You’re full of trickery and every kind of villainy!’ he said. ‘You’re a son of the devil! You’re an enemy of everything that’s right! When are you going to stop twisting the paths that God has made straight?’ ¹¹Now see here: the Lord’s hand will be upon you, and you will be blind for a while; you won’t even be able to see the sun!’

At once mist and darkness fell on him, and he went about looking for someone to lead him by the hand. ¹²When the governor saw what had happened, he believed, since he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Jim was full of enthusiasm when he left college. From his earliest memories he had been passionate about justice, about fairness, about people respecting one another and being able to live together in harmony. He had always admired the police (in England, this used to be quite easy) and had seen himself as a pillar of the community, helping society to get along, warning those who were messing about, and himself gaining respect all round.

On his first day in the police station, an older officer came up to him.

‘Now then, young man,’ he said. ‘Let’s not have any of that “grand ideal” stuff round here. We don’t want anyone making a fuss where there’s no need. We’ll tell you who to go after and who to turn a blind eye to. If we all just blundered ahead with this crazy notion of justice, we’d never get anywhere! People are watching, you know. Think of your family, think of your pension. You’ll learn.’

And Jim realized he had a choice. Compromise or confrontation. A safe passage to mediocrity, or a dangerous route to getting the job done.

Many Christians in the Western world today simply can't bear to think of confrontation (except, of course, with 'those wicked fundamentalists!'). There really isn't such a thing as serious wickedness, so they think, or if there is it's confined to a small number of truly evil people, while everyone else just gets on and should be accepted and affirmed as they stand. Christian mission then consists of helping people to do a little bit better where they already are, rather than the radical transformation of life that, as we have seen, was happening all around the place in the early chapters of Acts. And so, when we come to this great turning-point in Luke's story, the start of the extraordinary triple journey that would take Paul right across Turkey and Greece and back again, and then again once more, and finally off to Rome itself, we would much prefer the story to be one of gentle persuasion rather than confrontation. We would have liked it better if Paul had gone about telling people the simple message of Jesus and finding that many people were happy to accept it and live by it.

But life is seldom that straightforward, and people who try to pretend it is often end up simply pulling the wool over their own eyes. It's a murky world out there, and though the choice of compromise is always available in every profession (not least in the church), there is in fact no real choice. What's the point in trying to swim with one foot on the bottom of the pool? You're either up for the real thing or you might as well pack it all in. And Saul and Barnabas were up for the real thing.

They had to be, after that send-off. Luke introduces 'the church in Antioch' with something of a flourish of trumpets; Antioch was on the way to becoming a second major centre of Christian **faith** after Jerusalem itself, and its leadership team was well known, with Barnabas and Saul among them. We get a fascinating glimpse of their regular devotional life: fasting and prayer surrounding the worship of the Lord, waiting for the **spirit** to give fresh direction. Whether they had been expecting something like this, we don't know. But to be told, suddenly, that two of the main leaders were wanted elsewhere must have come as something of a blow. (At the time of writing, I have just lost a close colleague who has been called to new ministry, and I am feeling the loss quite keenly.) But there are times, when you have been praying and waiting on God, when a new and unexpected **word** comes in such a way that you have no choice but to obey. And it's just as well that this is how things happen, because when you then run into problems, and especially confrontation, it would be all too easy to think, 'Oh no, we shouldn't have come.' But the answer, again and again, is, Yes, you should have come; and it is precisely because the **gospel** needs to make

inroads into enemy territory that you need that constant support of fasting and prayer. (One might speculate and suggest that, since the **holy spirit** hadn't mentioned John Mark, whom Barnabas and Saul took with them [as in verse 5], we shouldn't be surprised that he got cold feet early on in the trip and went back home; but this may be stretching the point.)

We are not told that the spirit specified Cyprus as their initial destination, though Luke omits many details and it's quite possible that the direction was clear. In any case, Barnabas came from that island himself and it was a natural first port of call. There seem to have been Christian missionaries at work there already (see 11.19), but we should never imagine that a few quick visits and a few early converts meant that a whole town, still less an entire island, had been 'evangelized'. There was still plenty to do, and Barnabas and Saul were not simply going to try to persuade one or two people. They were going to take the **message** to the heart of the Jewish community on the island, and then to the heart of its **Gentile** community. They sailed from Seleucia, the port of Antioch (Antioch, like Rome, sat a few miles up river from the sea), took the short crossing to Salamis, at the east end of Cyprus, and travelled along the main road round the south of the island until they came to the capital, Paphos, at the western end.

