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Beyond the Tomb

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beyond the tomb
Introduction

*Beyond the Tomb* takes us beyond the resurrection of Jesus, to the very early years of the followers of Jesus who gathered together as a group known as “The Way”.

One of the objectives of this book is to try to see the dramatically unfolding events of these early years from the perspective of the ordinary member of The Way.

Much has been written from the perspective of the major players of the time — Paul, Peter, James, John and others, but it is interesting to contemplate how the ordinary folk of The Way were affected by these stirring events.

They knew times of great joy, but also times of fear and anxiety. As time went on, they experienced the daily risk of persecution by both Jews and Romans. But through all of these experiences, they knew that nothing could separate them from the love of their risen Lord, nothing could change their wonderful expectation of his return, and nothing could shake their belief in the Kingdom of God.

As with its predecessor, *With Jesus, Beyond the Tomb* is written in an exhortational and devotional style. One of the book’s major objectives is to present the Lord Jesus Christ, first as our great Saviour, and second, as our Lord and our King. We must view our Lord in the exalted position he now holds, his Father having bestowed upon him “the name which is above every name”, who has “put everything under his feet, and has made him the head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”
Beyond the Tomb takes us into realms only possible because Jesus died and is now risen from the dead.

May all who read this book worship our Lord Jesus, remembering that “he who does not honour the Son, does not honour the Father who sent him.” (John 5:23). As Paul wrote to the Galatians, Jesus “loved me, and gave himself for me”.

He loved you, and gave himself for you, too.
The women at the tomb

It was all over. The terrible six hours on the cross. At last, Jesus gasped out his last words, “It is finished.” He was dead.

It was a moment of deep trauma and unbelievable grief for the five at the foot of the cross — four women and one man (John). The four women were:

1. Jesus’ mother, Mary.
2. Mary’s sister, Salome.
3. Mary’s sister-in-law, Mary the wife of Cleopas.
4. Mary Magdalene.

Once Jesus had died, John took Mary, mother of Jesus, away to his parents’ home in Jerusalem, as Jesus had asked him to do. It would be natural for Salome, Mary’s sister, to go with her to comfort her.

So that left only two at the cross — Mary Magdalene and Mary, wife of Cleopas. Both of these women had been very close to Jesus. They loved him. They had walked the paths and roads of Israel with him, along with other women. Mary, wife of Cleopas, is said by historians of the time to be the sister-in-law of Mary and Joseph, as Cleopas was a brother of Joseph. This means he would be an aunt of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene had been healed of seven evil spirits (mental illness) by Jesus about two years earlier. Since then, she had been devoted to him.
As these two Marys stood at the cross, no doubt with tears streaming down their cheeks, they wondered what to do next. They refused to leave Jesus. They had been with him in life. They refused to abandon him in death.

Their grief was deep. Their beloved Lord, their master who they believed implicitly was the long awaited Messiah. Dead. They couldn't believe it. He was the Son of God, sent to save the world. How could he be dead? Their hopes were utterly shattered. Their confusion and bewilderment swirled about their minds.

This man who had healed so many, even raised dead people back to life. No-one could do that except the Son of God. This man who they had grown so deeply to love. He was dead, and they could not grasp that fact. How could their Messiah, God's Son, be dead?

After a while, two men came. The Roman soldiers had been guarding the bodies of the three men crucified. One of the two men, Joseph of Arimathea, had received Pilate's permission to bury Jesus.

Nicodemus was there to help him. Both were members of the Sanhedrin. Both were secret followers of Jesus. Now, their secrecy as his followers was blown away.

Openly, in the sight of everyone there, including the Jewish leaders, they came to gently take down Jesus’ body. They would be marked now as followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Never again could they take their seats in the Sanhedrin. From that moment on, the lives of Joseph and Nicodemus were changed forever.

As the two Marys watched with tearful faces, Joseph and Nicodemus carried Jesus’ body a little way to a new tomb owned by Joseph. Mary Magdalene and Mary, Cleopas’ wife, followed them, determined to stay with Jesus right up to his burial.

The men wrapped his body in linen cloths and hurriedly anointed his body with myrrh and aloes. There was no time to wash his body, which was covered in dried blood and sweat. No time to properly anoint his body. The Sabbath was about to begin.

They lifted his body, wrapped in its linen cloths, into the tomb and laid it on a rock shelf. There the dead Son of God was to lie in the stillness of death for the next three days.
The two Marys looked into the tomb and saw where he was laid. They said to each other, “He hasn’t been washed or properly anointed. After the Sabbath, we’ll come back and wash and anoint him properly.”

During the Sabbath, the women and the disciples shared their deep grief with each other. They were like sheep without their shepherd. The two women talked with the other women, and several of them decided to go with the two Marys to the tomb after the Sabbath to anoint his body.

They were in no doubt of the extreme danger they would be in. The Jewish authorities would be watching the tomb and Jesus’ followers like hawks. That’s why they decided to go while it was still dark, so they would not be seen.

Over the Sabbath day, they gathered together the spices and ointments they would need.

Our next view of these several women is in the darkness before dawn on the day after the Sabbath. This little group of women carrying spices and ointments out of Jerusalem to the place outside the city where Jesus’ tomb was.

Who were these women? How many were there? We need to examine each of the gospels to find out:

- Matthew 28:1 Mary Magdalene
- Mark 16:1 Salome
- Luke 24:10 Joanna and the “other women”

One of the “other women” is very likely to have been Susanna (Luke 8:3). The fact that Luke said there were other women present, shows that there were at least two others (perhaps more) beside the four that are named. This gives a total of at least six women.

We won’t spend much time on what happened when they reached the tomb.

We’ll just look at an outline of the events that took place:

- The women saw that the stone had already been rolled away.
- Jesus’ body was gone.
• The women looked into the tomb and were terrified when they saw someone in there, sitting up.
• The angel(s) spoke to the women. They were petrified and hastily left.
• Mary Magdalene ran back into Jerusalem to get Peter and John.
• Peter and John looked into the tomb and saw burial cloths wrapped up, **but did not see the angels**. They left, and went back into the city. Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb, alone.
• Mary looked into the tomb and saw two angels. They spoke to her. She was very distressed and crying.
• She looked behind her and saw a man. She thought it was the gardener.
• Jesus reveals himself to her. Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord.

I'd like particularly to think about the four or five women whose names we know who came to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body.

• What do we know about each of them?
• Why was it that the women played a dominant part in his burial, and at the tomb after the Sabbath?
• Why did the angels at the tomb appear to the women after his resurrection and not the men?
• What did these women have in common?

We'll think about each of these women, and the answers to these questions may become apparent.

*Mary Magdalene*

Mary Magdalene stands out amongst this group of women. Always, when she is mentioned among others, her name appears first. She was the only one at the foot of the cross who was not related to Jesus. The other four were all relatives of Jesus. There was obviously a very close relationship between Mary and Jesus.

I don’t suggest that this was a romantic relationship, but there was a very close bond between them. She would not have been at the foot of the cross with Jesus’ family if this was not the case.

To Mary, Jesus was **her Lord**. She said to the angels in the tomb, “They have taken away my Lord.”
It seems that Mary first met Jesus at Capernaum. When she met him, she was suffering from mental illness. The scripture record (Luke 8:2) tells us she was suffering from seven demons. Jesus cast out those seven demons. In our language, he healed her of her mental illness. From then on, Mary devoted her life to Jesus.

Mary was from the town of Magdala, a town renowned for the number of prostitutes there. It was near the major trade route from Jerusalem to Damascus, and was a favourite stopping point for traders on that route. Hence it was a town with many prostitutes.

There is a suggestion that Mary was one of those prostitutes. Immediately after Jesus healed her, we have the story of the woman who came into the house of Simon the Pharisee where Jesus was and anointed his feet with her tears and ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. Luke mentions that she was “a woman of the city” — a term which probably meant she was a prostitute. Simon’s words about the woman seem to confirm this.

“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him . . .” (Luke 7:39)

Was this Mary Magdalene? Very likely, given that she had just been healed by Jesus. She would hear of the way Simon the Pharisee had insulted Jesus by not giving him the normal welcome to his house. She could not bear to hear that Jesus, the man who had looked into her eyes and healed her, had been so badly treated by Simon.

It was also immediately after this that we find that Mary was one of the women who accompanied Jesus and his disciples and “provided for them out of their means.”

This gives us an interesting perspective about the way Jesus travelled about the country. We sometimes imagine that it was just Jesus and his disciples who formed this travelling group. But we find that there was also a group of devoted women who accompanied them wherever they went, no doubt looking after the food and accommodation needs of Jesus and the disciples.

There were probably many others in this group — people who followed Jesus because of all that he was doing and teaching.

We know one more thing about this group of devoted women. They paid for food and other expenses out of their own money.
Luke tells in chapter 7 about Jesus healing many people at Capernaum to show the disciples of John the Baptist that he was the Messiah and the Son of God. Luke 8 tells us that soon after this, he travelled to many other towns:

“Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.” (Luke 8:1–3)

In addition to these named women, we know from Mark 15:40–41 that Salome (Jesus’ aunt) and Mary, wife of Cleopas (another aunt of Jesus) were also with this group, ministering to Jesus and his disciples:

“There were also other women looking on from afar [at the crucifixion of Jesus] . . . Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses [this was Mary, the wife of Cleopas], and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and ministered to him . . . ”

So there were at least five women in this group who ministered to Jesus:

- Mary Magdalene
- Joanna, wife of Chuza
- Susanna
- Mary, wife of Cleopas
- Salome

And they paid from their own money the costs of food and other expenses. It is likely that Joanna, Susanna and Salome were quite wealthy, given their backgrounds.

At this stage, it’s worth noting that it was this same group of women who came to the tomb on that dark morning before dawn to properly anoint Jesus’ body. It’s also worth noting that Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna had all been healed by Jesus.

But back to Mary Magdalene.

We’ve already seen that she was one of the two women who were present when Jesus was laid to rest in the tomb. And we know she was the first person to see Jesus after he had risen from the dead. Mark makes a special point of this:
“... he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.” (Mark 16:9)

Twice we are told by Luke and Mark about these seven demons of Mary’s. Maybe she had been a very different person while she suffered from mental illness, and the fact that both Luke and Mark make special mention of her illness maybe shows that in her healing, her life and personality completely changed.

So Mary Magdalene was especially close to Jesus. Having seen Jesus after his resurrection, Mary completely disappears from the scriptural record. But we can be sure that she was one of the one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus in Jerusalem only days after he ascended to heaven. What a reunion it will be for Mary when she meets Jesus again at his return!

Mary, wife of Cleopas

Mary and Cleopas had two sons who were amongst the disciples of Jesus — James the younger (or less), and Joses. Not only that, but, as already mentioned, historians have recorded that Cleopas was a brother of Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus. So Mary, wife of Cleopas, was Jesus’ aunt, through Cleopas and Joseph.

Mary was with Mary Magdalene when they laid Jesus in the tomb. She was also at the foot of the cross. Mary, Cleopas’ wife, was also especially close to Jesus, and with the other women, followed him and ministered to his needs as he travelled about Galilee.

She was a generation older than Mary Magdalene. Her children were grown up. This would give her time to devote to Jesus and his needs. It’s interesting to find that amongst the group of women who followed Jesus around Galilee, two of them were his aunts.

Mary and Cleopas were both followers of Jesus. Our last view of them is on the road to Emmaus, when they were walking home from Jerusalem. It’s the day of Jesus’ resurrection, and those close to Jesus were reeling at the astounding and unbelievable news that some of the women had seen him alive that very day, only hours ago.
Now a stranger joins Mary and Cleopas. We know that stranger was Jesus. I feel sure that the other person with Cleopas was his wife, Mary. There are two reasons for thinking this.

First, some versions record that these two on the road to Emmaus were two men. The RSV states that Jesus said to them, “O foolish men”. The AV records that Jesus said, “O fools”. The Diaglott says “O inconsiderate men”. The ESV records the words of Jesus as “O foolish ones.”

So, were these two on the road to Emmaus two men? Or were they a man and a woman? Strong’s concordance tells us that the Greek word here is anoetos which means foolish or unwise. No mention of men or women here.

There is therefore every possibility that the companion of Cleopas was a woman. And that leads us to the natural thought that the woman was his wife, Mary. After all, they were going home and it was near the end of the day. What would be more natural than for a husband and wife to be heading home to Emmaus at the end of the day?

Second, it is notable that Jesus first appeared to women, not the men. First, Mary Magdalene and then the other women who had come to the tomb to anoint Jesus after the Sabbath.

Why did Jesus appear first to these women — even before his disciples? All of these women had ministered to Jesus in his needs as he went from place to place in Galilee. Mary Magdalene, Mary, wife of Cleopas, Salome, Joanna, Susanna and others.

They ministered to him while he was alive, and now, in his death, they wanted to continue their ministration to him by anointing his body. They came in the darkness just before dawn, bringing spices and ointments purchased with their own money to anoint him.

Mary, the wife of Cleopas, was part of that group of women. It seems that Jesus chose to appear first to these faithful women who had cared so lovingly for him, before anyone else.

It is therefore very likely that the companion of Cleopas was Mary, his wife, who was one of that group of women who cared for and loved Jesus, their Lord.
Salome

We come now to Salome, sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother, and therefore another of Jesus’ aunts.

Salome was the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John, two of the leading apostles.

Zebedee had a fishing business at or near Carpernaum. He also had a house in Jerusalem (John 19:27). Zebedee was therefore a relatively wealthy fisherman with two houses. It was to his Jerusalem house that Zebedee’s son, John, took his mother directly from the cross.

It is very likely that Jesus took his family from Nazareth to Capernaum to live, just before he began his 3 1/2 year ministry. He knew he would be away a lot and wanted his mother to be near her sister, Salome, who lived at Capernaum. Mary and Salome had a close relationship as sisters. This, of course, assumes that Joseph by now had died.

Being so close, it is natural that Mary would have told Salome about Jesus’ birth and that his Father was God Himself. Salome therefore believed fully in Jesus and his work and was very close to him. She wanted to help him as much as she could, and was one of the women who ministered to his needs whenever he was in Galilee. She was also one of the women at the tomb of Jesus.

Her close affinity to Jesus, her nephew, is apparent because she was one of the four family members at the foot of the cross. She was also there to support her sister, Mary, during this dreadful ordeal as they watched Jesus die an agonising death on the cross.

On the day after his resurrection, she was one of the group of women who saw the risen Lord shortly after he appeared to Mary Magdalene.

Joanna

Joanna was in a different social class to the other women here. She was the wife of Chuza, steward or house manager of King Herod.

The position of steward in Herod’s palace was a high position. Joanna, as Chuza’s wife, would mix in the highest Jerusalem social circles.
Joanna had an illness. As a Jewish woman, she would have sought treatment from a priest who also acted as a physician. We are not told what her illness or problem was, but it had obviously not been cured by the priests.

Luke tells us that Jesus healed her, and from then on, she was a devoted follower of his, joining the group of women who ministered to his needs from their own resources. Joanna would be a wealthy woman.

She was amongst this same group of women who walked to the tomb in the early dawn after the Sabbath day.

What an unusual group of women this was. They came from vastly different social backgrounds:

- **Mary Magdalene** — possibly a prostitute in her past life, who suffered from apparently severe mental illness. Healed by Jesus.
- **Salome** — wealthy wife of a successful fisherman with friends and contacts in high places in Jerusalem.
- **Mary, wife of Cleopas** — probably middle class.
- **Joanna** — wealthy wife of Chuza and part of Jerusalem’s top society. Also healed by Jesus of an illness.
- **Susanna** — probably a close friend of Joanna’s and therefore from the upper class, maybe even employed at Herod’s palace. She was also healed by Jesus.

And yet, we see in this group none of the social circumstances from which they had come. In Jesus, everyone is at the same level. Social differences mean nothing. These women came together with one major thing in common — an unshakeable belief that Jesus was the Messiah, whom they loved.

Joanna is mentioned by Luke (24:10) as one of the women who ran from the tomb to tell the disciples the great news that Jesus was alive! But the disciples didn’t believe them. They thought the women’s excited message was nothing more than an idle tale.

Well, that’s what the disciples thought of the women’s story. But it was not what Jesus thought. Little did the disciples know that Jesus, as the risen Lord, had deliberately chosen to reveal himself to these very women, many hours before he appeared to his disciples.
There is a direct link between the women who ministered to Jesus during his ministry, and the women who were at his tomb. They are the same women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>At the tomb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Magdalene</td>
<td>Mary Magdalene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna</td>
<td>Joanna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanna</td>
<td>Probably Susanna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salome</td>
<td>Salome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, wife of Cleopas</td>
<td>Mary, wife of Cleopas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (not named)</td>
<td>At least one more (unnamed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such was the love of these women for Jesus, they wanted to care for him during his life, and wanted to care for him in his death. They procured spices and ointments to anoint his body as he lay in the tomb.

But when they arrived at the tomb, the stone had already been rolled away. The tomb was open! They were completely confused and bewildered and no doubt very frightened.

They gathered the courage to peep into the tomb. This was not easy for them to do. People have a natural fear of dead bodies, and these women fully expected to see the dead body of Jesus lying on the rock shelf where it had been laid before the Sabbath.

Imagine their terror when they saw two men in the tomb, both sitting there! (Matthew and Mark record that one man was there, but Luke and John say there were two men. John specifically mentions that the two persons were angels.)

Mark 16:5–6 records:

“... a young man [was] sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe... He said to [the women], ‘Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.’ ”

Matthew 28:8–9 records:

“So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Hail!’ And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.”
This was after he had appeared to Mary Magdalene. So the women who ministered to him in his ministry were the first to see him alive again. First, Mary Magdalene, then the other women.

Let me conclude this chapter with a few thoughts.

The fact that the women at the tomb were the first to see the risen Lord was no accident.

That the angels in the tomb revealed themselves to the women, but not to Peter and John, was no accident.

Jesus expressly chose to appear first to the women who had been so kind to him in his mortal life. It was not that the men did not love Jesus. Of course they did — deeply. But these women had sacrificed much in money and time to serve Jesus. More than that, they had shown great courage in coming to the tomb to anoint what they thought was his dead body.

The Jewish authorities and the Romans could have dealt very harshly with them for daring to show their allegiance to Jesus in this way. They took a great risk. They came in the darkness of early morning so they would not be seen.

But they came to care for him in the only way they thought they could — to wash and anoint his body. They came to do this despite the great risk they took in doing so. It was the women who, in his death, openly showed their love for him.

Where were the men? The disciples had fled. But the women continued to show their love for Jesus with much courage.

Jesus puts great emphasis on caring for each other. The care and love these women showed for him in the face of significant personal risk from both Jewish and Roman leaders, was very important to Jesus.

Caring for each other, and for him, is reflected in his parable of the judgement seat when he said to those on his right hand, “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink.” (Matthew 25:35)

That’s what those women did as they ministered to his needs as he travelled around Israel. And now, in his death, these same women came to show their love for him by anointing his body in the tomb. Jesus loved them because they openly showed their love for him.
What does this mean for us, whether we are men or women? The parable of the judgement seat (Matthew 25) tells us that Jesus will ask us as we stand before him, in effect, “How well have you cared for each other? How have you satisfied the hunger and thirst of those in need? Have you visited those who are sick? Have you clothed those who have nothing? Have you visited those in prison?”

The women at the tomb of Jesus showed how much they cared for him and how unquenchable was their love for him.

We can only imagine how they felt when they saw him again — alive! It was the realisation that he had risen from the dead and was alive forever that convinced hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the early Christians to willingly give their lives for him rather than deny him.

For us, we too know that Jesus is risen and is alive for evermore. We can emulate the love of the women at the tomb by caring for those in need, for his sake.

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)
The death of the shepherd

I recently read about shepherds in the Middle-East and their relationship to their sheep. The Middle-Eastern shepherd has quite a different relationship than shepherds in Australia have towards their sheep.

The Australian shepherd, or drover as we call them, drives his flock of sheep from behind. We can imagine a drover on his horse behind his sheep — urging them on from behind. His sheep dogs are running around behind the sheep, nipping at their heels to force them back into the flock.

Or a sheep dog tearing off over the paddock to a sheep which has dared to break away from the flock and is running away. The sheep dog grabs the sheep by the leg and forces it to turn around, and then chases it back to the flock.

Finally, in a cloud of swirling dust, cracking whips, yapping dogs and yelling drovers, the sheep are forcibly driven through a gate into the sheep-yards where they huddle together, confused and frightened after their ordeal at the hands of the drovers and dogs.

That’s the Australian way.

The Middle-Eastern way is that the sheep are all placed in the sheep-fold. Usually, there are many sheep belonging to several owners. Each morning, the shepherds come to the sheep-fold and go to the gate which the gatekeeper opens, and the shepherd enters the sheep-fold.

Remember, there are probably hundreds of sheep. The shepherd has a special call. It’s a strange, high pitched call, but his sheep know that call.
He stands there and calls to his sheep and they make their way through the other sheep to their shepherd. The shepherd then leads them out of the sheep-fold, and goes before them as he leads them to their fields.

We think of the words of Jesus in John 10:2–4:

“... he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”

And verses 14–16:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

What a contrast to the Australian way of shepherd ing! The Australian method of moving sheep from one place to another engenders fear in the minds of the sheep. They are chased, nipped by dogs, flicked by whips, yelled at by the drovers and herded roughly into the sheep-yards.

The Australian drover doesn’t think of his sheep as individuals. To him, they are just one flock of mindless sheep.

But the Middle-Eastern way, and the way of Jesus, is gentle. It doesn’t engender fear. You see, there is a personal relationship between each sheep and its shepherd. Each sheep has a name. The shepherd knows each one of them. The shepherd calls to each sheep by its name. In its shepherd, the sheep finds security, tenderness, caring and love.

Note the words of Jesus: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”

No driving with whips from behind with Jesus; no yapping dogs to contend with. The shepherd, and Jesus as our shepherd, leads the sheep and they follow in confidence and security.

The shepherd theme is one of the strongest themes in scripture. We find it throughout scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. The theme of the shepherd is first found in Genesis 4:2:

“Abel was a keeper of sheep.”
We find the theme in Revelation 7:17, where Jesus as King is also described as the Shepherd of the saints:

“For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd …”

Note, too, that Jesus is also a Lamb. He knows what it is to be a member of the flock, for he, too, is a man who tasted mortality for thirty-three years. He is the Lamb of sacrifice — a Lamb, THE Lamb, from the flock of mankind.

Shepherding was the main occupation of the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had many flocks and herds. The patriarchs were farmers and graziers. All of them were shepherds.

Other people of God were also shepherds — the daughters of Jethro in Midian, Moses for forty years in Midian, Rachel in Haran. David was one of the greatest shepherds.

God called the priests “shepherds” and denounced them because they were not caring for the sheep of their human flocks.

Sheep and goats were and are an integral part of life in Israel and surrounding countries. Even Bedouins tend their flocks.

The life and work of a shepherd in the Middle-East revolves around protecting his sheep. In Bible times there were no fences, and wild animals were a constant threat. Remember how David killed lions and bears with his bare hands.

At night, the shepherd brought his sheep into the sheep-fold. Sheep were like children of the shepherd. He cared and protected his sheep as a father does for his children.

Even God describes Himself as a shepherd:

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself, will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered …”

(Ezekiel 34:11–12)

We know that this happened when God brought back Israel, His sheep, to their own land, and in 1948 they became a nation again for the first time in 2,500 years. He placed them, as it were, in their national sheepfold.