Straight away they established a pattern which would be repeated in place after place. People have sometimes imagined that, because Paul styled himself '**apostle** to the Gentiles', that meant he didn't bother any more with his fellow Jews, but nothing could be further from the truth. In Romans 1.16 he describes the gospel as being 'to the Jew first, and also, equally, for the Greek' ('Greek' here means, basically, 'non-Jewish'); and that describes, to a T, his practice as set out in Acts. Luke doesn't tell us what they said in the synagogues in Salamis and elsewhere, because he is saving that for when they get to the Turkish mainland, and because he has something sharp and important to report. When Barnabas and Saul arrived in Paphos, they met two people in particular: the Roman governor, and a local magician.

Both of these are important, as well as in themselves, for what they signify, for Luke and for us. We have already seen that Luke is very much aware of the larger Roman world for which he is writing, and though Roman officials in his book sometimes do the wrong thing for the wrong reasons he wants everyone to be aware that he will give credit where credit is due, and is not prejudiced, or eager to regard all officials, and especially all Romans, as automatically a danger to God's world and God's people. This is not unimportant for us to remember in our own world, where political polarization easily leads people into simplistic analyses and diagnoses of complex social problems, and to

a readiness to dismiss out of hand all authorities and anyone in power, whether locally or globally. In this case, the fact that Sergius Paulus had heard about Barnabas and Saul indicates well enough the kind of impact they had been making in his territory. The fact that he wanted to give them a fair hearing – and ended up apparently believing their message – is a wonderful start for their work.

But there is no advance for the gospel without opposition. Indeed, so clear is this truth that sometimes, paradoxically, it's only when an apparent disaster threatens, or when the church is suddenly up against confrontation and has to pray its way through, that you can be quite sure you're on the right track. On this occasion the gospel was invading territory which was under enemy occupation, and the enemy was determined to fight back. The enemy in question was the power of magic, which has already come up in Acts 8 and will recur in chapter 19. We who live in the curious split-level world, between modern scepticism on the one hand and the rampant culture of horoscopes and many other kinds of attempted raids on the supernatural on the other, would do well not to give a superior smile at this point. There are more things in **heaven** and on earth than are dreamed of in modern Western philosophies, and some of those things are very dangerous.

The confrontation comes to a head as the Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas (Luke says this is a 'translation', but it's clear he really means 'alternative name'), tries to persuade the governor not to listen to what the apostles are saying. But now it is the turn of Paul to do what Peter had done in chapter 8. Notice the 'looking intently' in verse 9, a feature we've observed before. Sometimes, in a context of prayer, it is possible to see right into someone's heart, even if we would rather not. When that happens, the only thing to do is to take the risk and say what you see. And what Paul saw was ugly indeed, though not (alas) uncommon: a deep-rooted opposition to truth and goodness, a heart-level commitment to deceit and villainy and, as a result, an implacable opposition to the **good news** about Jesus. Paul reacts sharply, declaring God's judgment on him in the form of temporary blindness (which he himself had suffered, of course, in chapter 9; did Paul hope that in Elymas's case, as in his own, this would lead to **repentance** and to embracing the gospel?). The result is that the governor believed the gospel. Luke says that he was astonished at the 'teaching of the Lord'; this clearly doesn't just mean the theological content of what was being said, but the power which it conveyed.

One obvious lesson from all this is that when a new work of God is going ahead, you can expect opposition, difficulty, problems and confrontation. That is normal. How God will help you through (and how

long he will take about it!) is another matter. *That* he will, if we continue in prayer, faith and trust, is a given.

One final note. Luke switches in this passage from the name ‘Saul’ to the name ‘Paul’, which he will now continue to use. ‘Saul’ was a Hebrew name, most famously used for the first Israelite king, whose noble and tragic story is told in 1 Samuel. Paul seems to be aware of this; he, like that king a thousand years earlier, was from the tribe of Benjamin, and on one occasion he quotes, in reference to himself, a passage about the choice of Saul as king (Romans 11.2, quoting 1 Samuel 12.22). Paul also mentions the king in Acts 13.21, in the speech we are about to hear. But the name ‘Saul’ didn’t play well in the wider non-Jewish world. Its Greek form, ‘Saulos’, was an adjective that described someone walking or behaving in an effeminate way: ‘mincing’ might be our closest equivalent. It was, to put it delicately, not a word that would help people to forget the messenger and concentrate on the message. So, like many Jews going out into the Greek world, Paul used a regular Greek name, whether because it was another name he had had all along, which is quite possible, or because it was close to his own real name, just as some immigrants change their names into something more recognizable in the new country. One thing was certain. Paul was serious about getting the message out to the wider world. When you even change your own name, you show that you really mean business, even if it will lead you into confrontation.

ACTS 13.13–25

Address in Antioch (See map 3, page xvi.)

¹³Paul and his companions set off from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and went back to Jerusalem.

¹⁴But they came through from Perga and arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, where they went into the synagogue on the sabbath day and sat down.

¹⁵After the reading of the law and the prophets, the ruler of the synagogue sent word to them.

‘My brothers,’ he said, ‘if you have any word of exhortation for the people, let us hear it.’

¹⁶So Paul stood up and motioned with his hand for attention.

‘Fellow Israelites,’ he said, ‘and the godfearers among you: listen.

¹⁷The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors, and he raised the people up to greatness during their stay in the land of Egypt. Then he led them out from there with his outstretched hand, ¹⁸and for about forty years he put up with them in the desert. ¹⁹He drove out seven nations from the land of Canaan, and gave them the land as their inheritance ²⁰for about four hundred and fifty years. After that, he

gave them judges, up until Samuel the prophet. ²¹After that, they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man from the tribe of Benjamin. He ruled for forty years, ²²and after God had removed him he raised up for them David as king. He is the one to whom God bore witness when he said, “I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will accomplish all my purpose.”

²³“From this man’s offspring, in accordance with his promise, God has produced a saviour for Israel: Jesus! ²⁴Before he appeared, John had announced a baptism of repentance for the whole people of Israel. ²⁵As John was finishing his course, he said, “What do you suppose I am? I am not the one. But look: someone is coming after me, and I am not worthy to untie the sandals on his feet.”

I sat in the small meeting room, intrigued at what I was hearing. I had been invited to a presentation organized by local councillors and businessmen in a particular area. They had a project, and they wanted support for it. There was an old factory, covering several acres, which the owners had abandoned. Now the council, together with local interest groups, wanted to develop the site in quite a new way, to make it a tourist attraction, to bring in visitors and, they hoped, new income for a deprived area.

But they didn’t start with the project. They began somewhere very different. They talked about the town, and about its history. They showed slides of how things used to be at the height of prosperity. They talked about the people who had grown up in the area, about how they had given their lives to working in the old factory, about the community spirit and the sense of place and history. They did everything, in fact, to demonstrate what a splendid community this had been, and should be . . . and could be. Only then, when they had done everything to demonstrate what a rich culture and heritage the area had, did they start, very carefully, to talk about the new plan. They stressed its continuity with what had happened in the past. They showed how the new innovations would fit in. They knew perfectly well that what they had come up with was quite different from anything that had happened before, but they wanted us on board and knew that simply to slap the proposal on the table would invite instant rejection. As I write, the proposal is still under discussion.

It’s good sense; and of course it’s what Paul does again and again, as he effortlessly now takes the lead where before it was Barnabas leading and him following. Perhaps, now that they are in Turkey, which was Paul’s home territory (Pisidian Antioch is about 200 miles west of Tarsus, and further inland), Paul feels himself more at ease. This is a typical diaspora synagogue; he knows how these people tick, the stories and songs they are familiar with, how to get the point across. We

will see a few chapters from now that when he is faced with different audiences – most noticeably in Athens in Acts 17 – he takes a very different line in order to achieve the same effect. But here he launches in to the history his audience knew and the hopes they already cherished.

Paul had an easy platform to do this, because it was customary in synagogues to allow visitors to give a fresh word of exhortation, following the reading from the **law** and the prophets. Indeed, some have suggested that Paul and Barnabas (John Mark has already left by this stage, as we see in verse 13) wore clothes which signified their status as qualified Jewish teachers, rather like someone showing up in an academic gown or a clerical collar; but this may be far-fetched. The important point is that the instant **fellowship** of Jewish people around the world, and the ready acceptance of previously unknown visitors to public worship, provided a natural context for Paul to announce the **good news**, as he was committed to doing, ‘to the Jew first’. (He also mentions ‘godfearers’; these were **Gentiles** who attended the synagogue, and worshipped the God of Israel, but who had not yet become proselytes and hence full members of the community.)