Ezekiel 34 goes on in verses 15–16:
“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak . . .”

Why is the shepherd theme so strong in scripture?

In the work of a shepherd we see love, caring, concern, new birth. We see protection, feeding and healing.

Hosea tells us that God, as the shepherd of Israel, “took them up in his arms, led them with compassion, bent down to them and fed them.” (Hosea 11:3–4)

In the life and work of a shepherd, we see a loving Heavenly Father, and we see Jesus. In David’s day, God was his shepherd — “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Now, God has provided His Son as our Shepherd.

Often and often we are told in scripture that what God requires of us most of all is to care for each other. To look after each other’s needs.

• For example, in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus’ one concern when he returns will be to see how well each of us has cared for each other.
• In Micah, we are told “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness.”
• Paul tells us to “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

In loving each other, we are emulating precisely what God and our Lord Jesus do for those who love them.

The picture we have is one of overflowing love by God and our Lord. Love poured out and all-enveloping. Compassion, care, feeding those in need, binding those who are crippled, healing the sick, the lame, the deaf, the dumb.

This is the character of God which is exemplified in Jesus. This is how we must live our lives in Christ Jesus.

Let’s go back to John 10. Twice, in verses 11 and 14, Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd”. But in verses 7 and 9, he also describes himself twice as something else. He told his listeners, “I am the door of the sheep” (verse 7), and “I am the door” (verse 9).
“... if anyone enters by me, he will be saved ...”

An ordinary shepherd would go to the door of the sheep-fold, and the gatekeeper would open the door. (Verse 2 — “He who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens ...”)

So we see here a gatekeeper whose job it is to see that the door is kept shut to protect the sheep, but when the shepherd arrives, the gatekeeper opens the door and the shepherd goes into the sheep-fold.

But Jesus described himself not just as the shepherd. He also says he is the door. He tells us that anyone who enters the door (that is Jesus) he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

So, through Jesus, who is the door, we enter into the new sheep-fold provided by him — the sheep-fold of salvation and ultimately of immortality. Jesus is both the door and the shepherd. He is the door through which we enter the way of life.

Let’s think now about Jesus and his disciples — a few of his special sheep. His disciples loved him and he loved them. They came to depend on him. They watched him as he healed and helped people.

Perhaps they thought of the words in Ezekiel in which God Himself said that, as the Shepherd of Israel, He would seek out the lost, gather together those who had strayed, bind up the crippled, strengthen the weak. He said, “I myself will be the Shepherd of my sheep.”

I wonder if the disciples thought of those words of God as they watched Jesus healing the sick, cuddling little children, and showing the utmost compassion to all those in need.

Jesus was their Shepherd. They were his sheep.

Now, I want you to think carefully about what you are about to read.

Our greatest hope is the return of Jesus. We long for the Kingdom of God when Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. We see corrupt governments and inept and incompetent governments all around the world, and we see the mess they are making of the world. We see immorality everywhere, violence, pollution, Godlessness.

We look forward every day to when Jesus is seated on the throne of David in Jerusalem, ruling in justice and righteousness and peace, when everyone
will have food and when the glory of God fills the earth. This is our great hope, our mighty vision.

Now, suppose we suddenly learned that none of this was going to happen. Suppose we suddenly learned that Jesus was not coming back. He can’t come back because he is dead. He is not alive as we have always believed. He didn’t rise from the dead. Jesus is not our Shepherd because he is dead.

Suppose we learned that because of this, the Kingdom of God has been a figment of our imagination. It’s not going to happen. All we have hoped for — the very centre of our belief and faith, dashed in pieces to the ground. In its place, nothing.

Can you imagine what effect this news would have on us? Our great hope and vision, suddenly snuffed out. Gone. Our Lord, our Master, our Shepherd — gone. What would this sudden and unexpected news do to us? It would leave us in a psychological vacuum from which we may not recover.

Well, that’s the news the disciples received. They fully expected Jesus would be crowned as King in their time, and that he would overthrow the Romans and establish the Kingdom. That from then on, everything would be different, for the world would have the greatest King that ever ruled.

This was their hope and belief. Imagine the effect on them when they got the news. Jesus is dead. Crucified. Every hope they had was suddenly destroyed. Their Lord was dead. They thought he would establish the Kingdom of God, but that hope was also now dead.

They experienced in total shock the death of the Shepherd. Their Shepherd was gone.

They were numb with shock and grief. Jesus, their Master was dead. The future stretched out before them as hopeless.

How could they live without him? It was as if a great bottomless chasm had suddenly opened up in front of them, and they could not cross it.

For them, it was the end of everything. Yeshua, their beloved Lord, their hoped for King, their Shepherd — gone. Dead.

This devastating news was torture for the disciples and for all who had loved Jesus and had believed he would be their King. Absolute darkness
in their grieving hearts. They could not come to grips with this terrible thing that had happened.

The Sabbath passed somehow. Then, the day after the Sabbath, came the astounding news which absolutely stunned them. Mary Magdalene came running in to say she had seen the Lord! She had talked with him! He was alive again!!

What nonsense, said the disciples. Everyone knew how deeply Mary felt about Jesus. She was just imagining things. Her emotions had got in the way of reality.

But then Peter burst into the room. “I have seen the Lord!!”, he told the incredulous disciples. “I’ve talked with him!”.

Now, for Mary to claim she’d seen Jesus alive was something to scoff at. Little did they know that it was because of the love and faithfulness of little Mary that Jesus had chosen to appear first to her.

But for Peter to say he had seen the Lord — this was something they could not ignore. Mary and now Peter? “What’s happening?” thought the stunned and disbelieving disciples

Then two more ran into the room — Cleopas and his companion — very probably his wife, Mary, breathless after running most of the seven miles from Emmaus.

Let’s read about Cleopas and his companion:

“... they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’” (Luke 24:33–34)

I think it’s rather sad that they left Mary out of this statement. But Mary had her own joy. He had appeared to her first, before anyone else. She would hold this treasured knowledge close to her heart for the rest of her life.

Then Cleopas and his companion told them all that had happened to them — what had happened on the road, and then when they were sitting down to eat the evening meal.

As the disciples stood there in absolute amazement at this stupendous news, suddenly Jesus himself stood among them. But still, they couldn’t
believe what they saw: “They were startled and frightened and supposed they had seen a spirit.”

Jesus, standing there amongst them said, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings arise in your heart? See my hands and my feet, for it is I myself. Handle me and see. A spirit doesn’t have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

Gradually, the disciples came out of their amazement. Jesus was alive! Here he was with them again! Alive! They had seen him raise others from death to life, but now he himself had been raised from death to life. Their Shepherd was back. Their lives were totally changed from then on.

Because the Shepherd is back forever. He has cared for his sheep ever since, and always will. Now, we can go in and out of the door which is Jesus. Through that door we come to the Father.

We stand before him wearing our Lord’s robe of righteousness. We stand before God Himself, and, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, Jesus has

> “reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him . . .” (Colossians 1:22)

Our Shepherd is alive. Our Shepherd is with us today, in our hearts and in our minds:

> “… if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.” (Romans 8:10)

Soon we will see him descending from heaven in power and great glory as he comes to gather us unto himself and establish the Kingdom. He will still be our Shepherd, even when ruling from his throne in Jerusalem.

I’d like to conclude with words by Walter Wangerin

> The Lord is my Shepherd who leads me down To quiet pools and a soft, green ground. He feed and restores, beholds and relieves me, He shows the right road and then precedes me. I am not lonely, you make me strong. For you are with me. My Shepherd and song.

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The first ten days after Jesus’ ascension

We find ourselves on the Mount of Olives. Jesus is there with his eleven apostles. It is forty days since he was resurrected.

Unknown to his apostles, in a few minutes he will leave them, dramatically and unexpectedly, by rising into the air and ascending into heaven.

But for the moment, let’s leave them there, on the Mount of Olives, talking together. We will come back to them shortly.

Let’s take a look at what happened to the believers in Christ in Jerusalem in the ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven. These believers were soon to become the very first ecclesia.

They were not even called “Christians” at this stage. That name was to come later when the name was first heard at Antioch. If the believers had a name, it was “The Way”.

Let’s not imagine that an ecclesia in that early time was even remotely like ecclesias today. Their circumstances were totally different to ours. For a start, they had implacable enemies in their fellow Jews. Their ecclesial structure was different. At this early time, they had no New Testament writings and wouldn’t have for many years yet. They lived much more communally than we do.
But their Lord is the same as our Lord. Their hope of the Kingdom was the same as our hope of the Kingdom. Their God is our God.

• How many believers were there in the first few days after Jesus ascended?
• Where did they meet?

Most importantly:

• How did they cope with the fact that Jesus was no longer in their midst?
• Just what happened in the first ten days after his ascension?

There was much drama happening in the ecclesia:

• What were these dramatic events?
• What effect did these dramatic events have on the brethren and sisters of this early group of believers in The Way.

Let’s remind ourselves of the background to all this.

Jesus had been resurrected forty days earlier.

We remember the women who came to the tomb. We know that the very first person Jesus appeared to was Mary Magdalene. The other women saw him a little later.

By the end of that first day, all the apostles had heard of his resurrection. They were amazed and bewildered — all at the same time. Some had actually seen him a few hours earlier. What did this mean? Then, as they pondered all this, suddenly, there was Jesus himself — amongst them. They could hardly take it in. Jesus — ALIVE!

The effect of the risen Lord electrified the apostles and the others who were close to Jesus. The next forty days were to be days they would always remember. Days when Jesus came to them at times and explained to them all that the scriptures said about him.

He was not with them all the time. How many times did he come to them? We don’t know. Acts 1:3–4 tells us that “he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days . . .”

He appeared only to his apostles, not to people in general. It also seems that he stayed with the apostles sometimes in that forty days.
His sole purpose in that forty day period was to prepare the apostles for what lay ahead. He explained to them the scriptures about himself. They talked together about the Kingdom of God.

We know two events involving the appearing of Jesus during those momentous forty days:

- He came to them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and cooked breakfast for the seven disciples who had been fishing all night. There is a fascinating story in that event alone, but that will have to wait for another time.
- Then he appeared to five hundred brethren at once, very likely in Galilee. Five hundred witnesses that Jesus had risen from the dead. What a tremendous witness they would be. Each one of those five hundred men could proclaim to the people they talked to, “I have actually seen and talked to the risen Jesus. I know he is alive.”

We are told nothing about the effect on those who were not his apostles during those forty days. Mary, his mother, Mary Magdalene, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Salome, Joanna, Susanna, Cleopas and Mary, Jesus’ brothers and sisters. They would be as incredulous as the apostles were, but their incredulity soon turned to joy when they realised that their beloved Lord had really risen from the dead! This was a whole new perspective for them to come to grips with.

During these forty days, Jesus had given them a specific and definite instruction:

> “And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem...” (Acts 1:4)

Note that he stayed with them. Did he spend a few days and nights with his apostles? The immortal Lord, with them in their homes!

> “I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

Before his arrest and crucifixion, he also told them:

> “I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever.” (John 14:16)

He told them who this Counselor would be:

> “… the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things…” (John 14:26)
So the apostles knew that somehow, sometime, the Holy Spirit would be sent to them. They knew they had to stay in Jerusalem, and they knew they had to stay there until they were “clothed with power (the Holy Spirit) from on high.”

We left Jesus and the apostles on the Mount of Olives. Let’s rejoin them now.

We find that Jesus is telling them to “stay in Jerusalem to wait for his promised Holy Spirit.”

Still the apostles didn’t quite understand. “Lord”, they said, “will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know when this will be.” He again brought their focus back to the promise of the Holy Spirit.

“... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

(Acts 1:8)

The Kingdom was not yet. First, you must be endowed with the Holy Spirit.

Now, as we watch and listen on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gives them his final instructions which sets the scene for the task of the apostles. I’m sure that up to this moment, they had no idea that Jesus was about to ascend to heaven.

“... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

The eleven apostles have now been told clearly what to do and what to expect. The Kingdom was not yet. Much had to be done before the Kingdom was established. The apostles had been given three instructions by Jesus:

• Stay in Jerusalem.
• The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you.
• Through the power of the Spirit, you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth. The gospel of Jesus was not for Israel alone.

As his witnesses, they would tell the world that Jesus is Lord and had risen from death to life. Through him, salvation was offered to all men
and women. This in fact was precisely what Peter told a gathering of three thousand men ten days later. But we'll come back to that.

Jesus now wasted no time. Having given his final instructions to his apostles on the Mount of Olives, we read:

“And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’” (Acts 1:9–11)

I’m quite sure the apostles would have been absolutely stunned as they watched Jesus rising into the air, higher and higher, until a cloud took him from their sight. Their question, “Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?”, showed that they had not grasped that he was about to go to his Father in heaven.

So, we find this little group of eleven men standing on the Mount of Olives. But once they had got over their amazement at what had just happened, they were filled with joy (Luke 24:52). We don’t know how long they stayed on the Mount of Olives, but we can be sure that they would stay there a while to talk about this amazing thing that had just happened, and the message of the angels that he would return. Jesus was gone, but there on the mount, he had promised them that he would be with them always (Matthew 28:20).

They knew what they had to do. They were to be his witnesses throughout Israel and beyond. But first, they had to wait in the city so that they could receive the Holy Spirit.

**The first ten days**

Now, we know that the day of Pentecost was always fifty days after Passover. Jesus was raised to life on the day after Passover. He ascended to heaven forty days after his resurrection. It was therefore ten days between Jesus’ ascension and the day of Pentecost.

What happened during these ten days? We know the apostles stayed in Jerusalem as Jesus had told them. They did not go back to Galilee.
We have a record of three events which took place in these ten days. First, the apostles went back into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. They went straight to the upper room where many of the followers of Jesus were. What a story they had to tell! They told everyone there of his ascension and of the message of the two angels. We can imagine the effect on those present.

Let’s pause for a moment and think about this upper room. For this room was the very room where Jesus and the apostles had eaten the Passover and the last supper. It was to continue as their main Jerusalem meeting place for the Jewish believers for at least the next eight years.

In this room, he had shared bread and wine with them. He had told them here that whenever they did this in the future, it would be in remembrance of him. In this room, Jesus had told Judas to go out and do what he was going to do.

So now, they come back from the Mount of Olives to this upper room. What was this room? We know it was a large room. Mark 14:15 tells us it was a “large upper room”.

John Wenham in his book, *Easter Enigma*, points out that the “early Christians seemed to have access to at least one large meeting place in Jerusalem from the time of the last supper to the time of Peter’s escape from prison”.² It is estimated that this was a period of about 8 years (AD 33–41).

It is likely that this upper room is the same room as is mentioned in Acts 12:12, which was in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. John Mark (Mark) and his family, obviously a wealthy family to have such a large house in Jerusalem, were close friends and followers of Jesus.

So we find that this large upper room is the one that in all probability was the room in which:

- Jesus ate the Passover meal and last supper with his apostles.
- The apostles were gathered on the night of Jesus’ resurrection when he suddenly appeared to them.
- The apostles met with other followers of Jesus after they returned from the Mount of Olives.
- The Holy Spirit was bestowed on the apostles on the day of Pentecost.

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• And to which Peter came after his escape from prison (Acts 12:12).

In each of these instances, a large room was required to hold the number of people involved. It was unlikely that the early followers of Jesus had access to more than one large room, so it is likely that this large upper room in the house of Mark’s parents is the same room mentioned in all of the above events.

This room then, was the principal meeting place of this first group of believers, who were to form the nucleus of the first ecclesia in Jerusalem. Let’s see who was in the room when the apostles came back to it from the Mount of Olives:

Acts 1:13–14 records that those present (as well as the eleven apostles) were:

• Mary, the mother of Jesus
• The brothers of Jesus (the Greek here suggests that his sisters may also have been present).
• The women

This was a very closely bound group. The women would be those who had been very close to Jesus, given that Mary and her sons, the brothers of Jesus, were there.

My guess is that the women would have included those who were at the empty tomb of Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Salome (Jesus’ aunt), Mary (wife of Cleopas and Jesus’ aunt), Joanna and probably Susanna.

Then came the eleven disciples. This was quite a select little group. Every one of those present had been very close to Jesus.

Altogether, there were about nineteen people, including the apostles, in the upper room. Acts tells us that these nineteen people devoted themselves to prayer, there and then in the upper room. Jesus was no longer with them in person. This was a brand new experience for them.

This brings us to the second event in these ten days. Within a day or two, there were about one hundred and twenty of Jesus’ followers gathered together — again probably at the house of Mark and his family.

“In those days Peter stood up among the brethren (the company of persons was in all about a hundred and twenty) …” (Acts 1:15)
We therefore know there were at least about one hundred and twenty believers in Jerusalem a matter of two or three days after Jesus’ ascension to heaven.

At this point, the believers looked to Peter and the apostles for leadership. Peter was accepted as the predominant brother. It was always Peter who took the initiative (Acts 2:14; 15:6–7).

This is an interesting characteristic found in all of the first century ecclesias. The ecclesial structure consisted of a leader — a bishop or overseer, and deacons (sometimes called elders) whose job it was to provide leadership and guidance within each ecclesia.

For example, we find that James, the brother of Jesus, was bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18). Paul instructed Timothy and Titus on the characteristics and personal qualities required of bishops and deacons.

The appointment of bishops and deacons in the very early ecclesias, both in Jerusalem and elsewhere, was a practice dating back to the days just after Jesus’ ascension, when Peter was in effect the bishop, and the apostles did the work of deacons.

The position of Bishop was very different from the Bishops in today’s churches. Bishops in the early part of the first century were very much part of the ecclesia, and probably were involved with only one ecclesia, not several. They provided spiritual and administrative leadership of the ecclesia, along with deacons or elders. We see this in Paul’s instructions to Timothy and Titus in instructing them in the formation of ecclesias.

Today, as we know, Bishops have a strong administrative and ceremonial role. They are part of the upper hierarchy of the church, whereas in the first century, Bishops were much closer to their ecclesial flocks.

Let’s return to the meeting in Jerusalem. The purpose of this meeting of one hundred and twenty believers was to elect a twelfth apostle to replace Judas who by now had committed suicide. Matthias was chosen.

A few days later, ten days after Jesus’ ascension, the third event occurred which was to profoundly affect the apostles and all of the early believers in Jerusalem. This event was the promised bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This was what Jesus had promised.
We go to what was very likely the same upper room where the twelve apostles are gathered together, ten days after Jesus’ ascension. It is the day of Pentecost. The twelve apostles of Jesus, including the new apostle, Matthias, are seated in this room.

Suddenly, a sound like a rushing wind filled the house in which they were sitting. The apostles were startled. Even more so when they saw tongues of fire appear and rest on each of them.

Then something equally strange happened. They all began to speak in different languages. The apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, and it was this that enabled them to speak in different languages.

People outside the room also heard this sound like a rushing, mighty wind. “What’s happening?”, they cried as they rushed into the room where the apostles sat.

There they saw and heard a remarkable thing. Twelve men, each with fire resting upon them, and all of them speaking in different languages. Not only that, but the men who had rushed into the room recognised these languages as their own language. These men came from all over the Middle East, from as far away as Rome, as well as Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Crete.

As these men listened in awe, they heard the apostles speaking about the mighty works of God in these various languages.

This outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the beginning of a new era in terms of the Spirit’s involvement with mankind. It marked the beginning of the spread of Christianity throughout the world.

After Pentecost, everything was different. Life would never be the same again for the twelve apostles, or for anyone else who came in touch with this dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus who was seated at God’s right hand, and yet present in their midst through the Spirit.

Jesus had told the apostles that this would happen, although they didn’t know when or just how it would happen.
Let’s look at a few of the passages in which Jesus told them that this remarkable event would happen. We have seen some of these already, but here is a fuller picture of what he told his apostles:

“And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

“... he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father ... before many days you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:4–5)

“And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17)

“... the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things.” (John 14:26)

“... if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7)

This bestowal of the Holy Spirit was a major event for these very early Jerusalem believers. It changed their lives.

From these words of Jesus, we therefore know:

- The Holy Spirit was promised by God.
- The apostles would receive the power of the Holy Spirit.
- They would be witnesses for Jesus throughout Israel and the world.
- The Counselor (Holy Spirit) would be with them for ever (John 14:16–17).
- Only those who are followers of Jesus would receive the Spirit. People who don’t know Jesus will not receive the Spirit.
- The Spirit would dwell with them.
- The Spirit would teach them all things.
- The Counselor would not come unless Jesus went away.

Peter’s address to the three thousand men gathered there that day was remarkable. Under the influence of the Spirit, Peter’s understanding was now complete. There was no question now (as there had been ten days before) of the Kingdom being established now.

He powerfully and unequivocally told them that Jesus had been dead, buried and was now alive:
“This Jesus . . . you crucified and killed . . . but God raised him up . . . and of that we all are witnesses. Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:23–24,36)

This powerful statement became the platform from then on of the early believers. They knew and preached that Jesus had risen from the dead.

On that day, three thousand were baptised. They were Jews from other countries, and they went back to their countries changed men.

The effect of this event must have charged the Jerusalem believers with a surge of spiritual strength they had not known before. Yes, Jesus had gone to heaven to be with his Father, but through the Spirit, he was still working with them and was with them in their hearts.

Well, we have thought about the first ten days of the lives of the Jerusalem believers after Jesus left them and ascended to heaven.

Yet, he was still with them through the Spirit. Jesus was with them as the spread of Christianity flowed out from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and beyond Israel to the rest of the world.

He guided and blessed them. God gave him absolute power and authority to do this. In the first and twenty-first century, Jesus operates with that power and authority in the lives of all his followers and ecclesias. There are three quotes, one from Jesus himself, and two from Paul, which confirm this:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28:18)

“... he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church ...” (Ephesians 1:20–22)

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ...” (Philippians 2:9–11)

Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven, he has been guiding his ecclesias and his people. He is with us always:

“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 14:23)
After the day of Pentecost, other dramatic events followed quickly. Each of them had a galvanising and electrifying effect on the believers in Jerusalem. Every believer was on tip-toe with excitement because they belonged to the risen Lord, and, through the Spirit, he was causing huge things to happen:

- The healing of the lame man at the temple.
- The arrest of Peter and John.
- The election of the seven to attend to the welfare needs of the early believers.
- Stephen’s death.
- Paul’s conversion
- The resurrection of Tabitha at Joppa
- The gospel was preached to the Gentiles in Caesarea. The first Gentile ecclesia was established there.
- The spread of the gospel to Antioch.

Within a year, Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus had happened and the Christian message began to be spread to Gentile hearers.

In the next five chapters, we will go with these early believers and watch as the gospel of the Lord Jesus takes root both in Jerusalem and more widely in Israel, and beyond. But we will also see that these early believers were called upon to display courage to the uttermost as they remained loyal to their Lord.
Peter and John at the temple

One afternoon only a few weeks after the mighty bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, about 3pm, the time of afternoon prayers, Peter and John arrived at the temple. They saw some people carrying a lame man. He had been born lame. He was over forty years old. Peter and John had seen this man often. He always lay by the gate called Beautiful, seeking alms from everyone who went through the gate. This was the main gate leading into the temple from the Court of the Gentiles.

They watched as they gently laid this man down at the gate. He was undoubtedly only one of hundreds of sick and disabled people who begged for money at the various temple gates.

This man had never walked. He had been lame from birth. He had never stood up. All his life, he had looked up at people from a sitting or lying position.