His approach was obvious. Like Stephen in chapter 7, he tells the story of Israel, bringing out particular points. But whereas Stephen had concentrated on Abraham, Joseph and Moses, Paul makes his way swiftly through the early years to arrive at the monarchy of Saul and David. What he says about the early period, though, is enough to establish the fact that God’s method of operation is to choose his people, to prepare them, to lead them through one stage after another, and then, finally, to give them ‘the man after my own heart’ as king. In other words, perhaps the main point of verses 17–20 is to stress that God’s purposes normally take a while to unfold, to get to the place where the ultimate purpose can be revealed. Unlike some in our own day who see the Israelite monarchy merely as a dangerously ambiguous flirtation with the wrong sort of power, Paul is quite clear: this was God’s will, and God was delighted to have arrived at the choice of King David after such a long time.

Now of course Paul would have been the first to agree that David, though he may have been ‘the man after God’s own heart’ (verse 22, quoting a combination of Psalm 89.20 and 1 Samuel 13.14), was also himself a man with deep and tragic faults and failings. Paul, indeed, cites David as a classic penitent, dependent on God’s grace for **forgiveness** (Romans 4.6–8). But the point is not that the story stopped at David, but that in working with Israel for several hundred years to produce the king who would establish the pattern of someone ruling over God’s people with justice and truth (that seems to be what ‘after God’s own heart’ is getting at), God was establishing a further pattern

as well: the notion of waiting for the true king, the ultimate king, ‘great David’s greater son.’

And so, as soon as he gets to David in his story, Paul moves on. In the next section of the address he will explain, in line with Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, how it is that things which David himself said or sang must be taken as referring, not to David himself, but to the descendant in whom they would be fulfilled. Here he simply declares, slicing through a thousand years of further waiting, that now at last God has produced for Israel the one who will rescue them. Notice, he says for *Israel*. Paul believes, of course, that what God has done in Jesus he has done for the whole world, but he makes it very clear, throughout this address, that the first stage is always to see Jesus in relation to Israel itself. He speaks, as one might to a synagogue audience, of ‘this people Israel’ (verse 17), and the whole point of the address is not that this is a model for how one might speak to just any audience, but that this is what has to be said to God’s people themselves. What God promised to our ancestors he has now fulfilled. The good news which bursts out of this for the Gentiles is exactly that: the good news that the creator God has fulfilled his **covenant** promises with Israel, promises which always envisaged blessing for the world. It is fatally easy for the church to tell the story of Jesus while simply ignoring the entire story of Israel. That is the way to produce a shallow, sub-biblical and ultimately dangerous theology.

Notice, too, that Paul refers to Jesus, right off the top, as ‘saviour’ or ‘rescuer’. He hasn’t said what Israel needed rescuing from. Later on he will talk about ‘forgiveness of sins’, but every Jew in the first century knew that all was not well on several levels; that Israel, though God’s people, were not living in freedom, were not being much of a light to the nations, and were often finding it difficult to keep their own law, whether because of pressure from pagan society or laziness within the Jewish community. All was not well: when would God’s purposes finally come true, when would Israel be rescued from her continuing plight? That is the implied question, a corporate as well as an individual problem, to which Paul offers the solution of Jesus the Saviour. It is vital, of course, that Jesus is a descendant of David; this was well known in the early church, and Paul refers to it at the foundation of his ‘**gospel**’ statement in his greatest letter (Romans 1.3). Hidden in the long years of gestation, the promise of a coming **Messiah** contained, not just a message for Israel, but good news for the whole world, as Psalms like 2, 72 and 89 had always insisted. But the message had to come to Israel first.

It is interesting to find **John the Baptist** playing such a prominent role in verses 24 and 25, corresponding of course to the place he has in all four gospels. It is as though one could hardly expect the Messiah to come unannounced, without Israel being prepared. And John, according to

Paul here, was doing two things in particular. He was getting people to repent, to turn back from everything which would hinder them from joining in the new work of God's **kingdom**. And he was pointing ahead to the one who was coming. Paul is setting up a system of signposts, from David a thousand years before to John a mere 15 or so years earlier. And all the signposts point to one person: Jesus the Messiah, the Rescuer. Paul's strategy is a challenge to us all, to understand our audience well enough to know how to tell them the story in a way they will find compelling, how to set up signposts in a language they can read.