Jesus would have seen this man many times. He would have walked past him, as he had entered the temple through the Beautiful gate on many occasions. Just inside the gate was the Court of the Women, for example, where Jesus had sat with his disciples when the widow placed her mite in the collection box. Yes, he would have seen this man often.

True to form, the man, when he saw Peter and John about to enter the gate, asked them for money. He knew they were two of the men who had come here often with Jesus.
We’ll come back to this man shortly, but first, it will be useful to think about what had been happening to the early believers up to this point.

Gradually, these early believers were coming to realise that Jesus was still guiding them, and that his message of salvation was being accepted by more and more people in Jerusalem. Jesus was not physically with them any more, but there was no doubt that his strong influence through the Spirit — the Counselor he had called it — was at work. Since that dramatic day at Pentecost, things had changed dramatically for them, and they saw again and again the work of the Holy Spirit as the apostles used its healing power.

The more perceptive of the believers were beginning to accept that there would be even more amazing things ahead. This was just the beginning. The world beyond Jerusalem, beyond Israel and beyond even Asia in the north and Egypt in the south, were about to change forever.

What effect were all these dramatic happenings having on these very early believers?

Were they grief stricken that Jesus was no longer with them?

Did they creep about in fear of their lives in case the Jews would arrest them?

No, quite the opposite. Throughout Acts, we have a few windows, as it were, through which we catch a glimpse of what effect all these happenings were having on the believers in Jerusalem. Remember, the gospel message had not yet gone beyond Jerusalem.

The first of these windows we find in Acts 2:42–47. When we peep through this window we find, only a month or so after Jesus had ascended to heaven, that these believers were happy and abounding in the love of Jesus. Why was this?

Because they believed implicitly in the fact that Jesus, once dead, was now alive again and would never die again. He was immortal. This was the central fact which galvanised these early believers. Hundreds of them had seen and talked with him in the forty days after his resurrection.

They believed and knew that Jesus was with them through the Spirit. They knew he was guiding their lives. They were beginning to see that
the message of salvation of their Lord was being accepted with joy by a
great many people in Jerusalem.

Every day, people were joining them as believers and followers of their
risen Lord.

Let’s take a peep through this window:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to
the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul,
and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And
all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they
were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds
to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together
and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and
generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And
the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
(Acts 2:42–47 esv)

This was not a people grieving or creeping about in great fear. Here
we find a gathering of believers who were over the moon in their new
circumstances, helping each other and praising God. They were a happy
people and they were held in high regard by everyone about them.

Let’s think about this for a moment.

Signs and wonders by the apostles

This was additional evidence of God’s Spirit being with them as Jesus had
promised. The same Spirit as used by Jesus was now given to the apostles,
who were performing many miracles by the Spirit.

They were together and had all things common

This was a new approach for the believers. They shared their belongings
with each other. I don’t think it means that they were living all together,
because they broke bread in their houses each day. But they shared their
belongings and had the common wonderful hope and discipleship in Jesus.
They carried out Jesus’ command to care for each other.
They sold their possessions and distributed to those in need

The gospel of Jesus brought a whole new perspective into their lives. There was no class distinction amongst the believers, even though many of them were priests. Some, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, had been members of the ruling Sanhedrin.

But this didn’t matter. Ownership of material goods was no longer important. It was far more important to care for each other. If someone was in need, they were given what they needed to satisfy that need.

The apostles told them what Jesus had told them on the Mount of Olives on the night before his arrest:

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

And that’s exactly what they did.

Incidentally, one wonders whether we will need to do everything together in the time of great tribulation yet to come. For us, ownership of material goods may become irrelevant. Much more important will be to pool our resources and care for each other, with daily food and accommodation. Matthew 24 and Revelation 13 tells us much about the time yet to come.

Day by day they attended the temple together, breaking bread in their homes with glad and generous hearts

This is an important point. They still went to the temple, and they went together. Those at the temple would know this large group of believers were followers of Jesus.

They would see the joy in their faces. They had a purpose they had never known before. Although their lives were centred on the Kingdom of God that Jesus had taught them about, they still went to the temple frequently.

In the partaking of their daily meals, they recognised that this was part of the Lord’s blessing to them — daily food. They ate their meals with glad hearts — and generous hearts. This mention of generosity implies that they often shared their meals with those who didn’t have anything
to eat. Perhaps the beggars of the city, or widows. They shared their food generously.

_They praised God_

They praised him for the wonder of his blessings to them through Jesus their Lord. Their lives had been completely turned around. Before, they suffered the disinterest of the Jewish priests. They would have had their share of sickness, disability, epilepsy, leprosy. They had no spiritual hope. Life was, at best, trying to cope each day in very difficult and hopeless circumstances.

They were sick of the oppression of Rome. Sick of the constant tension between the Roman rulers in Jerusalem and the Jewish leaders. They were an oppressed people, without hope and without direction in their lives.

Now, their lives were vastly different. All of these early believers had seen and known Jesus. They had listened rapturously to his teaching about the Kingdom of God. They had seen his many miracles. Some of them had been among the thousands Jesus fed beside the Sea of Galilee.

In Jesus, they had seen what God was like — a God of compassion and love and forgiveness to those who chose to come to Him. Their lives were changed. They had hope. They knew Jesus was alive and would return to establish the Kingdom of God. And they praised God for it.

_They had favour with all the people_

This is another interesting characteristic of the early believers. Everyone respected them and held them in good repute. Their new way of life, their behaviour, their generosity, the joy in their faces, their friendliness, their willingness to give up their possessions and goods for the sake of others, and above all, their absolute conviction that Jesus was alive and working in their lives.

None of this was lost on the people of Jerusalem. Probably each person in Jerusalem knew at least someone who had become a believer in Jesus. Even many of the priests had become believers.
The Lord added to their number daily

Every day, new believers joined them. People from all walks of life. People of high station, like the priests, but also people who were poverty stricken—beggars, cripples, lepers.

Those who chose to accept the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and King were welcomed, and the number of believers grew steadily.

I wonder if anything about the description of these early believers has struck you. You see, those characteristics we have just outlined are precisely and exactly the characteristics we should have. Do we have them?

Let’s move on. Only a few short weeks after the mighty manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, came the next great event in the lives of these believers. An event which was amazing in its effect, but which also significantly increased the danger to the early believers.

We have already seen that the believers attended the temple frequently. Every day, three times each day, prayers were held at the temple. It had been customary for these believers, all their lives, to attend at least some of these prayer sessions at the temple.

There were over seven thousand priests associated with the temple. In addition, some ten thousand Levites served in the temple. The temple, in Jesus’ time, could hold two hundred thousand worshippers. On feast days and Passover, Jerusalem’s population swelled to well over a million Jews.

We return now to the lame man at the Beautiful Gate.

As Peter and John came to the Beautiful Gate, they saw the lame man. They had often seen him. Jesus would have known him. But he hadn’t healed him. Jesus knew that his healing would come after he had ascended to heaven.

Peter and John stopped. Peter especially looked at the man with intensity (“Gazed at him” rsv). After gazing at him for several seconds, Peter suddenly said to him, “Look at us.” So the man looked up at them, feeling sure that these men were about to give him money.

But Peter’s next words caused the man’s expectations to drop. Peter said, “I don’t have any money . . .” The man was disappointed, but he saw that
Peter had more to say. “I don’t have any money, but I give you what I have. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk!”

Before the man could gather his wits and absorb what Peter had just said, Peter reached out and took him by the right hand, and raised him to his feet.

And suddenly, instantly, immediately, the man felt a surge of power in his body, and his feet and ankles were instantly strong.

He had never walked before. He had always, all his life, looked up at people from where he lay. But now he could look Peter and John in the face, level with them. He felt the new strength in his legs and he jumped up and leaped and walked through the Beautiful gate with them. No need for physiotherapy or rehabilitation for this man! As he walked with them, he continued to leap and jump and praised God for what had happened to him.

There were crowds of people about, and as the man leaped and jumped and praised God at the top of his voice, they turned to look at him.

“What’s going on?” “What’s this man leaping about for?”

Looking more closely at him, they said to each other, “Isn’t this the lame man who lay at the gate every day? Yes, it is! What’s happened to him?”

By now, the man was so overcome that he was clinging to Peter and John. People were astounded to see what had happened and they began to converge on Peter and John and the man. This was a spectacular happening.

Peter and John quickly saw the gathering crowd and saw an opportunity to talk to the people. They and the man went a few yards away from the gate into Solomon’s Porch. Jesus had often spoken to the people here.

Peter spoke to the gathering crowd:

“Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” (Acts 3:12)

We know that Peter spoke to the crowds for about three hours, for it was evening before the authorities arrested he and John, and they had been there since 3pm.
We obviously don’t have all that Peter spoke about to the crowds that day, for his address only covers fifteen verses in Acts. But his main points were:

- This man has been healed by faith in the name of Jesus.
- He urged them to repent of their sins and seek the Lord’s forgiveness so that they may be refreshed in the Lord.
- He told them that Jesus was in heaven and would return to the earth at God’s appointed time.

But the most vital element of his address was that although the Jews had killed Jesus, God had raised him from the dead and he was now alive. Peter was devastatingly merciless in what he said to them. Remember that he was in the temple when he said it.

“But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer [Barabbas] to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know . . . ” (Acts 3:14–16)

About 6pm, the temple authorities felt that something had to be done. There were at least five thousand people, probably more, who were out there in Solomon’s Porch listening to Peter. It was obvious to the authorities that they were being strongly influenced by what Peter said. We know that as a result of his address that afternoon, five thousand people came to believe in the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:4).

Let’s pause for a moment to get some perspective into what was happening here.

First, Peter. The difference in Peter was dramatic. Here was the man who had denied his Lord three times only weeks earlier. Now we find him bold and devastating in his statements to the Jewish authorities — the same authorities who had sentenced Jesus to death only weeks earlier. This required great courage on Peter’s part.

He didn’t hesitate to fling the accusation at them that the Jews had killed Jesus, but God had raised him from the dead and he was now alive again for evermore.

Time and time again, on various occasions, Peter hurled these words at the Jewish leaders.
Peter was undoubtedly the leader of the apostles and the Jerusalem believers at this early stage.

**Second, the apostles.** The teaching of the apostles that Jesus was alive and offered salvation to all through forgiveness of their sins, had spread rapidly through Jerusalem in the past few weeks. The Jewish leaders indicated just how far this teaching had permeated Jerusalem:

“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name [Jesus], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching . . .” (Acts 5:28)

**Third,** the apostles were now proclaiming Jesus in titles such as Lord, Christ, God’s holy servant. To us, we are used to these titles and accept them unequivocally as the role and titles of Jesus, but in the time of Jesus, and in the first few weeks after his ascension, he was generally known simply as Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, though, despite the orders that they are forbidden to teach in his name, they are openly proclaiming him as Christ, the Messiah, as Lord, and, interestingly, as God’s holy servant.

For example, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said:

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)

“This Jesus”, thundered Peter, “is none other than our long awaited Messiah, and you have killed him.

“But God has raised him to life again because death could not hold him. God has made him Lord.”

This was an obvious reminder to the Jews of Psalm 110:1:

“The Lord [God] says to my lord [Jesus]: ‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.’ “

One thousand years before Jesus’ time, David was saying, “Someone who, I, David, will address as ‘My Lord’, will come, and God will invite him to sit at his right hand.”

“This man”, Peter told the Jews, “is Jesus. He is our Lord.” (Acts 3:13; 4:27,30)

Peter also spoke of Jesus as “God’s holy servant”. This indicates that Jesus had shown his apostles, no doubt during the forty days after his resurrection, that he was the servant spoken of by Isaiah. For example:
“Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up . . .”
(Isaiah 52:13)

“By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous . . .” (Isaiah 53:11)

As Paul Barnett writes, “In short, the apostles’ teaching was that the “Christ” descended from David was also the “servant” who suffered vicariously for his people.”

The fourth point to note is that Peter was teaching unequivocally and constantly that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. This was anathema to the Jewish leaders, especially the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

So it is against this background and in this context that we rejoin Peter and John and the crowd of at least five thousand in Solomon’s Porch at the temple.

About 6pm, the temple authorities approached the crowd. There were the captain of the temple, the temple priests and the Sadducees. They pushed their way through the crowd, elbowing their way through to Peter and John. They arrested them and put them in custody (Acts 4:3) until the morning. Although not stated, it is implied that the healed man was put in custody as well.

This was a momentous event in the lives of the believers in Jerusalem. For the first time since Jesus ascended into heaven, two of the apostles, and senior ones at that, had been arrested because of their teaching about Jesus. It was inevitable that this should happen.

Word would spread like lightning around the homes of the believers — “Peter and John have been arrested and are in gaol! They must face the Sanhedrin in the morning!”

This arrest of Peter and John brought great fear to the believers. A week or two later, the apostles were again teaching at the temple, but we find that none of the believers dared to join them (Acts 5:13).

But on this evening of the arrest of Peter and John, the believers waited anxiously and fearfully for news of what was happening. “What will happen to Peter and John in the morning? What will happen to us all,

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now that the authorities have taken action against us?” No doubt there was fervent prayer by the believers that night.

Next morning, the Sanhedrin assembled in the Sanhedrin chamber of the temple to consider the case against Peter and John. All of the Jewish heavyweights were present — the rulers, the scribes, the elders, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander and others of the high priestly family. They were all there.

These were the ones who had arrested Jesus, (see Luke 22:52), who had tried him, who had urged Pilate again and again to crucify him. They thought with Jesus dead, that would be the end of the matter. But now they were having to deal with his apostles who were stirring up the people of Jerusalem with the claim that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was alive again!

Thousands believed in him, and the numbers were increasing each day. The teachings of this Jesus were sweeping the city. It had to be stopped.

Peter and John were brought in. Standing beside them, was the man who had been lame.

The first question to Peter and John was straight forward enough. “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

It was a crafty and specifically worded question. They knew that the apostles taught and healed people in the name of Jesus.

Before we hear Peter’s answer to this question, it is interesting to note that the words, “the name of Jesus”, appear no less than seven times in the third and fourth chapters of Acts. Here are some of them:

“And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong.” (3:16)

“By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified …” (4:10)

“There is no other name … by which we must be saved.” (4:12)

“They … charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” (4:18)

The name of Jesus, or Y’shua in Hebrew, is, we are told (Philippians 2:9–10), “the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

So when we conclude a prayer with the words, “in Jesus’ name”, we are concluding our prayer with the most powerful name in heaven or on
earth. **At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.** We must not take his name lightly.

It was in this name that Peter and John had healed the lame man.

Peter, about to reply to the question, “By what name did you do this?”, was about to address the most powerful ruling authority in Israel.

The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one of Israel’s wealthiest, most intellectual, most influential and most powerful men. Amongst their members was Gamaliel and very possibly Saul of Tarsus. Yet here is Peter, an uneducated Galilean fisherman facing them rather as their judge than as their victim. Peter was well aware that he was taking his life in his hands.

If they expected Peter and John to offer some small, defensive response to their question, they were mistaken. Peter immediately got to the point and did not hesitate to confront the Sanhedrin with the direct accusation that they had killed Jesus. He was filled with the Holy Spirit as he answered them:

> “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it 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 is standing before you well.”
> (Acts 4:8–10)

Angry stirring and muttering amongst the Sanhedrin . . .

> “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11–12)

The members of the Sanhedrin had not expected this. These men were uneducated and common Galileans, fishermen, but Peter spoke with boldness and conviction, and with devastating accusation of them.

More than that, Acts 4:13 records that the Sanhedrin “recognised that they had been with Jesus.” There was a strength, a conviction about them — a conviction and purpose which lit up their faces as they proclaimed their Lord as the Christ — the Messiah.

Standing beside them was the man they had healed the day before. The members of the Sanhedrin could not deny that Peter and John had healed
him. This group of powerful and educated men had been well and truly put in their place by Peter. They were perplexed about what to do next. They asked Peter and John and the man who had been lame to leave the chamber while they discussed their next move.

“What will we do with these men? What they have done in healing this man is now known all over Jerusalem, and we can’t deny it. The people would rise up in revolt if we did. All we can do is to warn them not to continue to teach in the name of Jesus.” (paraphrased from Acts 4:16–17)

They called Peter and John and the man back into the chamber and told them their decision. Still, the apostles were defiant. “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge.”

This response incensed the Sanhedrin, and they warned and threatened them again not to teach in the name of Jesus. They could not punish them because there were thousands of Jews in Jerusalem praising God for this healing of the lame man.

While this meeting with the Sanhedrin was going on, the Jerusalem believers waited, holding their collective breath. This was the first challenge to them by the authorities. What would happen next? All of them were in danger.

They were amazed when Peter and John came to them after their release. We are told (Acts 4:23) that they “went to their friends.” In all likelihood, it was the house of Zebedee they went to, as he had a house in Jerusalem as well as one in Capernaum. It would be natural for John, Zebedee’s son, to go there.

We are not told who those friends were, but we can be sure they included the other ten apostles as well as other believers close to Peter and John. These would include John’s parents, Zebedee and Salome, and Salome’s sister, Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as others with them at the house.

When Peter and John told them what had happened at the Sanhedrin, they lifted up their voices in prayer:

‘Sovereign Lord . . . you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them . . . Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel . . . to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.”

“They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your
word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”

(Acts 4:24–31 NIV)

And “with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”

This event, their first challenge, left the believers with great confidence in the Lord Jesus, that he would be with them and strengthen them each day. But they also knew that dangerous times lay ahead. They knew that the temple authorities would be watching them, waiting to pounce.

For the next few days or week or two, life went on. Peter especially was held in high esteem by the people. As he walked the streets of Jerusalem, people flocked to him as they had flocked to Jesus. They even carried their sick ones into the streets on beds and stretchers. If Peter’s shadow fell on them, they were happy.

As the influence and message of the apostles grew, people from the towns around Jerusalem brought their sick to Peter and the apostles, and all of them were healed.

A sobering and somewhat startling event occurred when two of the believers, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, tried to deceive Peter. The believers in general were selling their property and bringing the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to those in need.

But Ananias and Sapphira kept part of the proceeds from the sale of their property, and gave only part of the proceeds to the apostles. So seriously did Peter regard this, that he pronounced death on both of them. This had a profound effect on the believers. “Great fear came upon the whole assembly, and upon all who heard of these things.” (Acts 5:11)

Not long after the healing of the lame man, the apostles decided to preach again at Solomon’s Porch at the temple. This would not have been decided lightly. They knew the risk they were taking and that they had been warned not to do this.

“Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor.” (Acts 5:12–13)
This time, it was not just Peter and John who were there. This time, all of
the apostles were there. I believe this was a calculated challenge by the
apostles to the temple authorities. They knew the people of Jerusalem
wanted to hear more and more about Jesus the Christ, who was now their
Lord, and who had been resurrected from the dead.

But the apostles and the believers also knew the danger associated with
preaching in the temple again, or anywhere in Jerusalem for that matter.
The believers dared not join the apostles at the temple. Such was the fear
and tension building up between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish
authorities.

So the preaching in Solomon’s Porch began. It was not long before the
authorities were on the scene. This time, the high priest himself was
amongst the group who came to arrest the apostles. Once again, the
Sadducees and all the temple officers were there. Once again, they placed
the apostles (twelve this time) in the prison. Once again, word would flash
around the believers that the apostles had been arrested.

This time, though, things happened differently.

Imagine the amazement and awe of the apostles when, just before dawn,
an angel suddenly appeared to them in prison. Despite the fact that the
prison was securely locked, with sentries at all the doors, the angel led
them out of the prison and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak
to the people all the words of this life.” (Acts 5:20)

So the apostles entered the temple at daybreak and began to preach.

Within an hour or two, the Sanhedrin, who imagined that the apostles
were safely locked up in the temple prison, assembled to consider the
case. They were incredulous when they were told that the apostles were
no longer in the prison. And then word was brought to them that they
were teaching in the temple!

The captain of the temple, a man second only to the high priest, was sent
with his officers to bring the apostles to the chamber of the Sanhedrin.

The Captain of the temple realised that he was going to have to act care-
fully. The people of Jerusalem, great numbers of whom held the apostles
and believers in high esteem, felt much animosity towards the Sanhedrin
because of their treatment of the apostles. So great was this animosity,
that the temple captain felt that in bringing the apostles to the chamber
of the Sanhedrin, he was in danger of being stoned by the people. He brought them without violence because of the people.

The Sanhedrin was in a difficult position. They thought they had got rid of the problem of Jesus when they crucified him. Now, however, only weeks after his crucifixion, the influence of his followers was growing rapidly, and thousands of people in and around Jerusalem were becoming believers in Jesus. Worse still, his believers were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead and was still influencing the believers and their work.

But the Sanhedrin felt enough was enough. This time, a much tougher approach would be taken with the apostles. This teaching in the name of Jesus had to be stopped.

When the apostles were brought into the chamber, the high priest, who was the President of the Sanhedrin, told them:

“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching …” (Acts 5:28)

Once more, Peter flung at them that they had killed Jesus. This was too much for the Sanhedrin. They had had enough. There were moves to have the apostles killed, and the members were quieted only at the wise persuasion of Gamaliel.

The apostles were granted their lives, but this time, they were physically thrashed. This was the first time physical action had been used against them. They had narrowly escaped with their lives, and they knew that the Jewish authorities would go to any lengths to stop their preaching in the name of Jesus. But they also knew that they had the people of Jerusalem on their side. This was their protection from the authorities, for the temple authorities would not take any public action against them for fear the people would revolt. The Sanhedrin could not afford a rift with Rome over not being able to control their people.

For that reason, Acts 5:42 tells us that “every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

This took great courage on the part of the apostles. But their love of Jesus was paramount, and they were prepared even to die for him if they had to.

Up to this point, the teaching about Jesus was confined to Jerusalem and its nearby towns. This was soon to change dramatically. The message of Jesus was to go out to all the world.
In the next few weeks, events in Jerusalem would force the believers to flee from Jerusalem to other parts of Israel and even beyond Israel, as they fled from the fierce persecution of a man named Saul.

Soon, too, the gospel of Jesus would be taken to the gentiles. The great plan of God and His Son had begun. For the moment, though, pressure and threats were building up against the apostles and against the assembly of believers in Jerusalem.

Their hearts were firmly established. Their love of, and devotion for, Jesus overcame all their fears. He had died for them. If they had to, they would also give their lives for him, and many did. If suffering and death should be their lot in the coming days, weeks and months, they were prepared to accept it, for in life or death, they belonged to their Lord.

The first to give their life in death for Jesus, was Stephen. Our next chapter tells his remarkable story.
Amongst the early believers was a Jew named Stephen.

The story of Stephen took place about six to nine months after the ascension of Jesus to heaven. This time period was in the very earliest days of the development of Christianity in Jerusalem.

Let’s consider this time from the perspective of the many followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. We don’t know how many there were, but there would be thousands.

We often consider major events and major persons in these early months, such as Peter and John at the temple when they healed the crippled man, or the death of Stephen, or Paul’s persecution of Jesus’ followers, or Paul’s conversion at Damascus, and so on. But try to imagine what all these things meant to the early “ordinary” brethren and sisters of this time.

It was only six to nine months since Jesus had left them, and since then, these brethren and sisters had been through torrid times. In particular, the Jewish rulers had made life difficult and dangerous for them. The apostles were openly preaching the risen Lord in the temple precincts. Peter and John and the other apostles had been arrested only weeks earlier, flogged, and then let go.

There was a secrecy amongst these early brethren and sisters because of the danger they faced from the Jewish authorities. Life was not easy for them, but despite this, through it all they were filled with joy because they belonged to Jesus, their risen Lord. They looked to the apostles for
leadership and guidance. They had the presence of the Holy Spirit with them as Jesus had promised.

Up to now, the threats against them had been external threats — mainly from the Jewish rulers. But they were gradually becoming aware of another problem. Internal stresses were developing amongst them. There were differences of opinion amongst the various synagogues around Jerusalem where the followers of Jesus met. This was causing uneasiness amongst the believers and it was getting worse.

This was a threat from within their own ranks.

_Hebrew and Hellenist Jews_

The reason for this internal stress was because there were two groups of Christian Jews in Jerusalem — the “Hebrew” Jews and the “Hellenist” Jews. They were all Jews, and they were all followers of Jesus. The twelve apostles were the leading body for all of the believers of both groups, but it was becoming increasingly obvious that the division between these two groups was becoming a real problem.

What do we know about these two groups of Jewish believers?

The **Hebrew Jews** had always lived in Israel, principally in Jerusalem and Galilee. For 1,500 years (since Moses) these Hebrew Jews had focussed their Judaistic religion on the Law and the temple. The Law and the temple were sacrosanct to them. They were an integral part of their religious worship.

The **Hellenist Jews** had not been brought up in Israel. Worship at the temple was not such a huge part of their religious life. They acknowledged the temple as a religious institution, and an important part of Judaism, but it was not somewhere they attended on a regular basis. They had been brought up outside Israel.

The Hellenist Jews attended five or more Hellenist synagogues in Jerusalem:

> “Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen.” ([Acts 6:9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+6%3A9&version=NIV))

These, then, were some of the Hellenist synagogues.
We first come upon the stress between these two groups in Acts 6:1:

“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”

Acts 4:32–37 tells us that the early brethren and sisters had everything in common. They sold everything they had and pooled their money in a common pool.

Acts 4:35 says “distribution was made to each as any had need.”

As it happened, this communal way of living only lasted a short time. The way the apostles dealt with these growing complaints from the Hellenists was to appoint seven brethren to look after the welfare needs of the believers.

The seven were:

- Stephen
- Philip
- Prochorus
- Nicanor
- Timon
- Parmenas
- Nicolaus

Stephen was a Hellenist Jew, and judging by their names, some of the others were, too.

Some historians record that some of these brethren were later appointed as bishops of the early church in Asia. Apart from two or three of them, most of them are never mentioned again in Scripture.

But they were specially chosen brethren, “full of the Spirit and of wisdom and of good repute”. These were senior brethren in Jerusalem.

The apostles prayed with them and laid their hands upon them, the usual way of imparting the power of the Holy Spirit upon men.

It is notable that there appears to be a mixture of Hebrew and Hellenist Jews in these seven. A wise choice from both groups.

So this solved, for a time, the discontent amongst the Hellenists. Their widows were now looked after equally as well as the Hebrew widows.
But still there were problems between these two groups. The problems were caused because of the difference in approach between the two groups towards the Law and the temple.

It is worth pausing here a moment to mention that the ordinary believers in Jerusalem were about to experience two major developments. The first development involved their attitude towards the temple, and the second development resulted from them being persecuted and hunted out of Jerusalem.

Both of these developments were major and necessary factors in the development of Christianity in these very early months after Jesus’ ascension to heaven. And both developments came about because of Stephen, one of the seven appointed to look after welfare matters.

Stephen

Stephen was a remarkable man. Acts 6:5 describes him as a man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”. He was a man of wisdom and of good repute. He was also a man of undoubted spiritual insight. The most remarkable thing about him was that he appears to be the first of the believers to grasp that the teaching of Jesus involved moving from the physical to the spiritual. Let’s think about this.

For a Hebrew Jew, and even for the apostles (all Hebrew Jews), it was very difficult to accept that the Law and the temple were no longer part of their life in Christ. In fact, they didn’t even realise that the teaching of Jesus brought with it a new, spiritual way of thinking about the worship of God.

The Law and the temple were physical — written down laws and commandments and the physical temple, built of bricks and mortar. These were physical, real and tangible parts of the worship. As followers of Jesus, they still worshipped at the temple, still clung to aspects of the Law such as circumcision. They had been doing these things for fifteen hundred years.

So for a Hebrew Jew who had become a follower of Jesus, it just didn’t occur to them that the Law and the temple were no longer important.

But to Stephen, it was clear that the new covenant in Jesus meant that the Law and the temple were no longer part of life in Christ. He had
not grown up in Israel and did not have the entrenched attitudes of his Hebrew brethren towards the temple. He was able to take a wider view and realised that Jesus taught on a more spiritual plane, one in which the temple no longer played a part.

Because of this, Stephen taught that the temple and the Law were no longer relevant. They had been replaced by a spiritual understanding of the temple, and the old Law of commandments had been replaced by the new spiritual way of love in Christ Jesus. Jesus had fulfilled the Law, and a new covenant in Christ Jesus had been introduced in him.

Stephen also saw that the temple had never been an integral part of God’s plan for the Jews. God was concerned with the land of Israel, and its people, not the temple. The people and the land were God’s focus, and Stephen realised this.

Stephen was adamant in his teaching about this. He taught this new way of thinking in the Hellenist synagogues. Many of the Hebrew Jews disagreed with Stephen. His teaching was against all they had always believed and practiced. Even his fellow Hellenist Jews were becoming alarmed at his teaching. They could see that Stephen’s teaching about the irrelevance of the Law and the temple could bring them all into conflict with the Jewish authorities.

The authorities were also becoming concerned about Stephen’s new way of thinking, which threatened all they had ever known in Judaism.

We can feel this concern in Acts 6:11–14:

“Then they secretly instigated men, who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law . . . ’”

Imagine the effect of these developments on the ordinary followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. First, the animosity of the Jewish rulers towards them. Then the complaints of the Hellenist Jews about their widows being neglected. Now, Stephen, one of their leaders, had been brought before those rulers by some of their own.

Word would flash from family to family. Families would discuss these things over their meals. They waited in anxiety and fear to see what would
happen to Stephen. Not everyone agreed with his views, but he was one of them and held in high regard. They were deeply concerned for his wellbeing.

His accusers told the Sanhedrin that Stephen was saying that Jesus taught that the temple would be destroyed and would change the customs which Moses gave to us. Here was a direct accusation against Stephen involving the temple and the Law. We can imagine the reaction of the stiff-necked Jewish leaders who comprised the Sanhedrin.

“Is this so?” the high priest asked Stephen.

Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin is spectacular. If we think it was just a speech about the history of the Jews, we have missed the point of the speech. His speech was absolutely to the point that God’s plan involved the land of Israel and God’s covenant with Israel, not the temple.

Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that:

- God had promised Abraham the land of Israel for an everlasting possession.
- God had introduced circumcision as a sign of the first covenant between Him and His people.
- Moses had led the Children of Israel out of Egypt.

What did these things have to do with the temple? What Stephen was doing was reminding the Sanhedrin of the things that mattered to God. They did not include the temple.

He went on to remind them:

- God gave Moses a Law which included the establishment of a tabernacle in which God would be present while they were in the wilderness.
- Solomon later built the first temple, but even then, God did not require a temple. David wrote years before Solomon, “The Lord is in his holy temple”. Wherever God is, is where His temple is. There is no building that man can build that God needs for His temple.
- The temple no longer had any relevance in the teaching of Jesus. Worship of God under the new covenant of Jesus was through the Spirit, not the temple. The Jewish leaders were focussed on the physical, not the spiritual.
Years later, it was ironically Paul who came to believe implicitly in what Stephen was teaching about the temple. Let’s look at some later words of Paul’s to help us in our understanding of what Stephen was saying:

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are.” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17)

This was Stephen’s view entirely. He was brought before the Sanhedrin because he had said that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs and the Law. He thundered at the Sanhedrin:

“Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?’” (Acts 7:48–49)

As Stephen looked at these rulers, he realised that they were as stiff-necked as always. They had not moved, could not move, from the physical aspects of temple worship and the Law to the spiritual aspect of worship of God. A great anger rose up in him. He thundered at them that they had always resisted the Holy Spirit. His words were packed with power, aimed fairly and squarely at each member of the Sanhedrin. Note the personal aspect in what he now thundered at them:

“You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” (Acts 7:51)

He flung at them that “you have now betrayed and murdered the Righteous One. You who received the Law and did not keep it”.

If the Sanhedrin members were furious before, they were now maddened in their rage against Stephen. He accused them of murdering Jesus of Nazareth, who he called the “Righteous One”. And he told them to their face that they did not keep the law!

This was the last straw as far as these stiff-necked rulers were concerned. They didn’t even wait for sentence to be pronounced. They rose up in their fury to throw him out. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, infuriated them still further by declaring:

“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56)
They cast him out of the city and stoned him to death. And as they hurled stones and rocks at him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

And Saul was with them as they stoned Stephen to death, and consented to his death.

The repercussions of Stephen’s death

Deep would be the grief of the followers of Jesus when news reached them of Stephen’s death. They would also be in great fear, for they knew that what Stephen had said would bring brutal treatment upon them by the Jewish authorities. And it did.

“... on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him.

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” (Acts 8:1–3)

So it was that Stephen introduced (probably without knowing it) the two major developments necessary in the development of the ecclesia in its earliest days. In the midst of the believers’ terror and fear, Jesus was moulding his people and his ecclesia.

As a result of Stephen’s work and teaching, the teaching of Jesus that the physical aspect of worship at the temple had given way to a new spiritual method of worship, now came into effect. From now on, as part of the new covenant, worship of the Father was to be done at a spiritual level, with God dwelling not in the temple of bricks and mortar, but in our hearts. This was precisely what Stephen taught.

It took the apostles some years to come to grips with this new way of thinking, but in time, they did. Peter later wrote these lovely words:

“Come to him, to that living stone [not bricks and mortar], rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4–5)

So wrote Peter. But his words were the thoughts of Stephen. This was the first of the two major developments brought by Stephen — to move from
the physical to the spiritual, and to worship God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

The second major development that came as a result of Stephen’s teaching and death was that the believers were forced out of Jerusalem, hunted out, by the very man who had consented to Stephen’s death.

In their flight from Jerusalem, these early believers went to Judea and Samaria to preach Jesus as their risen Lord. And even further, to Antioch and beyond, into Asia and eventually to all nations.

So the gospel was spread to both Jew and Gentile. This was the second major development. Stephen’s teaching and his death changed the face of Christianity.

Not for one moment did the believers who fled the persecution in Jerusalem lose their faith in their risen Lord. They later faced further persecution and death because of their rock-solid commitment to Jesus, but their faith never faltered. They knew that Jesus had died for them, and that whether they lived or died, they were the Lord’s.

All of this happened in the first year after Jesus rose to heaven from the Mount of Olives. These beliefs and events established a firm base to Christianity which still stands firm today, for those who are true followers of Jesus.

Those early believers who knew Jesus personally, who knew Stephen personally, who were hurled into prison by Saul or who fled Jerusalem at the hand of Saul, who learned that God’s new way in Christ did not involve the bricks and mortar of the temple, but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers . . . these believers will stand with Stephen and countless others, including ourselves, as we see our beloved Lord descending from heaven in power and glory to establish the new Jerusalem.

As John wrote:

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them.” (Revelation 21:2–3)
This is the new, spiritual Jerusalem. It will be the ultimate in God’s plan for His people in moving progressively over the past six thousand years from physical to spiritual worship, and from mortal to immortal existence.
We find ourselves in the ancient city of Damascus — one of the oldest cities in the world, dating back to Abraham's time. In fact, Josephus says that Abraham lived at Damascus for a while on his journey from Ur to Canaan.

We are coming to Damascus in the year AD 34. Living here at that time was a man named Ananias. He was a Jew, and was also a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have only a few verses in Acts 9 about Ananias, but he shines out as a great beacon of faith and obedience to his Lord. He was a marvellous character.

We read that Jesus called to him in a vision, “Ananias”.

In those days, Jesus occasionally appeared to his people in a vision and spoke to them. This doesn’t happen today. It could, but today we are guided by God’s Word and the answer to prayer through the Holy Spirit in our lives as we pray for guidance. But in these early days after Jesus was on earth, the believers had no New Testament writings, and so when necessary, men were spoken to in a vision.

For example, God spoke to Joseph in a dream at night; Jesus spoke to Peter in a vision on a housetop in Joppa; God spoke to Samuel in a dream, wakening him from his sleep; Jesus spoke to Saul in a vision on the road to Damascus.
Now, how would we feel if we were woken up one night by a voice calling our name. Because of what followed, this was not just a dream Ananias was having, because he actually responded and talked to Jesus.

I am quite sure that Ananias would have shot bolt upright in bed. There was no-one there. But his name had clearly been called. I don’t suppose Ananias had ever talked to Jesus before. We don’t know if he had seen him during his ministry. It’s quite possible he had, and then had fled to Damascus with other Jewish families at the time of the persecution by Saul in Jerusalem.

The early believers were aware that God and Jesus occasionally communicated with men through a vision. So, Ananias, seeing no one in his room, would immediately think of the possibility that he was being spoken to by Jesus, his Lord.

So he replied, “Here I am, Lord.” It wasn’t as if he was talking to an ordinary man in his room. This was the Lord Jesus Christ! Ananias would be instantly alert and nervous as to what was about to happen. He would be electrifyingly awake wondering what this meant.

Jesus didn’t mince his words. He never does. He got straight to the point:

“Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” (Acts 9:11–12)

By now, we can imagine that Ananias was no longer sitting up in his bed. He would be on his feet in startled horror. **SAUL THE PHARISEE!!**

Ananias knew all about this Saul — the arch-enemy of the followers of Jesus. Word had already reached the Jewish believers in Damascus that Saul was on his way from Jerusalem to hunt out every believer there, men and women, and drag them back to Jerusalem to imprison them.

Josephus records that at one time, ten thousand Jews were massacred in Damascus. There was obviously a large Jewish population there. Knowing this, it was an obvious place for the Jews who were Jesus’ followers to flee to after the death of Stephen. To stay in Jerusalem meant murderous persecution, imprisonment and possible death at the hand of Saul and his men.

We know from Acts:
“... on that day [after the death of Stephen] a great persecution arose against the church at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria...” (Acts 8:1)

The man who persecuted these followers of Jesus was Saul of Tarsus. Saul the Pharisee. Some of those persecuted by Saul (a significant number to warrant Saul’s visit to Damascus) obviously fled to Damascus.

We’ll leave Ananias pondering Jesus’ words while we zoom in some background. We’ll return to Ananias shortly.

For Saul, it all began with the death of Stephen. No doubt it started even earlier, for Saul was almost certainly a member of the powerful Sanhedrin, and he knew all about this sect who were followers of the dead Galilean carpenter.

But the stoning of Stephen aroused a fury in Saul against these heretics who claimed that Jesus was alive again. Scripture is usually fairly conservative when it is describing anything dramatic, but it is very colourful and dramatic when it tells us about what Saul now commenced to do.

Look at Acts 8:3:

“Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”

Listen to the words of Paul himself, later in his life, when he described the sheer brutality of what he’d done to these Jerusalem believers:

“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons...” (Acts 22:4 NASB)

“I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.” (Galatians 1:13 NASB)

He told Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:13 that he had “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted Jesus”.

Let me paraphrase an imaginary answer that Saul might have given to someone who dared to ask why he did what he did. Bear in mind that this is an imaginary answer, but I think realistic:

Jesus of Nazareth is dead! He was crucified and buried! He was a trouble-maker and rabble-rouser who caused major trouble amongst our people. He preached against our Law.
His followers claim that he is alive and is the Messiah. They claim they can do miracles through him. **What nonsense!** It’s time the followers of this dead man were silenced and severely punished before our Law is destroyed.

**I will persecute and destroy them with all the power I have.**

So this was Saul, described as a murderous persecutor, full of fury and rage against the believers. Charles Swindoll in his book, *Paul*, describes him as a raging bull, a rigid legalistic Pharisee who practiced vicious brutality against the followers of Jesus.

In the midst of Saul’s violent raging, we read that:

“... Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” (Acts 9:1–2)

Armed with these letters of authority, Saul charged north out of Jerusalem with determined fury, in search of the followers of Jesus at Damascus.

Suddenly, in his urgent rush just before Damascus, Saul was stopped dead in his tracks.

“Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” (Acts 9:3–4)

Just like that! Saul stopped dead in his murderous track, and fell to the ground in the glaring brilliance of the light which shone on him. Who was speaking to him. How did he know his name was Saul?

“Who are you, Lord?”

This does not mean that he recognised that it was Jesus speaking to him, or that Saul recognised him as Lord. In the Greek, the word “Lord” is kurios, and can mean several things, including “Sir”. “Who are you, Sir?”

And the answer to Saul’s question, “Who are you, Sir,” hit him like the blow of a stun gun.

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

**JESUS!!** The man Saul was convinced was dead. Jesus alive, speaking to him! And that was the moment of Saul’s conversion. He didn’t argue back — “No, it can’t be. I don’t believe it”.

He just knew. In a blinding flash of insight, Saul knew that this was the authoritative voice of Jesus speaking to him. We can envisage his mind reeling at this fact.

The scripture goes on, “Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.”

Has the incongruity of Saul’s entry into Damascus ever struck you? Saul, surging at top speed towards Damascus, full of fury and rage and determination, now having to be led slowly into Damascus by the hand because of his blindness. The independent, raging Saul, now totally blind and dependent on someone else to lead him into Damascus.

We can imagine the tumult in Saul’s mind at this point. Jesus! Alive! What had he done?

His reeling mind thought of those he had ruthlessly hunted down in Jerusalem — dragging them out of their houses, men and women, and hurling them into prison, breaking up families, leaving behind their crying children, because they claimed that Jesus was alive.

He had regarded them as heretics, all of them, thousands of them, threatening Judaism with their claims that Jesus was alive. “In my fury and my rage, I have persecuted them and thrown them into prison. What have I done?”

Most of all, Saul thought of the young man, Stephen, as he crouched on the road outside the city wall, as rocks thudded down on him, smashing his body and breaking his bones. But it was not the rocks Saul thought of now. It was the face of Stephen and his cry as he called out to Jesus that burned into his mind — “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Stephen had believed that Jesus was alive and Saul had laughed at him. But now Saul knew that Stephen was right. Jesus was alive!

The Sanhedrin of which Saul was a member had caused Jesus to be killed, crucified, nailed to a cross. He was dead, but all those people who claimed he had come back to life were right. Jesus is alive!

Saul’s mind was reeling with these tumultuous thoughts.

“Saul, why are you persecuting … me”, Jesus had said. Every time Saul had persecuted a fellow Jew for believing that Jesus was alive, he had
persecuted Jesus. Jesus knew every one of his people. Their pain was his pain. It’s the same today. Our pain is Jesus’ pain. Our joy, his joy.

Jesus told Saul in effect, “Every time you persecuted one of my followers, hunted them and flung them into prison, you persecuted me.”

As Saul stumbled along in the blackness of blindness behind the man who led him by the hand, his great mind was reeling with a thousand thoughts, but there was no objectivity in them. Just the pounding question, time after time in his mind, “What have I done? What have I done?”

So they led Saul by the hand into Damascus, blind, stumbling and helpless. They took him to the house of Judas in the street called Straight. And Judas took him into his house.

In the succeeding hours, Saul’s great mind began to clear. **Jesus was alive!** In his blindness he began to pray to Jesus, seeking forgiveness for what he had done. He prayed for three days. He ate nothing and he drank nothing for three days.

In the house of Judas we will leave Saul and return to Ananias in his bedroom. He had just been told to go to the house of Judas in the street called Straight to talk to Saul of Tarsus. But Ananias couldn’t believe what Jesus was telling him. **SAUL OF TARSUS** — the arch-enemy of the believers in Jesus! “Surely”, thought Ananias, “this is a suicidal thing to do”.

Someone has written that this request of Jesus to Ananias to go and find Saul, was similar to asking a Jew in Vienna in World War 2 to go to a house in Vienna and find a man called Hitler.

Ananias in his great fear of Saul replied to Jesus, “Lord, we know about this man. He has persecuted your saints at Jerusalem, and we know he has come here with letters of authority from the high priest to do the same thing in Damascus.” Ananias was well informed!

But Jesus was not about to argue with Ananias. “Go! For he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my Name among the Gentiles and Kings and the sons of Israel ...”

Well, when you get a command like that from Jesus, you don’t argue a second time.
So Ananias departed and in the darkness of the night went to the street
called Straight, found Judas’ house, knocked at the door, and Judas admitted
him.

And there, inside the house, Ananias (no doubt pretty nervous) saw a
man praying. He could see that he was blind. Note carefully now the
wonderful thing Ananias did.

He could have stood at the door and spoken to Saul across the room. After
all, he was very apprehensive about meeting him. But he didn’t do that.
He strode across to this arch enemy of the believers and laid his hands on
him. That’s what Jesus had asked him to do.

Think about this. Think about the courage, compassion and thoughtful-
ness of that gesture. He could have stood ten feet away and spoken to
Saul. But he didn’t. He went straight across the room to him and laid his
hands on him, just as Jesus had told him to (Acts 9:12).

There is something else to think about here. The one thing a blind person
appreciates and needs and values is touch. When you speak to someone
who is blind, if you hold his or her arm or hold their hand, it creates the
contact the blind person needs. It is a mark of friendship and physical
contact. It also tells the blind person that you are standing next to them.

So Ananias laid his hands on Saul.

Acts 9:17:

“Brother Saul . . .” Brother Saul? What a fantastic thing to say. This enemy,
this raging bull of a man who had come to Damascus for the express
purpose of persecuting the followers of Jesus, was now experiencing the
love of one of these believers. He came to him at the command of Jesus to
heal Saul. And he did it with love and grace. Saul had never known this
side of the believers.

“Brother Saul”. What a wonderful character was this man Ananias. He
forgave Saul for all he had done, for Jesus’ sake, who had told Ananias
that he, Jesus, had chosen Saul as his instrument. He addressed him as
“brother”.

Let’s read on:
“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 9:17)

Jesus had obviously told Ananias more than is recorded in Acts. How did Ananias know that Jesus had appeared to Saul on the road? We don’t find that in Jesus’ conversation with Ananias. But Jesus knew how Ananias was feeling about having to confront Saul, so he told him how he had spoken to Saul on the road, and that he had chosen him especially.

As Ananias spoke to Saul, “something like scales fell from his eyes and he could see again.” He rose and was baptised, and then took food and was strengthened.

Did you notice that he was baptised before he ate? There is a principle here for us. Our relationship with, and our obedience to, the Lord comes before anything else, even food. Saul had not had food or water for three days. But he wanted to be baptised before he had a meal.

We are not told, but it would have been Ananias who baptised Saul. He baptised the man who grew to be one of the greatest of the apostles, whose teachings and writings shine down through the centuries to us today.

Consider what was happening here to Saul. He had come to arrest and persecute people like this man, Ananias. But now Ananias had healed him, and baptised him. Saul was learning a great lesson in humility.

Jesus knew who he was choosing when he chose Ananias to find Saul. There are many people who we would like to meet in the Kingdom, but for me, I look forward to meeting this gentle and obedient man with the greatest of characters — Ananias.

Legend has it that Ananias was later appointed bishop of the Damascus church. We have no further information about him.

Later, this same Saul, now known as Paul, wrote about Jesus, whom he had persecuted because he had persecuted his followers. This man Jesus, who Saul the Pharisee saw as nothing but a false prophet and a Galilean carpenter, a rabble-rouser and a threat to Judaism. Paul later wrote marvellous words about him:

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11)

And it was not just that Paul acknowledged the greatness and majesty of Christ Jesus in those stirring words in Philippians, but we find in his letter to the Galatians the wonderfully close and personal relationship Paul had with his Lord, and how he submitted himself completely to him.