ACTS 13.26–43

The Messianic Challenge

²⁶'My brothers and sisters,' Paul continued, 'children of Abraham's family, and the godfearers among you: it is to us that the word of this salvation has been sent! ²⁷The people who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, didn't recognize him, and they fulfilled the words of the prophets which are read to them every sabbath by condemning him. ²⁸Even though they found no reason to condemn him to death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. ²⁹When they had completed everything that had been written about him in prophecy, they took him down from the cross and put him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised him from the dead, ³¹and he was seen for several days by those who had come with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to the people.

³²'We are here now to bring you the good news which was promised to our ancestors, ³³that God has fulfilled this promise to us, their children, by raising Jesus. This corresponds, indeed, to what is written in the second Psalm:

'You are my son; this day I have begotten you.

³⁴'That he raised him from the dead, never more to return to corruption, conforms to what was written:

'I will give you the holy and faithful mercies of David.

³⁵'Because, as it says in another place,

'You will not hand over your holy one to see corruption.

³⁶'Now David served his own generation, and in the purposes of God he fell asleep and was gathered to his fathers. He did experience corruption. ³⁷But the one God raised up did not experience corruption. ^{38, 39}So let it be known to you, my brothers and sisters, that forgiveness of sins is announced through him.

Everyone who believes is set right in relation to all the things which the law of Moses could not put right.

⁴⁰‘Beware, then, lest what the prophets foretold comes true of you:

⁴¹‘Look out, you scoffers – be amazed, and disappear!
I am doing something in your days, a work which you wouldn’t
believe
even if someone were to explain it to you.’

⁴²As Paul and Barnabas were leaving, they begged them to come back the next sabbath and tell them more about these things. ⁴³Many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed them once the synagogue was dismissed. They spoke to them some more, and urged them to remain in God’s grace.

At the time I am writing this there is a massive global debate taking place. Led by senior figures in science and government, people everywhere are asking whether the world and its atmosphere are really warming up at the alarming rate that they seem to be doing, whether this is in fact caused by human agency as many people think and, if so – since the dangers from this warming are massive – what can be done about it.

This is a hugely important debate, and it carries a note of urgency. If it is indeed true that global warming and its attendant dangers are being caused by things we are doing, particularly by how we run our industries, then we must act swiftly. If we do nothing, the moment will pass, and the dramatic changes to our world will happen, with loss of life and livelihood and huge risks for social and cultural stability, leading potentially to massive displacement of people, to food and water shortages, and to the violence and war that desperate people resort to when everything is at stake. Fortunately (in my view) the churches around the world seem now to be in the forefront of this movement, as is only right.

There are no doubt many turns and twists, and not all the arguments advanced for the emerging consensus are as good as they should be. But few doubt that the situation is urgent and must be addressed at once. This is something strange and new in the Western world, where the prevailing philosophy most of us have imbibed is that we’ve more or less got everything right with our modern democracy, our business, commerce and industry, and that, if we just have more of the same and remain calm and sensible, a bright future is assured for us, our children and our world. The message is, This May Not Be the Case, and we need to do something about it urgently.

That is the kind of urgency which Paul now injects into his address. This isn’t simply a history lesson with a new ending. It is a history lesson which is rapidly turning into a warning: something new is happening under your very noses, and unless you join in you will miss out! God is doing a new thing, the new thing which he had long planned

and promised. When that happens, it isn't just something you might think about in long winter evenings and discuss over a drink with your friends, like the question of which is the best rock group in the last 30 years, or what to do about crime, or why the price of beetroot has dropped. This is more like someone rushing into a hotel bar and shouting that the river is rising, there are just a few boats left, and if you don't want to swim for it you'd better get on board right now.