Paul’s words should be our words, too. Let’s make them our personal statement of faith and love of Jesus, as Paul did.

He wrote:

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)
Peter’s visit to the Gentiles

So far in this book, the events described, according to several commentators, all took place within a year of the ascension of Jesus to heaven. In summary, we have considered:

- The women at the tomb
- The death of the Shepherd
- The first ten days after Jesus’ resurrection
- Peter and John at the temple
- Stephen and the temple
- Paul’s conversion

How did each of these events — some tumultuous, all absolutely unprecedented and totally mind boggling — how did these events affect the ordinary brethren and sisters of Jerusalem at the time? Never before or since have believers in Jesus seen the power of the Holy Spirit used in such dramatic ways.

In this chapter, our story takes place about five years after the ascension of Jesus. Over the previous four years, much was happening:

- Jews who were followers of Jesus had settled in the towns and countryside to which they’d fled from Paul’s murderous persecutions in Jerusalem.
- Paul had spent time in Arabia communing with the Lord.
- The apostles had remained at Jerusalem during those five years, but Peter (and probably others) spent time visiting various groups of brethren and sisters throughout Israel.
These first five years were the most dramatic years in the four thousand years of man's history from Adam to Jesus. For example, in the first year:

- Jesus had been raised from the dead and was alive for evermore.
- Never before had God used His Holy Spirit in such an outpouring way.
- Stephen had been killed by the Jews.
- The Jews of Jerusalem had fled in terror in their thousands throughout Israel and far beyond, to Damascus, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.
- Paul had been converted to Christianity, in direct communication with Jesus.

These events were quite unprecedented. The coming of Jesus had thrown Israel, and especially Jerusalem, upside down.

And the result? Thousands upon thousands of Jews became followers of Jesus. His resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit convinced them that he was their Messiah — their Lord. Their lives were changed forever.

Now, five years later, we are going to join Peter on a journey to the Mediterranean coast. Peter had emerged as the chief of the apostles. Right from the ascension of Jesus, Peter had been their leader in Jerusalem. (Later, it was James, the brother of Jesus, who was accepted as leader. But in these early years, Peter was the chief of the apostles).

Only a few days after the ascension, it was Peter who stood up amongst about one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus and said they must elect another apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. Only days later, it was Peter who stood up and spoke to the thousands of Jews on the day of Pentecost. His words were hot and scathing:

"Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs ... this Jesus ... you crucified and killed ... But God raised him up, having loosed the pain of death ... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

(Acts 2:22–24,36)

Now it is five years later. Through these years, the gospel of Jesus had been preached only to the Jews. Never to the Gentiles. Acts 11:19 tells us the word “was spoken to none, except Jews.”

Peter, we are told in Acts 9:1, went here and there among them all. He must have tramped all over Israel, visiting the new believers, strengthening them, healing the sick and disabled.
Many of those Jews who fled Jerusalem about four years earlier to escape the persecution of Paul, had settled in towns along the Mediterranean coast.

At the time that Peter made his journey to these coastal towns, the followers of Jesus were enjoying a time of peace. It was a time of growth as well. Acts 9:31 tells us that:

“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Sama’ria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.”

Peter’s journey takes him to Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea.

We come with Peter first to Lydda, a town about nine miles inland from the Mediterranean coast. Peter came down from Jerusalem to Lydda, to the saints — brethren and sisters — who lived there. He found there a man called Aeneas, who had been paralysed and bedridden for eight years. Note what Peter says to Aeneas:

“Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” (Acts 9:34)

Peter didn’t say, “Aeneas, I say to you arise.” No, it was “Jesus Christ heals you.” This tells us something about Peter. He was the chief of the apostles and was no doubt much revered throughout Israel because of his healing and leadership powers. But never did he let that go to his head. Always, he made it quite clear that it was Jesus, not Peter, who healed.

“Aeneas” is not a Jewish name. It was a very common name amongst Greeks. Very likely, Aeneas was a Gentile. We’ll come back to Aeneas shortly.

This healing of Aeneas had the usual effect on the people. When the residents of Lydda and Sharon (the district) saw Aeneas was healed, they turned to the Lord. Thus, many more disciples were brought to the Lord.

While this was going on at Lydda, nine miles away at Joppa, on the coast, the brethren and sisters there were devastated because one of their beloved sisters there, Tabitha, had died. Tabitha was much loved, and did many good works and acts of charity. She was obviously much respected for her skill in needlework, and the women thought highly of her skills:

“In those days, she [Tabitha] fell sick and died; and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.” (Acts 9:37)
Note carefully that the scriptures clearly say that she was dead.

About the same time, the Joppa brethren and sisters heard that Peter was visiting Lydda. They immediately sent two men to urge Peter to come to Joppa without delay.

Now, this is interesting. Tabitha was clearly dead. She had been washed and laid in an upper room. What was so urgent? Why ask Peter to come to them “without delay”?

It was not in their minds to send for Peter to heal her. It was too late for healing. She was dead.

There is no record in this five year period that any of the apostles had raised anyone from death to life. Healing, yes, but not resurrection. So it seems that in sending for Peter, the Joppa folk had faith that Peter could raise Tabitha to life again. This speaks volumes for the depth of faith these brethren and sisters had.

So Peter arrived. He asked to be left alone in the upper room where Tabitha’s body lay, and he knelt and prayed. He then turned to her body and said, “Tabitha, rise.”

Note the detail Luke in Acts 9:40–41 gives us here:

• She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. (I wonder if Tabitha had ever seen Peter before.)
• He gave her his hand and lifted her up.
• He then called the saints and widows (there is a suggestion here that Tabitha was a widow, but probably not an old woman. She was probably a widow still in the prime of her life who had become ill and died. If she was old, it is doubtful that they would have asked Peter to raise her back to life.)
• He presented her to them alive.

What a huge impression this would make on everyone there, and indeed, in the whole of Joppa. This was a landmark event — the very first resurrection at the hands of an apostle.

“And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”

(Acts 9:42)
One more thought about Tabitha. She was also known as Dorcas. Tabitha is an Aramaic name, the equivalent of the Greek name, Dorcas. There is therefore a suggestion that Tabitha (Dorcas) was not a Jew but a Gentile.

Interestingly, Harry Whitaker points out that the wife of Caesar Augustus, Livia, had, as one of her servants, a woman called Dorcas who was famous for the superb quality of her needlework. Is this the same Dorcas whom Peter raised to life? We don’t know. There were probably many Greek women named Dorcas. But because Tabitha was also known as Dorcas, almost certainly implies that she was not a Jew. She could have been a Gentile who became a proselyte Jew.

At Joppa, Peter stayed many days with Simon, a tanner. A tanner had constant contact with unclean animals and defiling carcases. This was not something a strict Jew should be doing. Yet Peter, who could have stayed with any of the brethren and sisters at Joppa, chose to stay with Simon, the tanner.

Let’s pause here and consider Peter for a moment. What was happening here? Peter was a strict Hebrew Jew through and through. Growing up in Galilee, he had been brought up under the Law of Moses and all that involved. He, like all Jews, believed that the temple was the centre of their religion. He was rigid in his beliefs and practices.

Strict observance of eating only certain foods, never eating with Gentiles, never entering a Gentile’s house and never having a Gentile to his house — these were all part of Peter’s long-held customs as a strict Jew.

But let’s think about what is happening to Peter in his visits to Lydda and Joppa. At Lydda, he had healed a man who was almost certainly a Gentile. Aeneas was a common Greek name. But consider the fact that Aeneas was bedridden. This meant that Peter, the rigid Jew, must have entered the house of Aeneas, a Gentile. This was something Jews strictly avoided. But Peter went into the house of Aeneas.

Then there is the question of Tabitha with the Greek name of Dorcas. Almost certainly another Gentile, and Peter went into the house where her body lay. A most defiling act on the part of a Jew. Yet, Peter went into the house and spent time alone with her dead body.

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Was Peter changing from his rigidity as a Jew, to an attitude of love towards all men and women — Jew or Gentile? His actions at Lydda and Joppa would certainly suggest this.

Try to imagine the effect of all that happened at Lydda and Joppa in the eyes of the believers (all of whom were Jews) at these two towns. The work of the Holy Spirit in healing Aeneas and raising Tabitha from death to life — performed for the first time by anyone other than Jesus — would be absolutely sensational to these early believers.

But although Peter seems to be moving away from Jewish custom and towards a more compassionate approach towards Gentiles, he had not yet moved from his Jewish rigidity to a point where he could openly admit there was no difference between Jew and Gentile when it came to the gospel of Jesus. Given that the Law had been with the Jews for 1,500 years, and their rigid unyielding attitude towards Gentiles, this was a powerful object to overcome in the mind of a Jew like Peter.

Now came his greatest test. Now came the message from God that not only could both Jew and Gentile be healed and resurrected by the Holy Spirit, but the gospel could and must be extended to Gentiles for the first time.

Jesus had told his apostles five years earlier that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47)

We come now to Cornelius.

He was a Roman centurion of the Italian Cohort. What was a centurion?

The structure of the Roman Army was that there was first the Legion (six thousand men). Each Legion was commanded by a Tribune. Each Legion had six Tribunes who took it in turns to take charge of the Legion.

We remember that when Paul was in prison in Jerusalem, his nephew came to visit Paul with news that he was about to be killed. Paul called one of the centurions and said, “take this young man to the Tribune, for he has something to tell him.”

In each Legion, there were ten cohorts (six hundred men per cohort)
Cohorts were divided into six centuries of one hundred men each. Over each century was a centurion. These centurions were the backbone of the Roman Army.

In addition to these legionary cohorts were independent cohorts of volunteers, who were commanded by Roman Tribunes and centurions from the Roman Army. One of these cohorts was called the Italian cohort, consisting of volunteers from Italy.

So Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman Army, was in charge of one hundred volunteer soldiers from Italy.

Luke records in Acts 10:2 that Cornelius:

- Was a God-fearing man
- He gave liberally to those in need
- He prayed frequently

Cornelius was of exemplary character. We learn that he was well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, so he was widely known. We also find that it was not only Cornelius who feared God, but all his household as well.

Cornelius, of course, was a Roman and therefore a Gentile.

He was told in a vision to send men to Joppa and bring one Simon, called Peter to see him. So Cornelius sent two of his servants and a God-fearing soldier to Joppa (Acts 10:7).

Caesarea was about 50 km (30 miles) from Joppa, so there would need to be an overnight stay on the journey. The journey would be on foot, and the men would walk about 20 miles in a day.

While this was going on, and as these three men from Cornelius drew near to Joppa on the second day of their journey, Peter had a vision of unclean animals and beasts being let down on a sheet. This happened three times, and each time Peter was commanded to kill these animals and eat. Each time, Peter refused to do so. It was almost midday — the sixth hour.

We know that this was a most important message to Peter, indicating to him that he must not regard the Gentiles as unclean. A voice said to him, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.”

At this point, Peter did not understand what this vision meant. The whole thing was a puzzle to him. What did it mean?
While he was thinking about this strange vision, he received a message through the Spirit:

“Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” (Acts 10:19–20)

The three men, meanwhile, were enquiring at the gate whether Peter was there. Peter went down and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?”

They told him about Cornelius, and how an angel had spoken to him and told him to send for Peter.

Now, remember these men were Gentiles. Jews could not invite Gentiles into their house. But what did Peter do? He called them in to be his guests. They were in the house with him. They were his guests, we are told. It was lunch time, the sixth hour, and he presumably ate the midday meal with them. Both actions were forbidden under Jewish custom.

They stayed the night with Peter, in the house of Simon the tanner, and next morning set off for Joppa. Peter took with him six brethren from Joppa (Acts 11:12).

So there was Peter, the six brethren from Joppa and three men from Cornelius’ house — a group of ten men walking from Joppa to Caesarea along the Mediterranean coast. Again, they stayed overnight somewhere. It’s left to our imagination as to what they talked about as they walked, and as they talked together at their overnight stay. They were all God-fearing men. Seven of them were followers of Jesus, and three were believers in Judaism. No doubt there was much discussion about Cornelius and Jesus.

They arrive at Cornelius’ house. He is waiting for them and had gathered together his relatives and close friends.

Peter enters (again, here is Peter entering the house of a Gentile) Cornelius falls down at his feet and worships him. Peter lifts him up and says, “Stand up. I, too, am a man.”

Peter was very conscious of his position as a Jew. Yet here he was in the house of a Gentile — not the first time on this Mediterranean journey. He had healed Aeneas at Lydda and had entered his house, and he had raised Dorcas to life in the house at Joppa where she had died.
But even though Peter had entered the houses of Gentiles at Lydda and Joppa, it seems that he was still struggling with the conflict between Jewish customs and his position in Christ. The vision at Joppa and his call to Cornelius had resolved this conflict in his mind.

Listen to what he now says to Cornelius:

“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean . . . I ask then why you sent for me.”

(Acts 10:28–29)

Cornelius tells Peter his story, and why, four days ago, he had sent for Peter. Peter then knew why he had been asked to come. He told them all how the Word of God had come to Israel.

Incidentally, in all our deliberations about the Lord Jesus, and our salvation in him, we must always commence with Israel, as Peter did here. We are of the seed of Abraham through Jesus, and heirs of the promises to Abraham. We are grafted into Israel. The Kingdom of God will be centred in Jerusalem in Israel.

So Peter begins with Israel, and tells them all about the life of Jesus, and his death and his resurrection and that he is now alive and immortal. He told them that Jesus had been prophesied through all the Jewish prophets.

Then an amazing thing happened. While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on them — the first time the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles, thus confirming that God was God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

The seven Jewish men were astonished at this. They listened in amazement as Cornelius and all with him began to speak in tongues and extol God in the Spirit.

Peter said, “Can anyone forbid water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we [Jews] have?” And so they were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter stayed on with Cornelius for some days, no doubt to expand their knowledge of their salvation in Christ Jesus and their new life and hope in him.

This was a truly momentous occasion. It was momentous for Peter and the six Jewish brethren. It was momentous for Cornelius and his relatives.
and friends. It was momentous because this was the first Gentile ecclesia, formed at Caesarea. It was the very beginning of Gentile ecclesial development in Israel which was to spread throughout Asia and throughout the world. Remember Jesus’ words to his apostles just before he ascended to heaven:

“... repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47)

So Peter left Cornelius at Caesarea and returned to Jerusalem.

Word travelled fast, and by the time Peter returned to Jerusalem, the other apostles and Jerusalem brethren had heard all about Peter and Cornelius at Caesarea, and they were aghast.

“Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3)

So Peter calmly told them all that had happened. And he finished by saying, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I should withstand God?”

And the apostles were convinced. “When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also, God has granted repentance unto life’”

Two thousand years earlier, God had promised Abraham that he would become the father of many nations. Now this was beginning to happen. When Peter brought the gospel to Cornelius and those at Caesarea, the barriers were broken down between Jews and Gentiles.

So, in this journey to Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea, Peter learned of the love of God to all men of all nations, and not only to the Jews. It was a lesson that changed the beliefs and attitudes of the apostles from then on. It was a major milestone in the extension of the gospel to all men everywhere.

It was because of these events that Peter later wrote with absolute conviction to “those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours in the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ

“... so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:11)
In our last chapter we travelled with Peter to Caesarea when he introduced the gospel of Jesus to Cornelius and his family and friends. This resulted in the first Gentile ecclesia being formed in Caesarea.

We now take another step in the lives of the very early followers of their risen Lord.

It is six years later, and the year is about AD 43. On this journey, we are going to leave Israel and travel to Syria, to the city of Antioch. Many Jews who were followers of Jesus fled here about AD 34 from the persecution of Saul.

**Barnabas**

But before we leave for Antioch, let me introduce you to Barnabas, for he is a central figure in this story about Antioch.

Barnabas, as we will remember, is a Jew from Cyprus, of the tribe of Levi. He was living at Jerusalem at the time Jesus trod its streets and taught there at the temple.

In fact, it is highly probable that Barnabas knew Jesus in the days of his ministry. Barnabas was a very early convert as a follower of Jesus, and the circumstances of his life make it very likely that he knew Jesus, and may even have been converted by Jesus himself.
The sister of Barnabas, Mary, lived with her husband and family at Jerusalem. Because Barnabas also lived at Jerusalem, he would have visited his sister and her family often.

Mary’s husband was a wealthy man. He owned a large house in Jerusalem. Jesus was obviously on close personal terms with this family, for it was in this house that the upper room was located.

Let’s remind ourselves what scripture has to say about the upper room and the house of Mary and her husband. We don’t know her husband’s name, but we do know that John Mark, mentioned several times in the gospels and in Acts, was their son.

We are introduced to the upper room in their house for the first time in Mark 14:12–16:

“And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the passover lamb, his disciples said to him, ‘Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the passover?’ ”

Jesus told them to meet a man in Jerusalem . . .

“and he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.”

There are three things to note here. First, Jesus had already arranged with the owner of this house that he wished to use the upper room for the purpose of eating the Passover with his disciples.

Second, Jesus obviously knew this man well. He and his disciples had probably visited this family before, and the family were amongst his followers.

Third, from now on the upper room was often used by the disciples, even after Jesus had ascended to heaven. In fact, this upper room in the house of Mary and her husband became the main meeting place for the disciples in Jerusalem.

For example, immediately after Jesus’ ascension, the apostles walked back into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and went straight to this house and met there in the upper room with Mary, Jesus’ mother, and with Jesus’ brothers:

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem . . . and when they had entered, they went up to the upper
room . . . [they] devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” (Acts 1:12–14)

A few days later, there were one hundred and twenty of Jesus’ disciples gathered together. It was very unlikely that the disciples had access to two large rooms in Jerusalem. The upper room was a large room, capable of holding well over one hundred people. It is therefore very likely that the one hundred and twenty were gathered in the same upper room at the house of Mary, sister of Barnabas. Was Barnabas one of the one hundred and twenty present there?

A few days further on, the apostles were again gathered together in one place. Although it does not name the place, it is probable that they were in the same upper room, for the apostles were beginning to use this room as their Jerusalem meeting place.

One more piece of scripture shows us this. It’s about a year or so later and Acts 12:12 tells us that Peter had been imprisoned in Jerusalem by Herod. But he is freed by an angel and immediately made his way to the other apostles who were meeting in this same house in the upper room:

“. . . he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.” (Acts 12:12)

So this house of Mary and her family was an important and regular meeting place for the apostles.

Finally, we find in Colossians 4:10 that Mark is named as the cousin of Barnabas. The Authorised Version describes Mark as “Barnabas’ sister’s son”, which would make John Mark the nephew of Barnabas. Whether cousin or nephew is not so important. The important thing is that Barnabas was a close relative of this family, through Mary, the mother of John Mark, and was very likely to have met Jesus personally.

The name “Barnabas” was given to him by the apostles meaning “Son of encouragement”. His real name was Joseph. From the few references we have about Barnabas he was a disciple of fine character, very positive and helpful in his outlook, and who was a source of great encouragement to his fellow Jewish believers at a time when they were struggling at the hands of the Jewish authorities and the Romans.

Barnabas was a man of wisdom and friendship. He had a wider view of things than most of his Jewish colleagues who had the usual narrow, rigid
attitude common to Jews of the time. But Barnabas was different. He was able to take a wider perspective of things, with wider vision, as we shall see.

We catch another view of Barnabas three years later. Saul had been converted near Damascus, then spent some time in Arabia before returning to Damascus. All of this took place over three years (Galatians 1:15–18).

Soon after, he decided to visit Jerusalem again — the first time since he’d left there breathing murderous threats against all followers of Jesus, as he left to persecute the followers of Jesus at Damascus.

Now Saul was returning to Jerusalem. It’s not hard to imagine the scene. Last time he was in Jerusalem he had persecuted thousands of believers, dragging them out of their houses and throwing them into prison.

The Jewish believers still in Jerusalem, those who had not fled from the persecution of Saul, had heard that he’d been converted and was now a follower of Jesus. They had been amazed at this news. But now he was back in Jerusalem they were very nervous. They didn’t trust him. Perhaps it was a trap to resume his persecutions of them. Even the apostles were nervous.

“And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.” (Acts 9:26)

No-one wanted to know or see Saul. No-one believed him. Except Barnabas. We see the character of Barnabas shining out here as he took on the role of mediator between Saul and the apostles.

“But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles . . .” (Acts 9:27)

But even then, it was only two of the apostles. Paul later writes to the Galatians that he met with Peter and James the brother of Jesus:

“Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [chief of the apostles], and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.” (Galatians 1:18)

The decision that Peter and James the Lord’s brother should meet with Saul was no coincidence. Peter and James the Lord’s brother had been closely involved with Jesus — Peter as an apostle and James as his brother. Peter and James were both leaders of the apostles — Peter in these early days after Jesus’ ascension and later, James (see Acts 15:13–21).
So the close association between Barnabas and Saul begins — an association which was to be a major factor in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Saul stayed in Jerusalem for only fifteen days, and then left hurriedly for his home city of Tarsus because of a threat by the Hellenist Jews to kill him at Jerusalem.

Barnabas and Saul did not see each other again for about seven years. We’ll leave Barnabas for the moment, but we will soon join him again when he visits Antioch several years later.

**Antioch**

We need now to go to Antioch. Saul is in Tarsus and Barnabas is in Jerusalem. Let’s think about Antioch for a few minutes.

Antioch was one of Rome’s principal cities. Today, it has the name Antakya and is part of Turkey, situated at the foot of a mountain named Mt Silpius. There is a tradition that Luke came from Antioch.

William Barclay describes Antioch as the third greatest city in the then known world next to Rome, and it was notorious for luxurious immorality. It had a deliberate pursuit of pleasure which went on literally night and day.

Antioch was famous for its worship of the goddess, Daphne. The priestesses of the temple of Daphne were sacred prostitutes. William Barclay goes on to say:

“It seems incredible, but nonetheless it is true that it was in a city like this that Christianity took the great stride forward to becoming the religion of the world. We need only to think of that to be reminded that no situation is hopeless.”

So it was that from Antioch, the gospel of Jesus took root among the Gentiles, and through Barnabas and Paul, was able, from that root, to grow into a great tree that ultimately filled the world.

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The believers at Antioch

But we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves. Let’s go back a few years. We recall that some of the Jewish followers of Jesus fled to Antioch. They did not preach to the Gentiles. They preached Jesus exclusively to their fellow Jews.

At this time, there was severe hostility between the Jews at Antioch, on the one hand, and the Romans and Greeks on the other. The Romans and Greeks did not like the Jews.

Paul Barnett in his book, *The Birth of Christianity*, writes that the rule of the Roman Emperor, Caligula, in the late 30s AD, was particularly offensive to Jews. His policies were anti-Jewish and the Jews suffered much under his reign.

Caligula ordered that a statue of himself as the god Jupiter be erected in the temple at Jerusalem. Because of this, the feelings against Caligula, the Emperor, were fierce and bitter in Israel, and in cities outside Israel where there were congregations of Jews. One of those cities was Antioch. The Romans and Greeks in Antioch were poised to attack the Jews, and there is a medieval record which state that they actually did attack them.

The Jewish believers in Jesus met in caves at Antioch.

More Jewish followers of Jesus came, this time from Cyprus in the Mediterranean and Cyrene on the north coast of Africa. These, too, had fled from Saul’s persecutions in Jerusalem some years earlier.

Up to now, the gospel of Jesus had been taught to Jews only. But now, these new arrivals from Cyprus and Cyrene began to openly teach the gospel to the Greeks and Romans at Antioch — Gentiles!

This was particularly alarming to the Roman authorities at Antioch. These Jews were teaching about Jesus, who they claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, and who had been killed but was now alive. The number of converts was growing and the Romans saw this as a threat. Relations between Jews and Romans were already on a knife-edge. This new development made it much worse.

These new believers in Jesus were named by the Antioch Romans as “Christians” — adherents of Christ. They could unite at any time under their leader, the Christos, and threaten Caesar.
All of this led to a great deal of turmoil at Antioch. The enmity of Romans and Greeks was mounting towards both the non-Christian Jews and the Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus.

Adding to this turmoil was the fury of non-Christian Jews that Christian Jews were preaching the gospel to the Gentiles! As the gospel is fundamentally Jewish in character, these non-Christian Jews were fiercely opposed to the Gentiles being taught things that belonged, in their view, to Israel alone.

For the first time, Christian Jews sought out Gentiles to teach them the gospel. In Cornelius’ case, he had sought out Peter. Peter, a Jew, had not sought out Cornelius. So this was a new development — Christian Jews deliberately seeking out Gentiles and teaching them the gospel of Jesus.

Word of this turmoil in Antioch reached the apostles in Jerusalem. The apostles were the ruling body in the spread of Christianity. They were
concerned to learn of the problems in Antioch, involving not only deteriorating relations between Gentiles and Jews, but also among non-Christian Jews and Christian Jews.

The gospel of Jesus was obviously taking root in Antioch in a big way. Whenever this happened in an area, the apostles would visit that area to make sure all was well. For example, when Philip successfully preached about Jesus in the towns of Samaria, Peter and John visited those cities. They strengthened the brethren and sisters there and imparted to them the Holy Spirit, through the laying on of hands to the brethren there (Acts 8:4–15).

But the situation in Antioch was different. There were complex issues and problems and someone needed to go to Antioch to assess the situation amongst the followers of Jesus there, for they were clearly under threat.

Another issue was that Antioch was in Syria. It was not even in Israel. Although it is not mentioned in Acts, it’s likely that the apostles felt that their work was in Israel, not in other countries.

**Barnabas is sent to Antioch**

So Barnabas now re-enters our story. Acts 11:19–24 picks up the story:

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.”

News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad …”

The apostles could not have chosen a better man that Barnabas to see what was happening at Antioch:

- He was a trusted senior member of the Jerusalem church.
- He was a very early convert, much respected for his wisdom and positive encouragement in times of difficulty.
- He was a Jew, and understood Jewish thinking.
• He was a person of wide vision, not bound by narrow Jewish prejudices.
• He was a Greek speaking Cypriot. There were many Jewish Cypriots in Antioch who would welcome Barnabas there, and respect his views.
• He was a man of proven pastoral ability.
• He was a very suitable ambassador for the Jerusalem church.

So the choice of Barnabas to go to Antioch was decidedly appropriate. His principal task was to assess the preaching of the gospel amongst the Jews and Gentiles of Antioch.

We read that when he arrived, he saw the grace of God and was glad. Acts makes no mention of the strained relations between the various parties at Antioch. For Barnabas, the important thing was that Jesus was being preached to both Jew and Gentile in Antioch and that the ecclesia there was growing.

Other members of the Jerusalem ecclesia may have seen things differently in Antioch, but Barnabas, with his wider vision, was happy with the way things were going. He was not named the “son of encouragement” for nothing.

F.F. Bruce in his book, “Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free”, writes,

“No doubt the forward movement at Antioch presented features which some members of the church at Jerusalem would have found deeply disturbing, but Barnabas found much cause for satisfaction.”

Barnabas didn’t just have a look at what was happening at Antioch, and then return to Jerusalem to report his findings. He rolled up his sleeves and joined the brethren there in preaching about Jesus. No doubt a brother of Barnabas’ standing and wisdom was warmly welcomed by the believers at Antioch, and his wide counsel and advice would stabilise and strengthen the rapidly growing ecclesia there.

As the ecclesia grew, Barnabas realised that he needed someone else to help him. He thought of Saul and the leadership qualities he had. He thought of Saul’s conversion to Jesus and his meeting with Peter and James at Jerusalem. He had not seen Saul for about seven years, but he knew he was at Tarsus, about sixty miles from Antioch.

Most importantly, he was aware (probably from Saul himself) of the words of Jesus to Ananias of Damascus when Jesus said:

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“... he [Saul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel ...” (Acts 9:15)

Here in Antioch were both Gentiles and Jews. “What better man”, thought Barnabas, “could be found than Saul of Tarsus to assist me at Antioch.”

Barnabas goes to find Saul

So Barnabas sets off to find Saul at Tarsus.

“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.” (Acts 11:25)

There are two things to note here:

1. Barnabas didn’t know just where in Tarsus he might find Saul. He went to Antioch “to look for Saul”.
2. He had to spend time looking for him. “When he had found him”.

Saul had been in Tarsus for about seven years. He knew that the Lord Jesus wanted him to preach to the Gentiles and also to the Jews. But when was this to be? And where? Year after year went by, with no obvious direction for Saul. He had spent a few weeks in Damascus, and some time in Arabia in which he undoubtedly would have communed with Jesus about salvation in Christ and Old Testament prophecies about Jesus and his purpose.

Then a short fifteen days in Jerusalem with Peter and James and Barnabas before Hellenist Jews threatened to kill him, and he fled to Tarsus. He’d been here ever since, waiting for the Lord’s direction. But no direction had come in all of those seven years.

There is a lesson here for us in the way God works. He is never in a hurry. We are in a hurry, but God is not. We want answers today, or at the latest tomorrow, but God does not work that way. His answer will come to us in His time, not ours. And God’s time may mean we have to wait a long time for His direction. This is how it was for Saul.

Saul was a man of action and drive. In his new-found role as a Christian — and not just a Christian, but one to whom Jesus had personally spoken and communed with — we can imagine him chafing at the bit, wanting to be up and doing in the service of his Lord. He was now about forty-four years old.
How would Barnabas go about finding Saul? He would probably go first to the synagogue in Tarsus asking about Saul. And maybe he checked on the tent makers in Tarsus, for he knew Saul was a tent maker by trade.

At last he found someone who knew where Saul was. We can imagine Saul’s great surprise when Barnabas finally found him. His old friend from Jerusalem! Some commentators have suggested that Saul and Barnabas had been fellow students with Rabbi Gamaliel, but this is speculation.

**Barnabas and Saul travel to Antioch from Tarsus**

They would have a lot to catch up on. Barnabas would quickly fill Saul in with news of how Christianity was going, and particularly about what was happening in Antioch. Would Saul come and help him in Antioch?

Would he ever! Saul had been waiting seven years for this sort of call, and he was keen to go with Barnabas.

So once more Barnabas was the guiding light in Saul’s life — first introducing him to Peter and James all those years ago, and now setting him on a path that would see Paul become the greatest apostle to the Gentiles.

Barnabas and Saul worked together in Antioch for a year. In the days of the Emperor Claudius, a great famine occurred throughout the Middle East, and the brethren and sisters of Antioch decided to send food to their poorer brethren and sisters at Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul travelled to Jerusalem with this food in AD 46.

They then returned to Antioch, bringing with them John Mark, Barnabas’ nephew. This almost certainly meant that Barnabas and Saul had visited Barnabas’ sister, Mary, in Jerusalem, and no doubt Saul finally met the other apostles. One wonders if they and other Christians in Jerusalem still felt nervous about Saul.

By then Antioch was a large ecclesia. It included five senior brethren who were prophets and teachers. These were Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, who interestingly was a one-time member of the court of Herod, and Saul.

The ecclesia was flourishing and growing in numbers. More and more Jews and Gentiles were accepting Jesus as their Lord.
The gospel had come to Antioch in three phases over a period of about ten years:

- When Christian Jews fleeing from Jerusalem arrived about AD 34. They taught Jews at Antioch about Jesus.
- When Jewish followers of Jesus arrived from Cyprus and Cyrene in the late 30s AD. These believers began to actively teach the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews.
- When first Barnabas and then Saul arrived to strengthen the teaching of the gospel to more and more Gentiles and Jews.

With the strengthening and growth of the Antioch ecclesia, there came a time when a message was received through the Spirit that it was time for the next phase in spreading the gospel to Gentiles across Asia Minor. “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

So began the first of the three great missionary journeys. This first journey was carried out by these two close friends and brethren, Barnabas and Saul, who took with them John Mark, nephew of Barnabas.

We will leave them as they depart from Antioch to set sail westward to Seleucia and then south to Cyprus, and from there on into other towns and cities of what we know today as Turkey.

Barnabas and Saul left Antioch about AD 47. This was about fourteen years after the ascension of Jesus.

A brief summary of these years is:

*AD 33* Jesus’ ascension.

*AD 34–35* Stephen’s death and Saul’s conversion

*AD 35–37* Saul spends a total of three years in Damascus and Arabia, and after a couple of weeks in Jerusalem, flees to Tarsus.

*AD 37* Peter visits Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea.

*AD 43* Barnabas is sent by the apostles to Antioch

*AD 44* Barnabas finds Saul in Tarsus and brings him to Antioch.

*AD 46* Barnabas and Saul take food to Jerusalem from Antioch.

*AD 47* Barnabas and Saul leave on their first missionary journey.
We must remember that the New Testament scriptures did not exist at this time. The early Christians had the Old Testament and were very much guided by the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s letters to various ecclesias were written some years before any of the gospels were written:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Book(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AD 48</td>
<td>Galatians</td>
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<tr>
<td>AD 50</td>
<td>Thessalonians (both letters)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AD 55–56</td>
<td>Corinthians (both letters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 57</td>
<td>Romans</td>
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<tr>
<td>AD 60s</td>
<td>Ephesians, Philippians, Timothy, Titus</td>
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As we ponder these things, we think about the very early brethren and sisters, many who laid down their lives for their Lord. We benefit from their heritage, their example and their faith, as we look back to when they lived two thousand years ago.

Tradition has it that Barnabas was one of those who was martyred for his Lord. He is said to have been killed by Jews who opposed his teaching. He was disputing with them in the synagogue at Salamis, in his home country of Cyprus, and they dragged him out of the synagogue, tortured him and then stoned him to death.

It is also said that John Mark, his nephew, witnessed his cruel killing and privately interred his body at Salamis.

This relatively short period of fourteen years we have thought about concerning Antioch ignited the flame of Christianity which will never be extinguished. We are privileged to share this flame with all of those early brethren and sisters of that fourteen year period.

We, with them, and with countless other followers of Jesus over the past two thousand years, including faithful men such as Stephen and Barnabas, echo the words of the apostle John as the last words of the Revelation of Jesus, reflecting the hope of every follower of Jesus:

“Come, Lord Jesus”.
The resurrection of Jesus was of earth-shattering consequence.

So far in this book, we have considered the dramatic events affecting the very earliest of Jesus’ followers. Our thoughts now turn to the years and centuries beyond those early days, right up to our own day, for our hope, our vision, is identical to the hope and vision of these early forerunners who have travelled the road of faith before us. Like them, we are able to look beyond the tomb to the life our risen Lord offers us.

Because of his resurrection, we, his followers, know that we, too, will be raised from the dead. As Paul wrote to the brethren and sisters at Corinth:

“Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep . . . For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:20–22)

It was because of their risen Lord that thousands in the first century and beyond, willingly gave their lives under persecution and torture, for they knew that their Lord would raise them to life again at his coming.

Today, two thousand years later, we, too, know that death in Christ is only temporary, because he will raise us up as well when he comes. Many of his followers in this modern age have already suffered greatly, some losing their lives in faithfulness to him. Many who may not have suffered yet for his sake, may do so before our Lord returns, for we have yet to live through that “time of great tribulation” our Lord warned would come just before his return.
He told his disciples on the Mount of Olives on the day before his arrest:

“For then [in the days before he comes] there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” (Matthew 24:21)

He continued in verse 29 and 30:

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

Paul reiterated the words of Jesus about his return when the elect of Jesus will be gathered:

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air . . .”

(1 Thessalonians 4:16–17)

This is all part of our vision. We can look beyond the tomb to the vision of resurrection and life eternal which the resurrection of Jesus guarantees to his faithful followers.

Our vision is all encompassing. It also includes our relationship with our Father and His Son now — before Jesus’ return. It is a vision which resides in our hearts.

There is a beautiful Irish prayer about our vision. Here is the first verse of that prayer (author unknown):

Be Thou my vision, my blessed Lord,
Almighty God, King of the endless heavens,
Be Thou my thinking from dawn to dusk,
In the brightest of days and the darkest nights.
Be Thou my speaking, in each word that I say;
May it reflect the depths of your wisdom.
Be Thou my Father, may I be your child;
May we be together, as one.
Be Thou my vision.”
I’d like to consider some people who had the vision we must have, and also some people who had lost their vision.

What is our vision? In a very real sense, our vision is the Kingdom of God. But is just the Kingdom which is our vision? If we view the Kingdom as our vision, but fail to include in our vision the one person who has enabled us to have the Kingdom as our vision, then our vision is incomplete.

Paul wrote to the Colossians:

“[God] has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation . . . he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .”
(Colossians 1:13–19)

The great and faithful men of old had a clear vision. Men such as Abraham, Isaac and Melchizedek and many others. They foreshadowed, and looked forward to, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was their vision. And although they didn’t know him, we know him, and in Jesus, we see the Father.

What do we think about the Kingdom? The Kingdom can be for us a time of pleasantness and plenty, with perfect conditions. No problems. No more war. No one starving. No violence. A perfect world.

All this is true of course, but we should not have the Kingdom as our vision for those reasons only. Our vision should not be simply looking forward to the pleasantness and conditions of the Kingdom.

Our vision, like the vision of Abraham, Isaac and Melchizedec (and also Jacob, David, Moses, Joseph, Daniel and many others) is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, who reflects the glory and majesty of God. Our vision is to “look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith”, in whom we find the beginning and the end of all things.

Jesus said of himself, “I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” In Jesus, we look to our Father. Supreme above all, He has given us Jesus, His only Son, His beloved Son, whom He loves, so that we may know God.

Our focus must therefore be on Jesus, who will bring us the Kingdom. It is the righteousness and glory of our Lord, and of our Father, which draws
us to the Kingdom, and not merely the pleasant conditions which will exist in the Kingdom. It is in that righteousness that we should wish to dwell. We find that righteousness in Jesus.

*Jesus is therefore our vision.*

Those well known words of Hebrews 12:1–2 says it all:

“... let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer [author] and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Our vision is the vision of Jesus, and what he means to us now and in the life to come. In Jesus, we see the vision of the Father. In Jesus, we see God’s glory.

*“Be Thou my vision, my blessed Lord.”*

What was the vision of men like Abraham, Isaac and Melchizedec? Every one of these men had a vision of Jesus, the Son of God. All of them pointed forward to Jesus. They all knew that in God’s time, He would bring forth a Son who would reflect his Father’s character and carry out God’s will.

Take Abraham for example. God chose Abraham as the man through whom His promises would be given. Now, I’m quite sure that Abraham didn’t just say, “These are great promises! I wonder what they mean.”

A man who was as close to God as Abraham was, who had the privilege of spending time with Melchizedec, and, above all, who went through the agony of preparing to kill his own son — a man who had had those experiences would also have a far-seeing faith and belief in what was to come.

And what was to come, was Jesus. No wonder Paul tells us that Abraham believed that God was able to raise men even from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

Abraham’s faith and vision were firmly fixed on the Lamb of God’s providing, through whom resurrection would be possible.
And consider Isaac, son of promise, who so closely reflected the greater Son of promise, our Lord Jesus.

Isaac, with his father beside him, climbed Mount Moriah to be offered as a sacrifice on an altar.

- Isaac carried the wood.  
  *Jesus carried his wooden cross.*
- Isaac, who was totally obedient to his father as his father bound his hands and laid him on the altar.  
  "Not my will, but Thine, be done", were Jesus’ words two thousand years later.
- Isaac, obedient unto death.  
  *Jesus, also obedient unto death as he cried to his Father from the agony of his cross. And his Father delivered him, through death and resurrection.*

And Melchizedec, king of righteousness and peace. Priest of the Most High God. There is much about Melchizedec we don’t know, but what we do know is that he perfectly reflected the role of the Lord Jesus Christ — King of righteousness and King of peace.

He came from where we do not know. He went to where we do not know. He was “without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he continues a priest for ever.” How could such a person not have the Lord Jesus as his vision? He resembled him in every respect.

All of these men had a vision of Jesus. They looked forward in time to him.

- They knew he would be the Son of God.
- They knew he would also be the Lamb of God and would introduce a new covenant.
- They knew he would be King of righteousness and King of peace.
- They knew he would make resurrection a reality by rising from death to life himself.
- They knew he would reflect the character and glory of God in himself.

*Jesus was their vision. The Lord Jesus must be our vision, too.*

*Be Thou my vision, my blessed Lord.*
Let’s look more closely at Hebrews 12 again. Verse 1 speaks immediately of what’s been said in chapter 11. Verse 1 begins with the word, “Therefore” (or, in the light of all these people of faith).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . . ”

You see, these people to whom Paul was writing, Hebrews, were people who had lost their vision. The whole purpose of this letter to these Hebrews was to bring them back to Jesus. They had lost sight of him.

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet . . . ” (Hebrews 12:12)

In chapter 10, we find that these Hebrews had suffered much. They had suffered abuse and affliction. Life had become so hard for them that they had lost their vision:

“But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.” (Hebrews 10:32–34)

Paul told them to regain their confidence, to endure their hardship. He wrote (verse 39), “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.”

He then reminded them (in chapter 11) of all those who had shown strong faith in the face of hardship and suffering. There were people whose vision remained strong, despite their suffering.

Therefore, said Paul, you must also be strong, as they were, and regain your vision. And the only way to do that is to “look unto Jesus.”

He gave them a vision of Jesus:

• He is the pioneer (author) and finisher of our faith.
• He endured the awfulness of the cross and despised its shame because of the joy which lay beyond the cross.
• He is seated at the right hand of God.
“Think about this”, wrote Paul, “so you will not grow weary or fainthearted. Jesus is your vision, and with Jesus as your vision, you will look beyond the present, as he did, to what he will make possible in the future.”

“You have lost your vision”, wrote Paul. “You must look unto Jesus — he is your vision.”

Paul goes on, in an ever increasing build-up of the picture of our vision in Christ. He points out to the Hebrews (and us) the wonderful grace of God. He tells them (and us) in chapter 12:22–24 that we:

- Have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God.
- Have come to the presence of innumerable angels.
- Have come to the assembly of the first-born.
- Have come to a judge who is God of all.

And finally, as the crowning pinnacle of this vision, Paul tells the Hebrews that they have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. We are part of that covenant, just as the Hebrews were.

“Jesus is your vision”, Paul told the Hebrews.

Jesus is our vision. He is our Saviour. He is the Lamb of God. He is our Redeemer. In Jesus, we see the Father. “He that has seen me has seen the Father”, said Jesus.

- Through Jesus, we will achieve the promises given to Abraham about the Kingdom
- In Isaac, we see Jesus reflected in his birth, his sacrifice and his marriage.
- It will be Jesus’ voice that will call to us as he descends from heaven in power and great glory.
- It will be our immortal and glorified Lord who will hold our gaze as we watch him descend from heaven to the earth.
- As he descends, he will send out his angels to invite us to go to him, to meet him, as he comes, to be with him forever. He is our bridegroom.

To Jesus, God has given all authority, on earth and in heaven.

Through Jesus, we come to the Father. In him, and in His Son, we have our vision:
Be Thou my vision, my blessed Lord,
Almighty God, King of the endless heavens,
Be Thou my thinking from dawn to dusk,
In the brightest of days and the darkest nights.
Be Thou my speaking, in each word that I say;
May it reflect the depths of your wisdom.
Be Thou my Father, may I be your child;
May we be together, as one.
Be Thou my vision.”
Once upon a time there lived a king. His country was very prosperous, and his people were mostly comfortably off.

The king’s palace was on a high hill overlooking the main city, and quite often, the king would look out from his palace to the city below and wonder how his people, his subjects, were getting on.

The king, who was a kindly man, loved his people. He longed to see more of them, but being the king, it was somewhat difficult for him to mix easily with the people. His advisers warned him that to go down to the city would be dangerous.

The more he longed to see his people, the more determined he became to do so. He didn't just want to see them from his gilded carriage, while they all lined up to cheer and wave to him. He dearly wanted to see them in their everyday circumstances. He wanted to visit them in their homes.

Well, he decided to do just that. One fine day, he strode out of the palace and down the hill to the city. No one was with him. He went alone.

He was soon amongst the houses of his people, and he knocked at the front door of the first house he came to.

Nobody answered the door. He could hear lots of noise and shouting inside the house. He looked through the window and saw the family gathered around the TV set watching the football. They and the TV were making so much noise they hadn’t even heard the king knocking at the door.
So he went a bit further down the street to another house and knocked at that door. No answer. He looked down the drive and saw that everyone was around the back, having a BBQ with the neighbours. They were too busy to listen for a knock at the door.

He knocked at the door of a third house. No-one home. They had taken their boat to the lake for the day.

“Surely”, thought the king, “someone will answer my knock.”

He knocked on the door of a fourth house. This was a small house and the king admired the lovely garden around it. Suddenly the door opened and there stood an old lady with bright sparkling eyes.

She recognised the king instantly and curtsied. She was astonished to find that it was the king knocking at her door. She invited him in to come in and have a cup of tea. And in the king’s presence, her humble little house seemed to feel like a palace.

Well, I’m sure you’ve realised that I’m talking about the well-known verse in Revelation 3:20 about the greatest King of all who knocks at our individual doors:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”

(Luke 22:42)

These words were written to the ecclesia at Laodicea, but they apply to all men and women. This is not a message for the people Jesus knew at his first coming. These words are in his Revelation, written about AD 96. They therefore are for people who would live in the centuries beyond AD 96 — including us.

Jesus comes to all our doors and knocks — not once, but often. He longs for us to open the door and invite him in. Of course, many have invited him in. But many have not.

I’d like to speak about three of the houses Jesus actually went into in the last week of his mortal life. Two of them on his way to Jerusalem, and one in Jerusalem. You will recall how, a few days before his arrest and crucifixion, he said to his disciples:

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished . . . they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” (Luke 18:31–33)
Jesus knew he had to go through this dreadful experience. But he was human, like us all, and his prayerful ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane some days later shows that he dreaded what lay ahead.

“Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, let your will, not mine, be done.”

That final week for Jesus, as each day brought him closer to THE day — the day of his arrest — was terrible for him.

Like us, he would experience fear, deepening anxiety, and dread of what was to come. We can only imagine the courage Jesus had as he stoically and purposefully lived through those awful days. Always communing with his Father in prayer, he sought the strength God alone can give.

Bearing that in mind, let’s think about the two houses he went into on his way to Jerusalem. In both of them, he derived much warmth and welcome. This must have meant so much to the Lord as he faced what lay ahead.

The first house was at Jericho. It was the house of Zaccheus:

“He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way.

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zaccheus, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today.’”

(Luke 19:1–5)

Zaccheus quickly climbed down out of the tree and “received him joyfully.” What a wonderful experience for Jesus! Zaccheus, a hated tax collector — a chief tax collector. A man who had defrauded the people by taxing them too much.