Because the **resurrection** of Jesus, which is the main subject of this second half of Paul's address, has introduced a new note of urgency into everything. Jesus is risen, so new creation has begun. Jesus is risen, so God has at last fulfilled his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Moses, David and the prophets. Especially, here, David: Paul, like Peter in Acts 2, goes for the Psalms and for the teasing but pregnant things they have to say. Psalm 2, quoted in verse 33, speaks of the new birth of God's own son, the **Messiah** who is to rule and judge the nations. Psalm 16, quoted in verse 35, speaks here, as Peter said it did in 2.27, of an extraordinary promise: that this Davidic figure, though he might die, would not experience the normal corruption and dissolution of the body that takes place after death. How on earth can that be?

Well, in David's case it didn't happen. He died, was buried, and decayed. But – and this is a strong indication, if any such were needed, of what Luke, like the rest of the New Testament, thought 'the resurrection' was all about – Jesus did not experience corruption. He was raised up after being thoroughly dead and buried, so that his body did not decay. This, declares Paul, is the sure sign that he is indeed the one promised to David and through David, the one through whom God is bringing in the new world order for which he called Israel into being in the first place.

Paul also quotes a passage which was not in Peter's address in Acts 2, a passage which is of great interest for various reasons. 'I will give you the holy and faithful mercies of David.' As those words stand, this is a prophecy that what God promised to David, the sacred **words** to which God would be faithful, are now being fulfilled in Jesus. But the verse comes from Isaiah 55.3, which in context – and Paul knew his scriptures, not least Isaiah, very well indeed – belongs with the wonderful promise of new life breaking out for the whole world on the basis of the achievement of the Servant in chapter 53 and the consequent renewal of the covenant in chapter 54. 'Ho, everyone who is thirsty!' shouts the prophet, 'Come to the waters! Come and drink! It's all free! And it's for everybody!' And the point about the fulfilment of the promises to David in Isaiah 55.3 is that the promise is now being thrown open to all and sundry. No longer just for one man, or one family, but for all people. There is no contradiction here. As Paul

would insist, it is *because* God has been faithful to his promise in and through Jesus that the **message** can now go out to all the world. He is the Messiah (**‘Christ’**), and those who follow him are Messiah-people (**‘Christians’**). And, on this basis, Isaiah 55 continues with the wonderful, world-changing promise of the fresh word of God going out to renew, heal and transform the entire created universe.

With that message of resurrection and renewal as the focal point of his message, Paul needs to do two other things. First, as the lead-up to the explanation of resurrection, he needs to explain how it was, granted that Jesus was indeed the true heir of David, that the people of Jerusalem, especially their leaders, missed the point and didn’t recognize him. Here he touches, briefly but tellingly, on a deep and dark mystery which it will take all of Romans 9—11 to address in full. The Jerusalemites and their leaders, he says, didn’t understand the scriptures that were read to them **sabbath** by sabbath, *but they fulfilled those scriptures by condemning him*. It isn’t just that the scriptures spoke of the coming Messiah, and they failed to understand them. The scriptures spoke of the coming Messiah *being rejected by his people* and, all unwittingly, they fulfilled precisely those prophecies. This is a twist in the story which takes us down, deep down, to the mystery of God’s call of Israel in the first place: when God wanted to save the world, he called a people whom he knew to be part of the problem, as well as being, from then on, the bearers of the solution. This is one of the hardest things Paul has to say, but it can’t be avoided. All, Jew and **Gentile** alike, must be humbled before God if they are to receive his rescue and new creation as what it is, a gift of grace and not a favour automatically reserved for a special few.

But this is at once balanced, at the end of the address, by the open and eager invitation. The new world which God is creating through the death and resurrection of Jesus is all about **‘forgiveness of sins’**. At every level. Your sins and mine. The wickedness, the folly, the failing, the rebellion; the shameful, dirty, lying, cheating, glittering, sophisticated, flashy, corporate, international, global, local, personal, individual sins – the whole lot. All dealt with. The **law** of Moses enabled you, says Paul (verses 38–39) to get rid of a good deal of sin, to be declared ‘in the right’ in relation to them. But there were all kinds of other things still muddying the waters, and they can now all be sorted out. Nothing need stand in God’s record against you any more. You can be ‘justified’, declared to be in the right, forgiven, a full and free member of God’s people. That is the immediate effect of the **good news** that Jesus is risen as the Messiah, **God’s son**.

Accepting this is, of course, quite a challenge. That’s why there’s a warning attached, again taken from the prophets, this time Habakkuk

1.5, the chapter before the same prophet declares, as Paul just has, that there will be a way of justification open to all on the basis of **faith** (Habakkuk 2.4). Watch out in case you miss out. No wonder they followed Paul and Barnabas down the street and asked to hear some more. No wonder, too, that Paul and Barnabas urged them to continue in God's grace. The whole address was about grace: the great story of God's amazing mercy to the world, to the human race, to Israel, now coming to its climax in Jesus. Stick with the story, they say. Learn it, live in it, live from it. Don't imagine you can possess it. Let it possess you.

ACTS 13.44–52

A Light to the Gentiles (See map 4, page xvii.)

⁴⁴On the next sabbath, almost the whole city came together to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with righteous indignation, and spoke blasphemous words against what Paul was saying.

⁴⁶Paul and Barnabas grew very bold.

'God's word had to be spoken to you first', they declared. 'But since you are rejecting it, and judging yourselves unworthy of the life of God's new age, look! We are turning to the Gentiles! ⁴⁷This is what the Lord has commanded, you see:

'I have set you for a light to the nations,
so that you can be salvation-bringers to the end of the earth.'

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were thrilled, and they praised the word of the Lord. All those who were marked out for the life of God's new age became believers. ⁴⁹And the word of the Lord spread through the whole land.

⁵⁰But the Jews incited the devout aristocratic women and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. ⁵¹They, however, shook the dust off their feet and went on to Iconium. ⁵²The disciples were filled with joy and with the holy spirit.

Everyone who works with words – the poet, the journalist, the philosopher, the translator, the theologian – knows it all too well. We use a word one day and it seems perfectly all right. It does the job. The next day we are told it now means something different, or is now regarded as impolite. Often words do what T. S. Eliot said they do, cracking and sometimes breaking under the burden and tension we put on them, slipping, sliding, perishing and decaying just when we wanted to rely on them. This happens particularly when there is an embarrassing or unpleasant

social reality for which any name is going to be tricky: witness the slipping and sliding between ‘negro’, ‘black’ and ‘African-American’ (and many more) in the United States over the last two or three generations. Sometimes the words crack, break or decay with imprecision when the reality is so great that it can hardly be conceived: reviewers who really like a novel, a film or a concert quickly run short of adjectives to say that this wasn’t just ‘great’, ‘beautiful’, ‘powerful’ or whatever – those have been said so often, and this was different! – but something more. And sometimes the words stay the same, in traditional contexts, while the meaning moves on, slowly, silently, unnoticed until it’s almost too late. The word which meant one thing is now used, without anyone realizing it, for almost the exact opposite. (People have often pointed out that the euphemism for ‘strike’, namely ‘industrial action’, is exactly wrong, since what is happening is ‘industrial inaction.’)

Something like this latter move – a word staying in place while popular perception changes – has happened in the Western church in relation to **‘resurrection’**. At the beginning, as we have seen, it clearly and unambiguously referred to someone being bodily alive again after being bodily dead. But years of imprecision have meant that many people today, when they *say* ‘resurrection’, actually *think* ‘disembodied immortality’.

Something very similar to this, and for the same reason, has happened to a well-worn phrase which trips off the tongue so easily: ‘eternal life’. What do *you* think of at once when you hear that phrase? Chances are, if you are part of a church within, or influenced by, the Western church of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, you will think of a final state which is beyond space and time: an ‘eternity’ in which, as one hymn puts it, ‘time shall be no more’, and space and matter as well.

But the phrase which has so often been translated ‘eternal life’ actually means ‘the life of the age’. No wonder, you may think, we don’t put it like that; nobody would have a clue what we were talking about. But Jews of Paul’s day and many other times would know exactly what was meant. For them, there were two ‘ages’, or ‘periods of world history’: the **present age** and the **age to come**. And the **‘life’** of the ‘age to come’ is the state to which all devout Jews would aspire. Indeed, we know of debates among Jews of Paul’s day and thereafter as to precisely who will inherit this life, the life of ‘the age to come’. But the point is: nobody, thinking within the framework of thought which this phrase reflects, imagined that this ‘age’ would be ‘eternal’ in our sense – timeless, spaceless, matterless. It will be a whole new period of history, when everything will be put right at last. It will be the ‘great restoration’ we met in Acts 3.21. Everything will be different; but it will

still be a world like ours, only much, much more so, more solid, more throbbing with life and energy, because the curse of corruption and death itself will have been banished, making it ‘eternal’ in that sense but not in our usual ones. It is our inability, in the Western thought of recent centuries, to conceive of such a world (is it actually inability? or is it unwillingness?) that has made it so hard to speak of some of the foundational beliefs of the early Christians.