But Jesus in effect knocked at Zaccheus’ door. And Zaccheus welcomed Jesus into his house. Because of that, he became a changed man. He told Jesus he would give half of his goods to the poor, and would pay back fourfold what he had taken from anyone fraudulently by taxing them too much.

Zaccheus repented of his greed — his sins — and Jesus told him, “Today, salvation has come to this house ... for the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” He was the guest of Zaccheus we are told. As the host,
Zaccheus would obviously provide a meal for Jesus. “I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.”

And that’s why he knocks at our doors. We are lost, for the wages of sin is death. He knocks at our doors so he can come in and save us from certain death.

The second house Jesus entered on that journey to Jerusalem (the very next night), was the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus at Bethany. Their’s was a house Jesus had often been in before. On this night, it would be especially comforting for Jesus, for he was with his dear and loved friends — Mary, Martha, Lazarus and their father, Simon.

Considering what lay before him only four days later, I’m sure Jesus would relish the warmth and love and welcome of this house at Bethany. It would mean so much to him.

In fact, in the next few days before his arrest, Jesus returned each night to this house of love and warmth at Bethany, no doubt gathering strength and courage as the awful day of his arrest grew ever closer.

These regular visits of Jesus to this much loved home at Bethany remind us that it is not only once he knocks at our individual doors. He comes to us often and knocks.

Always when he came to the home at Bethany and knocked, he knew the door would be swiftly opened and he would be invited in for a meal and to spend the night.

He comes to us often and knocks at our doors. Are we always as warm and welcoming as that little family at Bethany?

Well, the next few days passed in that terrible week. Each night, Jesus basked in the warmth of the house of his Bethany friends.

But on Thursday night of that week, everything changed.

Late on Thursday night, or perhaps in the dark, early hours of Friday morning, Jesus entered another house — the house of the high priest.

“In then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house.” (Luke 22:54)

What a contrast! In the house of Zaccheus, Jesus had found a warm welcome and had turned Zaccheus from a sinner to a devoted follower of the Lord.
In the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus found the love and warmth he craved in the days leading up to his arrest and crucifixion.

Zaccheus and Mary, Martha and Lazarus had opened their doors to Jesus and invited him in. In both cases, he ate a meal with them. Remember Jesus’ words in Revelation?

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”

(Revelation 3:20)

But now, in the house of the high priest, he found none of the warmth and love he’d experienced in the houses of Zaccheus, and Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In this house of the high priest, he was surrounded by men whose sole aim was to kill him.

No meal together here!

No washing of Jesus’ feet here!

No love here!

No, these men beat him and mocked him. They gloated over Jesus who they had been plotting to kill for the past 3 1/2 years. That house of the high priest was full of revenge, hatred, violence and false accusations.

The high priest was supposed to be the spiritual leader of the Jews. Of all people, he was expected to emulate and teach God’s ways. But in his house, on this night, we find the high priest rejecting and belittling and physically condoning and encouraging the beating up of the Son of God.

We need to consider one more house Jesus visited.

It was the day of his resurrection. He had joined Cleopas and his companion — probably his wife, Mary — on the road to Emmaus. As they talked, they reached Emmaus where Cleopas and Mary lived.

They stopped, and Jesus began to move away from them as if he was going on further. It was late afternoon, and probably dusk. Cleopas said to him, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.”

So he did. They sat down together for a meal:

“... if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”
Beyond the Tomb

Once again, Jesus was warmed by the kindness and love of these two from Emmaus. They opened their door to him. They believed in him and had hoped he would redeem Israel. They were his people, and he loved them.

And when Jesus broke the bread of their meal and blessed it, they instantly recognised him as the Lord! He had been with them in their house and sat down to a meal with them.

In all the time of Jesus’ ministry, he knocked on people’s doors hoping they would open to him. Even in the hours before his birth in Bethlehem, Joseph had knocked on the door of the inn, hoping that he and Mary and their baby about to be born would be invited in.

But even on that occasion, they were told that there “was no room for them at the inn”. So even at his birth, Jesus was not invited into the house.

Jesus knocks on our doors every day. Do you always open the door to him and invite him in? There are others who knock on our doors, too. People who are in need, or are anxious, or need encouragement or comfort or spiritual strength.

When these people knock at our doors, it is good for us to remember that in helping them, we are doing it for Jesus.

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

And it’s not just that Jesus knocks at the door of our homes. He also knocks at the doors of our hearts. He wants us to respond and invite him into our hearts. He said in John 14:23:

“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

And Paul wrote:

“Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.” (Romans 8:9–10)

This matter of our Father and Jesus dwelling within us is particularly important. What does this mean for us?

Jesus said he would come in and eat with us and we with him. This indicates that he will not only be with us in the major problems of our
lives, but also every day in the ordinary events and circumstances of our lives — even in things as simple as eating a meal.

All of us at some time in our lives are worried about problems within our families. These are major problems and can be very concerning to us. We obviously take these problems to the Lord in prayer, which is exactly what we should do. But Jesus is saying that he and the Father are with us not just as we experience major problems, but they are with us in absolutely everything we do, even to the every day things like eating a meal.

That is what Jesus means when he says he “will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.” That is what he meant when he said “We [the Father and I] will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 14:23)

This knowledge is of tremendous encouragement to each of us in our life in Christ. Jesus is with us always, every day, every minute of the day, whether our problems are engulfing us, or whether it is being with us throughout the daily circumstances of our lives. We only have to open our door to him and he will enter in.

Let’s think again of the houses Jesus went into in his final week, and then on the day of his resurrection. Zaccheus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Cleopas and Mary — in each case he brought peace and confidence into those houses.

**Zaccheus** — peace and confidence through forgiveness of his sins, and confidence through Jesus granting salvation to his house. Remember that Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to this house . . .” And remember, too, that Jesus sought Zaccheus out. He knew about him, and he knew of his need. And he knows us, too, and our needs.

**Mary, Martha and Lazarus** — Peace and confidence came to them all because of Jesus’ presence with them when he came back to Bethany each night of his final week before his arrest and crucifixion. Remember, too, the warmth and comfort they gave Jesus in that terrible week — just by being with them in their house. We can give him warmth and comfort when he is with us, for it shows that we love him, as Mary, Martha and Lazarus did.

**Cleopas and Mary** — Peace and confidence because they suddenly knew that Jesus was alive and that he had overcome death. It was while they sat and ate with him in their house that they recognised him.
All of these things matter deeply to us, too:

- Peace through forgiveness of sins.
- Peace because of Jesus’ presence with us every day in all we do, even in the little things of our daily lives.
- Peace and confidence in the knowledge that Jesus is alive, and is immortal, and that he is coming back to the world to make all things right.
- The peace of knowing that whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s and are in his keeping until he returns.

Until he comes, his presence is with us each day if we will open our doors to him.

When Jesus returns, the boot will be on the other foot, as it were. He will invite us into his house. Then, we will be with him in the glory of his Kingship and majesty, in his house that will be our house as well.

Now, in this life, he comes to us, knocking on our doors, asking us to open our door to him.

Then, at his coming, he will invite us to go to him in his house, where he will eat with us, and we with him, at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

As we wait in our present darkness of night for the dawn of that new day, we remember the dark night of long ago when there was no room for Jesus in the inn. In these last days of night as we wait for him to come again, let us be sure that there is room for him in the inn of our heart.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him …”

Our King is coming, not as a baby in a cattle trough, but from heaven, with radiant power and great glory, to take us unto himself.
In 2010, Easter and Anzac Day were celebrated in Australia on the same weekend. Both of them represented freedom. Easter represented freedom in Christ, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Anzac Day represented freedom for Australia through victory at war. Two very different kinds of freedom.

Both involved death. Freedom in Christ comes through the death of one man, Jesus. Freedom through victory at war comes through lots of men killing lots of other men. Freedom in Christ has a background of love. Freedom through war has a background of hatred.

What does freedom in Christ mean?

In thinking about this, I’d like you to come with me to five different places:

• The Garden of Eden
• Beersheba in the far south of Israel
• The temple in Jerusalem
• The Garden of Gethsemane
• The empty garden tomb of Jesus

From each of these five places, we will put together a picture of what freedom in Christ means.

So, fasten your seat belts as we set off for the Garden of Eden!
The Garden of Eden

Genesis tells us that the garden was beautiful — it had every kind of tree that was pleasant to look at and was good for food. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden and told them to look after it. They could eat of every tree there, except one — the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Death would result if they did.

Then came the serpent, who persuaded Eve that she didn’t need to take any notice of what God said. “You will not die”, it said. And we know what happened. They believed the serpent and did what God had expressly told them not to do. They ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

God found Adam and Eve later that day, full of guilt and hiding from Him in the garden. “What have you done?”, He asked them. And they told Him.

We know the result. God had said they would die if they ate of that particular tree. They had done what He said not to do. They had disobeyed Him. They had sinned. In this beautiful garden, the first sin was committed. Only one sin. The penalty was death.

God pronounced judgement on Adam and Eve and on the serpent for what they had done:

“I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he [the offspring of the woman] shall bruise your head, and you [the offspring of the serpent] shall bruise his heel.”

(Genesis 3:15 esv)

Anyone who has worked in a hospital emergency department knows that a head injury is far worse than an injury to the heel. A head injury can mean death. An injury to the heel can usually be treated and cured.

Here we have the first prophecy of how Jesus will destroy sin — the serpent, representing sin. Jesus will crush and smash the head of the serpent. Jesus himself referred to the serpent twice in Revelation. He speaks of it in Revelation 12 and 20, as “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and satan.”

Jesus has crushed and smashed the head of the serpent. But he paid a price for doing it. Sin (the serpent) was to bruise the heel of Jesus. I’ll come back to the price that Jesus paid shortly.
The work of Jesus was to overcome sin, and that affects us directly.

**Beersheba**

Let’s go on now to Beersheba — north we go from the Garden of Eden, along the fertile crescent from modern day Iraq, and then south into Israel — down, down, into the deep south, a place of desert, to Beersheba. 2,000 years have passed since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden.

On the day of our arrival at Beersheba, we find a great feast going on. Abraham’s many tents are spread out in this desert place. Abraham has many people — servants, shepherds, cattlemen, camel keepers — hundreds of people are with him. They are all at this feast, celebrating. What are they celebrating?

They are celebrating the weaning of Isaac. As we watch, we see a seventeen year old boy taunting three year old Isaac. The seventeen year old boy is Ishmael. Paul tells us in Galatians 4 that Ishmael persecuted Isaac at this feast.

> “And the child [Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. [Persecuting, says Paul.] So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.’” (Genesis 21:8–10)

Remember, Ishmael is the son of Hagar, a slave. Isaac is the son of promise.

> “Now we, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now.

> But what does the scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.’ So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” (Galatians 4:28–31)

Keep these two events at the Garden of Eden and Beersheba in your mind as we continue on our journey. We now head north through Israel, and it’s another 2,000 years later. We are heading for the temple in Jerusalem.
The temple at Jerusalem

As we come in over Jerusalem, down, down, we go to the magnificent temple built by Herod. As we descend, we see a large crowd in the temple court. Then we see Jesus in the midst of this crowd of scribes and Pharisees, and hundreds of people are gathered around them.

Jesus, the offspring of the woman, mentioned in Genesis 3:15. Jesus, the greater Son of promise, who was foreshadowed by Isaac, the earlier son of promise. Let’s join the crowd and listen to what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is talking to those Jews here who believed that he was the promised Messiah. The Pharisees are scathing at what he is telling them.

“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ “ (John 8:31–32 esv)

Note three things here:

• If you abide in my word, you are my disciples.
• You will know the truth.
• The truth will set you free.

“The truth will set you free . . .” We are free because of the word of Jesus. But the Pharisees there that day were angry. What was this about freedom? They shot back at Jesus (verse 33) “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

Then Jesus gives them an ominous warning. He said to those Pharisees, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

The religious leaders of Israel were not only sinners, and therefore slaves to sin, they were also slaves to the law of Moses. They thought of themselves as impregnable. They were the leaders of the Jews! They were the religious leaders of Israel! Nothing could topple them. No-one could condemn them. What right had this young upstart from Galilee — Galilee of all places — to speak like this to them, telling them they are slaves to sin!

But Jesus had issued a thinly veiled threat to these Pharisees. He had implied that they were sinners, and therefore slaves to sin. This was totally unacceptable to the Pharisees. And now Jesus gives them a devastatingly
blunt warning. Calmly but quite deliberately he delivers this ominous warning to the Pharisees (verse 35):

“The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever.”

He has called them slaves, and now threatens them that they, in their self-exalted position as the religious leaders of Israel, may be cast out, for they are slaves to sin.

I’m quite sure that the Pharisees knew what Jesus was saying. How dare he tell them they would be cast out. They — the religious leaders of the Jews! They were furious, and at the end of this angry exchange with Jesus, they picked up stones to stone him.

But the crowds who stood there listening to all this heard Jesus say something else. He said (verse 36), “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Garden of Gethsemane

Well, it’s time to move to our next destination — the Garden of Gethsemane. It’s about a year later. We don’t have to go far. Just down the hill from the temple we go, following the path that leads down the steep slope from the temple to the brook Kedron. Then up the beginning of the slope of the Mount of Olives.

It is dark, quite late at night. We pass eight of the disciples in a group, and a little further, we come to Peter, James and John. They are asleep. Just ahead in the deep shadows, we see Jesus, prostrate in prayer.

For the past few days, Jesus has been deeply troubled. Just days before this agonising night in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had told his disciples,

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.” (John 12:27)

It is now two or three days later. Here in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is still deeply troubled and fearful of what lies ahead. In the dark shadows, he confides to Peter, James and John, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”
He left them behind, and we find him in deep prayer. He was asking his Father that he would not have to suffer what was to come. “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36 ESV)

The point here is that Jesus was in deep personal distress and anguish of mind. He shrank from what lay ahead, but he forced himself to submit to his Father’s will.

We are told by Luke (Luke 22:44) that the sweat of Jesus was “like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.” This is a recognised medical condition known as haematidrosis. It can occur when a person is suffering a massive level of stress. In such cases, the sweat caused by the stress mingles with the blood cells which burst, causing the sweat to be blood red. The sweat therefore drips from the suffering person appearing like drops of blood.

This was the beginning of the price he had to pay. The beginning of the bruising of his heel. It is meaningful to us to know that Jesus, as a mortal man, went through what we would have gone through had we been in his position. Here, before his crucifixion, he was in intense agony of mind, pleading with his Father to find some other way.

In that garden, he fought his hardest battle. And having fought it, and overcome himself, he resolutely faced the cross. I believe that his real battle was fought, not on the cross, but here, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was then able to face the cross, and Paul tells us that “for the joy that was set before him, [he] endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2).

We, too, can learn from Jesus in fighting our own personal battles. We should look ahead, beyond the present agony of our troubles. We must look to Jesus who also looked beyond his agony of mind to what lay beyond — the joy of his resurrection and immortality, and of being with his Father.

We can do that, too. There is unlimited joy before us, in Christ Jesus. We have his strength with us today. Knowing what he went through in that garden, and then on the cross, we can pour out our troubles to him, because he knows how we feel.

Then came his arrest, and the jeering and hatred of the Jewish leaders. How they would revel in their revenge. This man had humiliated them so
many times in front of the people. Now they savoured this opportunity of
revenge, in the dead of night, away from the ordinary people who loved
Jesus.

They watched with grim approval as the temple guards beat him up,
pulled the hairs from his beard, spat on him. And they watched, gloating,
as Pilate’s soldiers whipped him, mercilessly shredding his back and
shoulders, leaving gaping, bleeding, raw flesh.

And soon more gloatingly, they watched and shouted and jeered as the
nails were hammered into his hands and feet, and he hung there in agony
on the cross, gasping and breathless for six long hours.

Jesus paid the price. His heel was bruised by sin. Our sin.

*The empty garden tomb*

We have one more place to visit. The empty garden tomb. Jesus has risen
victoriously from the dead. In the words of a hymn:

“Now the iron bars are broken,
Christ from death to life is born,
Glorious life, and life immortal,
On this resurrection morn.
Christ had triumphed, and we conquer
By his mighty enterprise.
We with him to life eternal,
By his resurrection rise.”

In his death and resurrection, we have freedom in him. He has crushed
and smashed the head of the serpent. The serpent has been struck a
crushing blow, but Jesus, having paid the price, is alive forever.

Paul wrote to the Romans:

“… if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart
that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

This is the essence of our freedom in Christ. We know that, whether we
live or die, we are saved, because Jesus is our Lord. **But there is more.**

This freedom in Christ gives us a growing freedom from sin itself. We
know we will always fail — will always be sinners in this life, but as we
grow older, our freedom in Christ, and our relationship with him and with our Father, helps us to grow away from sin, and our tendency to sin should diminish.

We have, and always will in this life, fight the battle of the flesh. The flesh equates with sin and death. The Spirit equates with life. Listen to how Paul puts it:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1–2)

Verse 5–6:

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

**And there is still more.** Freedom in Christ frees us from hopelessness. We all suffer grief and loss. Anxiety and worry are all part of this life of mortality. We live a life of imperfection because we are still mortal.

We suffer these imperfections, and the many aspects of life that bear down on us as well. But freedom in Christ takes us beyond all that. It doesn’t stop us facing these problems, but with the freedom of Jesus in our hearts, we are not crushed. Freedom in Christ allows us to look up and beyond these problems.

Our problems are like a big, black hole in front of us. We stare down into the hole, and, if we are not careful, we can fall into that big black hole.

We must learn to step back from those holes, and look up, not down. That’s what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane. He did not allow his black hole of suffering and impending death on the cross to overcome him. He looked beyond it to the joy that lay beyond the cross — beyond his own personal black hole. Looking up and beyond our black hole, brings everything else into perspective.

I once knew of an old man in Africa. He had nothing. He lived in an old tumbled-down hut. He had to carry his water a long way. He had no electricity. He was often cold and had very little food. But this old man had been baptised into Jesus. He had accepted Jesus as his Lord. He told
everyone who visited him that he was rich, for he had the Kingdom of God.

That old brother knew what freedom in Christ meant. He had been set free from the worries of this world, and he knew he was freed from the effect of sin.

What is it that brings us this freedom in Christ? Paul felt deeply about what Jesus had done for him. He told the Galatians that Jesus “gave himself for me.” But there is more to that. Have a look at what Paul actually said in Galatians 2:20:

“I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

It is the love of Jesus that brings us freedom in Christ. Jesus loved Paul, and he gave himself for Paul.

And he loves you. And me. He gave himself for you and me because he loves us. He gives us freedom which means that no longer are we slaves to sin, but we have life in the Spirit. “In freedom Christ has set us free”, wrote Paul. “Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

We found on our visit to Beersheba that Hagar and Ishmael were cast out of Abraham’s house. Isaac, the son of promise remained. At the temple, we heard Jesus say, “The slave does not remain in the house forever. The Son remains forever.”

Jesus has set us free from slavery — the slavery of sin. We are no longer slaves, but free sons and daughters of the Father, through Christ Jesus our Lord. We will never be cast out of our Father’s house.

Let me tell you a story about a little slave girl in America. It fits well with our freedom in Christ.

It’s a story about Abraham Lincoln. Some years before he became the President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln was visiting the southern states of America. It was the 1850’s.

Abraham Lincoln was a staunch opponent of slavery. He hated the very notion of slavery. One day, as he strode through the streets of a certain southern town, he came across a slave market. He stopped and looked in. He saw there a beautiful young African slave girl in her teens, about to be auctioned as a slave.
All his hatred of slavery welled up in him in great anger. He knew what would happen to this young girl once one of the cotton farmers got her onto his property. She would not just be used as a slave. She would be in demand as an instrument of sex. Her life would be wrecked.

He entered the slave market, seething with wrath, but also with great compassion for this young girl. It was soon time for her to be auctioned. He bid for her. He bought her.

He led her outside the city and stopped and looked at her. He said to her, “You are now free. I am setting you free from slavery.”

The girl looked up at him with a troubled look in her eyes (Abraham Lincoln was very tall). She was bewildered. He told her again, “You are free. You are no longer a slave.”

Finally, the girl spoke shyly to him. “But I am a slave. I have always been a slave. My mother and father were slaves. I will always be a slave.”

“No”, said Abraham Lincoln, “I now own you and can decide what I will do with you. I have chosen to set you free. You are now free to choose whatever you would like to do.”

The girl looked up at him for long moments. Then she replied, “Can I really choose what to do?” “You can”, he replied.

“Then”, she said, “I choose to be your servant.”

That little slave girl is us. Jesus has brought us away from the slavery of sin, and we, of our own choice, have become servants of Jesus.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

(Matthew 11:28)

The old man in Africa came to Jesus and was filled with the joy of the Spirit. He was aglow with the Spirit.

And the wonderful thing about freedom in Christ is that we have received only the first instalment of freedom. The second instalment is yet to come. It will come at Jesus’ return when he will set us free from our nature — our mortality.

“For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality.” (1 Corinthians 15:53)

Then our freedom will be complete.
The Passover meal and the marriage supper of the Lamb

We begin this chapter in the upper room, where Jesus and his disciples are gathered for the Passover meal.

As the disciples ate the Passover meal with Jesus, a strange thing was about to happen.

We must remember that all of them there that night, including Jesus, had eaten the Passover meal many times before. They knew the ritual and the meaning behind the meal.

Not only was there a roasted lamb to be eaten, and bitter herbs, but other food items were also very much part of the Passover meal. There were three of these:

• There was a bowl of salt water on the table. This was to remind them of the tears their forefathers had shed whilst slaves in Egypt.

• There was a paste called the Charosheth — a mixture of apples, dates, pomegranates and nuts. This was to remind them of the clay with which their forefathers had made bricks in Egypt.

  Through this paste were sticks of cinnamon to remind them of the straw with which the bricks had been made.

• There were four cups of wine — a reminder of the four promises of Exodus 6:6-7:
1. “I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”
2. “I will deliver you from their bondage.”
3. “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.”
4. “I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.”

The disciples and Jesus knew all this. It had been part of the ritual of every Passover, all their lives. The Passover was a time of remembrance of all that lay behind in the mists of history. A reminder of God’s great deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt, taking them to Himself, as His people.

Thus, the prime focus of the Passover meal was deliverance from the slavery of Egypt and becoming the special people of God.

But as the Passover meal progressed in the upper room, something strange happened. Jesus did something which was not part of the normal Passover meal.

As they were still eating, Jesus took some bread, and blessed it and broke it, and said, “Take, eat. This is my body.”

What was this? This was not something the disciples had ever seen before. What did it mean? What did these strange words of Jesus mean? “Take, eat. This is my body.”

The disciples looked at each other. What did it mean?

But they did as Jesus asked them. He passed each of them a portion of the bread he’d blessed and broken, and they ate it.

Jesus hadn’t finished his strange words. After giving them the bread, he now took a cup of wine. When he had given thanks for it, he said to them, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Again, these words were totally mystifying to the disciples. As with the bread, they didn’t understand what he meant.

He went on, “I tell you, I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom.”

Now, these words are perfectly familiar to us. We read them every time we remember Jesus in bread and wine. We know what they mean. But try
to think what the disciples would make of them. They'd never heard Jesus use these words in this way before. He talked about my body, my blood. What had this to do with the Passover?

They had never before shared bread and wine in this way. I think they would be absolutely confused.

And what did Jesus mean when he said, “I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom”?