Because, when Paul and the others spoke of ‘eternal life’, they didn’t mean something (as we say) ‘purely spiritual’. The life of the coming age had already begun when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning, and will be complete when God does for the whole world what he did for Jesus that day. And all those who share in that Easter life in the present are assured of a full share in it in the future. That is what it means to be part of ‘the life of the coming age’ now, and on that great day.

And that is what verses 46 and 48 are talking about, heavy as they are with both warning and joy. If you turn away from this **message**, declares Paul to the synagogue audience, then you are declaring that you don’t see yourselves as belonging to God’s coming new age! How can you do that? This is your ancestral hope, your dream, your future – and you’re rejecting it! While, at the same time, the **Gentiles**, who had not been looking for a ‘coming new age’ or the special kind of life that is proper to it, were discovering it. They celebrated the fact that, according to the scriptures Paul was now quoting, God’s new age, his rescue from corruption and decay and all that thwarts truly human existence, was open freely and equally to them. Paul says something closely parallel to this in Romans 9.30–33.

At the heart of this passage stands one of the great biblical witness to the turn-around which was taking place in the first generation of Christian **faith**. As so often, it is from the central section of the book of Isaiah, the passage which speaks of God’s **word** doing new things, working through the strange ministry of the Servant to restore Israel *and thereby* to send out the message of **salvation** to the whole world. The poem which Luke’s readers heard (Luke 2.32) on the lips of old Simeon in the **Temple**, as he welcomed the baby Jesus, come back to mind:

A light to lighten the Gentiles
And the glory of your people Israel.

The point, which we go on emphasizing because it is so important throughout Luke’s work, as indeed throughout Paul’s, is that *within* the hope of Israel there always lay the promise – sometimes buried under the rubble of anger against the wicked and blaspheming pagan nations

who were oppressing them, but always available to be rediscovered, dusted down and put once more to good use – the promise that when God did for Israel what Israel longed for him to do, then the Gentiles would come into the picture. Abraham had been called so that in him all the families of the earth might be blessed. Israel at Sinai was called to be a nation of priests. David was celebrated, in hope rather than actuality, as the king whose dominion would eventually stretch to the ends of the earth. And Isaiah specifically said that the work of the servant, the one who embodies Israel and puts God's plan for Israel into effect, will not merely be to restore the tribes of Israel, but to be a light to the nations.

It is at this point where, without too much reflection, we can see why many of the Jews who heard this message in the first century rejected it angrily. It must have sounded to them like a compromise. All these years they had been maintaining their Jewish distinctness, keeping themselves clean from the impure, pagan lifestyle of the wider world. They had been true to the commandments which marked them out from the world full of idols all around them. They had suffered many things, mockery, social ostracism, sometimes physical abuse or even death, to be true to this heritage and this calling. And now – all these pagans surrounding them were going to come flooding in to *their* world, without so much as a by-your-leave? This was blasphemous nonsense! And the 'righteous indignation' which welled up in them, deeply understandable as it was – and corresponding exactly to the reaction of the young Saul of Tarsus only a few years before – was, again, this thing called 'zeal' (Acts 13.45). Not 'envy' or 'jealousy', as some translations have it, but 'zeal', righteous indignation, zeal for their God and his law: the thing Paul himself confesses to in Galatians 1.14, Philippians 3.6 and (by implication) Romans 10.2.

And it was this 'zeal', in Antioch as in so many other places later on, that led to the trouble which caused Paul and Barnabas to leave town in a hurry. Jesus had spoken of **apostles** wiping the dust off their feet when a town refused their message of peace (Luke 10.11). That is what they did now, faced with leading local people coming out in support of those of the synagogue community who had been stirred up to anger. The **gospel** doesn't leave things intact. At the end of this first major missionary visit, we have three distinct groups: the angry and aggressive people who don't want to know; the joyful, **spirit**-filled local people who had believed the message; and the two apostles, escaping persecution and scurrying on to the next town.

Oh, and the word of God (Acts 13.48), which, though 'attacked by voices of temptation', is doing its own work as usual.

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