The disciples would not have known, as they reclined there with Jesus in that upper room that this new meal that Jesus was introducing, partaking of bread and wine, would be eaten from then on by his followers of all ages — right through the next 2,000 years to today.

“Do this in remembrance of me”, Jesus said. “Remember me always. Remember that you have been given life and salvation because of my body and my blood.”

The disciples didn’t realise that these new words of Jesus were about a new covenant. The old Passover meaning was about deliverance from bondage. It related to the old covenant.

But Jesus was introducing them to the new covenant in him. And he was doing it at the Passover meal. In fact, they were still eating the Passover meal when Jesus introduced this new, strange aspect of the meal. Matthew tells us that “as they were eating” Jesus introduced the bread and wine in this new way.

They were still eating the old Passover meal when he did this. And it was most appropriate that he did it this way. This new meal (bread and wine) was also related to a Passover. Not the Passover from Egypt, and the release from the bondage of slavery, but the new Passover in him. This new Passover meal was about release from sin, which can only be achieved through Jesus. He was now introducing the new covenant in him.

That is why he emphasised the bread as being his body, and the wine, his blood.

Later, the disciples would understand as we do, the meaning of this new meal Jesus introduced to them.
Perhaps for us, it is tempting to think about the introduction of this new supper by Jesus as something remote that happened long ago. We look back 2,000 years and maybe we don’t feel part of that momentous moment when Jesus gave his disciples this new meal of bread and wine.

Maybe we look back across the centuries to that time, and then think forward into the future to when Jesus will return. It is understandable that we might think of these two events — the supper of the upper room, and the return of Jesus as two quite separate events, being quite unconnected. Both are vitally important, but perhaps we don’t see the connection between them.

But they are connected. There are three things that join them together:

Think of an unbroken chain, beginning at the supper with Jesus and his disciples in the upper room, and ending at the second coming of Jesus. The chain starts in the upper room, and continues into the centuries between then and now.

First, then, we, as his followers in this generation, are part of that great band of followers who have remembered him in this memorial meal of bread and wine every first day of the week down through the past 2,000 years.

Those followers may not have eaten this simple meal in comfortable rooms as we do, but always they remembered him in this meal of bread and wine. Sometimes they met in caves; sometimes in prison; sometimes in hiding. Perhaps they didn’t always have bread and wine available, but always they remembered him, and wherever possible, they ate bread and drank wine in remembrance of him.

So, we keep this connection with that first supper simply by being part of the followers of Jesus over the past 2,000 years. If we could trace back over the past 2,000 years, we would get back to that supper in the upper room where Jesus introduced this supper to his disciples.

The second thing that joins us together with that long ago supper is that Jesus is with us every day. He told us that he would be with us if we gather together in his name. He is with us every day. He is our Shepherd and our King.

It’s not as if he disappeared into heaven from the Mount of Olives and has had nothing to do with us until he returns. We can’t see him, but he is with
us. He told his disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” We are his ecclesia. He guides us in all our ways, both collectively and individually. The New Testament records that his early followers prayed to Jesus and that he spoke to them. (eg Ananias of Damascus was told by Jesus to go to talk to Paul).

The third thing that connects us to the upper room has to do with the return of Jesus. He spoke of his return in the upper room:

“I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom.”

In those words, we have an immediate connection between the supper of the upper room and the return of Jesus.

I want you to let your mind dwell for a moment on the supper of that upper room, with Jesus and his disciples reclining at the table.

Now, let your thoughts roam over the next twenty centuries. Somewhere, in many places, Jesus’ followers have partaken of this same meal each Sunday across all of those centuries.

Next, think about us being here today. We are part of this scene, just as our fellow followers have met over this meal over the past twenty centuries. We are doing exactly what Jesus and his disciples did 2,000 years ago. In that way, we are directly connected to that first supper, and all of those over the past twenty centuries.

Finally, I want you to let your mind look forward to the return of Jesus. To that day when he will once more drink wine with us anew in his Father’s Kingdom.

But before we come to that moment, it is important for us to be reminded of what will happen at Jesus’ return.

First, let’s just run over in our minds what his return means to you and me. We all believe implicitly that Jesus will return. But we need to be sure that the knowledge of his return is not just an academic fact in our minds.

It is more than an academic fact. It is something that we will be absolutely involved in personally. It’s not just a story about the future. It’s not going to happen to someone else. It’s going to happen to you and me. And you will be closely and irrevocably involved with his return, whether you have died before he comes or are alive when he comes.
Let’s quickly go over what the scriptures tell us about his return. We know these passages well, of course, but think about them from your own perspective.

I want to focus on just two passages of scripture — Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 4. Keep your finger in these two places.

First, Matthew 24. (Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives the day before he was arrested):

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

(Matthew 24:29–31)

This literal descent of Jesus from heaven with his angels will be utterly unprecedented.

• He will come with power and great glory. His coming will be blindingly brilliant.
• Myriads of angels will be with him. We’re not given much information about these angels in Matthew, but 2 Thessalonians 1:7 gives us a better look at them:

“… when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire …”

Imagine this. Jesus descending in power and brilliant, dazzling glory. Myriads of angels with him in flaming fire.

But there’s more. As the people of this earth (including us) gaze into the sky to see this amazing and powerful and brilliant display of Jesus returning to the earth, the air is suddenly pierced with the massive blast of a trumpet.

1 Thessalonians 4:16 talks about the “sound of the trumpet of God”. Matthew 24:31 describes it as a “loud trumpet call”. 1 Corinthians 15:52 proclaims “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”
This trumpet blast will reverberate all over the earth, in every nation and to every ear.

As Jesus descends, Matthew 24:31 tells us (confirmed in 1 Thessalonians 4:17) that he will send out his angels to gather his elect.

This is where we will be personally involved, for we each will be invited by an angel to come to Jesus, our bridegroom, even while he is still in the air, descending from heaven. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 tells us that we will be caught up to meet him in the air as he comes.

About a week ago, I received a letter telling me I had a chance to win $55,000 in a Lucky Number Giveaway. Let me read you a paragraph from this letter:

“Mr. Hyndman, please sit tight for the next few days. Take a few minutes to get used to the idea of what it feels like if you are the confirmed winner of this $55,000.

In the next few days, important documents will arrive at your Beechworth home marked “Express Mail”. Then be prepared to respond at once.”

Bearing in mind what we’ve just read about the return of Jesus, let’s rephrase this letter. How would you feel if in the coming week you received a letter like this:

“Mr. Hyndman, please sit tight for the next few days. Take a few minutes to get used to the idea of what it will feel like to know that you are going to be with Jesus. You will actually be caught up in the air to meet him as he comes.

In the next few days, you will see an amazing and unprecedented sight in the heavens. Drop everything when you see this sight. Be absolutely prepared, for an angel will come to you to invite you to go to Jesus, even as he is descending from heaven. Be prepared to respond at once.”

How would you feel to receive such a letter?

Well, my brothers and sisters, we have already had that letter. Did you know that? You’ve already received it. It’s right here in Matthew and Thessalonians. We’ve read it many times. What does it mean to you?

Because Jesus wanted to be sure we understood this letter, he reinforced the letter when he told the parable of the ten virgins. (Matthew 25:1–12)

All ten virgins were waiting for the bridegroom — just as we are. At midnight comes the cry — “Behold the bridegroom! Come out to meet
him.” Note, it is not the bridegroom who calls to us. It is someone else. In our case, it will be the angel who comes to us to invite us to come to meet our bridegroom, Jesus.

Then we will be caught up in the air to be with him. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 — “and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

And shortly after that, will come the Marriage Supper of Jesus and his bride — us. Another supper. Here is where we come back to that great link that connects the supper in the upper room with the Marriage Supper of Jesus. In both cases, Jesus was, and will be, there.

This Marriage Supper connects us directly to the supper in the upper room:

“I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Matthew 26:29)

And this Marriage Supper will be when he will do that with his now immortal bride.

In the upper room, the bread was the bread of the earth, pointing to Jesus as the bread of life. Remember he told his disciples at his first coming:

“… unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life …” (John 6:53–54)

The wine at the supper in the upper room represented his blood to be shed on the cross within hours of this supper. In his shed blood, our sins are forgiven.

But the wine he will drink with us at the Marriage Supper with his bride will have a different meaning. No longer will it represent his blood shed on the cross. He told his disciples that he would drink it new with them in my Father’s Kingdom.

This is new wine — the wine of celebration, the wine of new life, shared with his now immortal bride — us, and all his followers who have long waited for him to return.

This is the great link between these two suppers — the wine representing his death in the upper room, and the new wine representing life in the Kingdom. It represents new life for his bride, immortality and life everlasting with the bridegroom of our love.
There is a living and vibrant link running through the past 2,000 years, linking us with Jesus and his disciples in the past, and linking us to Jesus and his disciples in the future, as we sit down with them at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

The last time Jesus drank wine was in the upper room. Now, for the first time since then, he will drink wine again, at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and we will be with him, to share the wine of celebration of new, immortal life. With Jesus, our bridegroom and King.
Rejoice in the Lord

We commence this chapter by reading three passages from the New Testament. They were all written by Paul.

Paul, as we know, was a man filled with the love of Jesus. He felt a sense of rejoicing in his heart because he had found in Jesus, his Saviour. He loved his Lord. He believed in him implicitly. He rejoiced constantly in the knowledge that, despite his sins, Jesus had lifted him from the darkness of death and sin to the light of life.

Here are the three passages:

Ephesians 5:18–20

“. . . be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.”

Aren’t these words full of positive joy? “Making melody to the Lord with all your heart.”

These are words that lift us from the drudgery of our everyday routine to spiritual realms.

Here’s the second one:

Romans 12:11–12

“Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope . . .”
Again, we feel Paul’s soaring positivity and joy in the Lord.

Now the third quote:

Philippians 4:4–7

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

This is wonderful advice from Paul. We need to feel this same joy in Christ that he felt.

We need to be filled with the joy and strength of the Holy Spirit. “Be filled with the Spirit. Be aglow with the Spirit.”

We need to rejoice and sing and praise God for our life in Jesus.

I know, as you know, that we don’t always feel like this. In fact, in the ups and downs and drudgery of our daily lives, I doubt that we feel this surge of joy and love and rejoicing that Paul felt.

Remember that Paul was writing to people just like you and I. These were people going about their daily routine just like we do. They had to earn their living, cook meals, clean the house, wash dishes. They worried about their children and grandchildren. Marriages then, as now, had their difficult moments. They had their worries, just like we do. And on top of that, these early believers had to contend with the pressures from Rome and from the Jewish leaders who would not accept that Jesus was the Messiah.

Paul himself had to contend with huge suffering and rejection. He had the welfare of all the early ecclesias on his shoulders.

But despite all this, Paul said, “Rejoice! Be aglow with the Spirit! Be filled with the Spirit!”

Even coming together to remember our Lord Jesus each week, can be a mechanical duty that we do just because that’s what we do. That’s what we’ve always done. We come, we go through the meeting routine, we chat afterwards, we go home. Are our hearts rejoicing as we come here each Sunday? Are we aglow with the Spirit as we come in that door each Sunday?
We have every reason to rejoice and sing melodies in our heart to God. It’s just that I suspect we don’t do this often enough. We let ourselves be drawn downwards by the things happening in our lives, instead of looking upwards to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and rejoicing in him.

We need to sit quietly from time to time to reflect on the wonderful gift we have from our Father and His Son.

As I write these words, I look out of our dining room window. The day is beautiful and sunny. Blue sky, a light breeze whispers through the trees and shrubs. The trees are covered in their new, fresh Spring leaves. My vegetables are going well in the garden. The sun has risen this morning and will set again tonight.

These things are enjoyed by you each day, too. God allows us to rejoice in the beauty of His creation. In the beauty and order of His creation, we see His gentleness and also His power.

We see His faithfulness, His stability and His steadfastness.

We see His absolute reliability. “Will the sun rise tomorrow? Well, it might or it might not” No, that’s not how our Father operates. We know the sun will rise tomorrow. We are absolutely sure of it. God is absolutely reliable.

These things are surely great reasons for rejoicing in Him.

But we know that’s only part of the story. In fact, the other part of the story is even greater for us personally, because God’s gift to us has been to lift us from the darkness of death to the light of life. Once again, we find the scriptures are full of this message to us from our Father.

We are familiar with those wonderful words from Romans 6:23:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is indeed a reason to rejoice and sing melody in our hearts to God. But it gets even better. When Paul wrote his letter to the Colossian brothers and sisters, he wrote some remarkable words that apply equally to us. We need to think carefully about them.

“He has delivered us . . .” [Note that. It is past tense. He has already delivered us.] “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred
us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13–14)

Paul is telling the Colossians that this has already happened. He is not saying it will happen when Jesus returns. There are many who believe that this will only happen when Jesus returns. It will happen, they say, at the judgement.

Paul is saying that we have already been transferred to God’s Kingdom. It’s already happened. It happened at the cross and at the empty tomb. We are no longer in the dominion of darkness. Right now, we are already in the Kingdom of God’s beloved Son. That’s what Paul has written.

We usually think of the Kingdom as happening when Jesus returns, and in a very real and dramatic sense, it will. But Jesus himself is our King today.

“[God] raised him [Jesus] from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church . . . ” (Ephesians 1:20–22)

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11)

Note carefully the past tense in the above passages. God has already exalted the Lord Jesus. He is already Lord, and as Revelation 20:16 points out, he is “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

The Kingdom, in one very real sense, is already with us. Jesus is our King, and we are in his Kingdom. At his coming, Jesus will introduce the next phase of the Kingdom, when it will fill the whole earth. At the moment, we rejoice that the Kingdom of God is in our hearts. The time is coming when everyone on earth will live in God’s Kingdom.

So, what does this mean for us today? It lifts our rejoicing in Christ to an even higher level. First, we rejoice in living in God’s beautiful creation and seeing Him in His creation.

Second, we rejoice because we have already been delivered from darkness to the light of God’s Kingdom, in Christ.

But it gets better still!
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Still in Colossians we read:

“And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds …”
(Colossians 1:21)

That’s certainly a description of us before we entered into the new covenant with our Lord Jesus. We were estranged and hostile in mind before we were baptised into Christ. But note verse 22:

“. . . he [Jesus] has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, [note this] in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before [God] . . .”

I don’t know about you, but for me, this is unbelievable. I know what I am like in my sinful nature which estranges me from God. I know that God cannot look upon sin. There is NO WAY I could ever on my own stand before God and be accepted by Him.

Yet, here is Paul saying that Jesus has reconciled me (and you) so that he can present me (and you) holy and blameless and irreproachable to God.

Have you ever thought of yourself being holy, blameless or irreproachable? But Jesus our Lord brings us to God in this state. Not because of anything we’ve done, but because of what he has done for us. As Paul says in Galatians, “Jesus loved me and gave himself for me”. And he loved you and me, and gave himself for us, too.

When Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me”, that’s what we remember. We look at, and partake of, the bread and wine and remember that through his sinlessness and death, he presents you and me to God as holy, blameless and irreproachable.

This surely lifts our rejoicing and the melody in our hearts to an even greater level.

But it gets better!

God wants us to be like Him. He wants us to be changed so that we will be like Him.

Our Father is gradually drawing us to Himself, through His Son. He wants us to have His character. He has given us His Holy Spirit — even in this life, and will give it to us in full in immortality. Paul told the Corinthians (and us):
“... he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” (2 Corinthians 1:22)

He repeats this in 2 Corinthians 5:5:

“He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”

A guarantee of what?

In Ephesians 1:13–14 he gives us the answer:

“In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

He has given us the Spirit, to dwell within us, until we are filled with the Spirit at the coming of Jesus. Paul also stresses that as well as the Spirit dwelling in us, Jesus and God Himself dwell within us, too, through the Spirit:

“Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.” (Romans 8:9–11)

God’s gifts to his children are never ending.

**But the best of all is still to come.**

Again, we turn to Paul’s words, this time in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17:

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.”

And Paul adds to this:

“... we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:51–52)
It will be then that we, in God’s grace at the judgement seat of Christ Jesus, will be changed from mortality to immortality. As we sing of Jesus in C.J. Caldicott’s words:

“’We shall be like him’, pure in heart and sinless,
But his redeeming mercy ends not there,
These bodies like to his shall then be fashioned,
And we his resurrection glory share.”

God wants us to be always in his Kingdom, with Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. And in Revelation 21 and 22 we are told no less than four times that God Himself will also be there:

“Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them ... The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it ...” (Revelation 21:3: 22:3)

So we can see that our blessings in the Lord are like an ascending ladder, taking us higher and ever higher, taking us further and further from the morass of mortality, to the heavenly heights of God’s dwelling place and Kingdom to ultimate immortality. In this life, Jesus has made it possible for our sins to be forgiven permanently, not year by year as under the Law. In this life, he presents us before God as holy, blameless and irreproachable — through the righteousness of our Lord Jesus.

In the time ahead, Jesus will change our mortality to immortality, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”, and finally, at the very peak of our ascending ladder, we will come into the very presence of God Himself, clothed in His nature and living eternally with our Lord and Father.

This is all part of God’s new covenant in Jesus Christ with those who choose His way.

We have the promise of Jesus that he is with us in this mortal life. And beyond this life, we are given the greatest promises that men and women can be given.

In our daily ritual of life, make time to think about these things and rejoice, and sing melodies in our hearts to God who freely gives us this great gift of grace in His beloved Son, our Lord and King, and who welcomes us into his Kingdom.
I would like to write a few words about silence.

Silence is a quality we all need at times. Silence is often mentioned directly in scripture, and in other parts of scripture it is implied.

For example, when Moses stood on the shore of the Red Sea, with the children of Israel all yelling at him and criticising him for leading them into this death trap, with the Egyptian army thundering across the plain towards them, he cried out to the people, “Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.” (Exodus 14:13 AV).

In those words is an implication of silence. You can’t stand still and see the salvation of the Lord if you are yelling and shouting and rushing about in fear. What Moses meant was, “Stand still. Be silent, and see the salvation of the Lord.”

We need to do that, too. We need silence in our lives at times. We live in a mad world. Clamour, noise, rush and tear, speed, lack of time, roaring, crowds of people.

In ourselves we need silence at times. We lead lives full of busy-ness, worry, anxiety, stress, coping with life and problems.

Whether coping with the world, or coping in our own lives, we need every now and then to stand and be silent, and see and think about the salvation and the blessings of the Lord.

Then there are many scriptures which speak directly about silence. Here are just three of them:
Habbakuk 2:20

“... the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Zephaniah 1:7

“Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand ...”

Zechariah 2:13

“Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.”

Why does God ask us to be silent before Him? I’ll come back to that question shortly, but first, I want to tell you about a man I once knew.

He worked in the city. He had a very senior position in the Public Service in a government department.

His daily working life was stressful, because he was at the beck and call of the government minister in charge of his department.

Other public servants relied on him constantly. He had deadlines to be met, meetings to attend, and reports to prepare.

He led a hectic working life, working often up to 12 and 14 hours a day. What kept this man sane and level-headed was the fact that every month or so, he would deliberately leave his work and the clamour and rush and tear of the city behind him, and spend a weekend in the silence and solitude of the mountains.

He wasn’t married, so he spent these weekends in the mountains alone. Here, he could unwind and drink in the calmness of the hills. Perhaps he thought of that lovely prayer:

“Give me, midst the confusion of the day, the calm of the everlasting hills.”

He would look for tiny wildflowers, he would revel in the colour of the sky and the trees and the blue hills around and above him. He would ponder the majesty of the mountains and their calm, serene stillness.

He would sit and listen to the bird calls all around him, and watch the clouds. He wandered along fern gullies, and climbed to the top of a ridge to see the view beyond.
At night, he found peace in the stillness and silence of the stars and the serenity of the moon. He listened to the nocturnal bush animals scampering around looking for food.

Far from his normal, mad, crazy, noisy, demanding daily world, he experienced the quietness of God’s creation.

Very often, our lives are not silent. Our minds are often not quiet. Anxiety in life can mean a lack of silence in our minds, an inability to stand still and be silent and think about the salvation and blessings of the Lord.

Our man from the city found silence and peace. I don’t know if he found God in that silence. I hope he did.

Remember Elijah. He was in great turmoil of mind, in the very lowest pit of despair on Mount Horeb. It was out of the silence of the mountain that a still, small voice brought him back to a confidence in his God and in himself.

He stood still on the mountain, and in the silence, God spoke to him.

Like Elijah, we need from time to time to experience silence before the Lord. Not just silence in our minds, but silence deep within us which comes from a deep love and reverence for our Heavenly Father and His Son. From a feeling of awe, and an awareness of the majesty of God.

A well known hymn begins:

Drop Thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease.
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered minds confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

This brings us to keeping silence before the Lord.

Habakkuk 2:20 again:

“The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him.”

I suggest we think carefully about these words of Habakkuk. I want to take you on a journey to God’s holy temple. This may sound a bit fanciful, but we actually have a description of God’s holy temple — His dwelling place — in Revelation 4 and 5.
John was shown in the Spirit the dwelling place (the holy temple) of God. We find a description of it in Revelation chapter 4.

Let’s join John and see what he saw.

Verse 2:
He saw in the Spirit a throne in heaven, with God sitting on it. This indeed is God’s holy temple. “The Lord is in his holy temple”.

God is not there alone. We see that the Lord Jesus is there (the slain Lamb) beside his Father. But we also see other beings there with God. The Holy temple is filled with immortal beings, and the air is filled with their voices as they constantly praise God.

Verse 4:
Around God’s throne are twenty-four other thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders.

As we take all this in, we see flashes of lightning, and hear voices and peals of thunder. There are seven torches of fire in front of God’s throne, and we learn from Revelation 8:2 that seven senior angels stand before God as He sits on his throne. We know that one of these angels is Gabriel, and one is undoubtedly Michael, the arch-angel.

Verse 6:
But there are others here as well. There are also four living creatures, one resembling a lion, one an ox, one has the face of a man, and the fourth resembles a flying eagle.

I’m not going to dwell on what these four creatures represent, if they represent anything, but they form an important part of activity in God’s holy temple, at least as John saw them in the Spirit. Later, these four living creatures are involved with the opening of the seven seals.

These four living creatures sing day and night, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”

And we hear the twenty-four elders constantly worshipping God and singing:

“Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.” (verse 11)
(Note the emphasis on God’s creation in these words of Revelation. His creation is enormously important to God).

We think back to the man from the city who experienced silence and peace in his mountain solitude from the things **God has created**.

There is an important point for us to note here. In a very real sense, we are in part of God’s holy temple when we stand still and look at and rejoice in His creation. God has given us His creation to enjoy. It is very important to Him, and He has placed us in the midst of His creation to enjoy it.

Man has destroyed much of it and will ultimately pay the price for that. In Revelation 11:17–18, the same twenty-four elders worshipped, saying,

> “We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, . . . for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

Woe to those who deliberately destroy God’s creation.

Now, I’m not a Greenie, but we need to remember those words when we contemplate the destruction of millions of trees all around the world, and the pollution of the environment by man’s inventions — especially in these past one hundred years or so since the burning of fossil fuels such as oil and coal has polluted the air God gave us to breathe. People in places such as Tokyo have to wear face-masks to avoid breathing in the fog of pollution which man has created, and which has destroyed the clean air God has given us to breathe.

I grew up near the Latrobe River in Gippsland, Victoria. In my boyhood days, the once crystal clear water of this lovely river was polluted by chemicals from a paper mill as it flowed past the mill. The river became not much more than a dirty ditch.

But we need to return to God’s holy temple. We find that God’s holy temple in heaven is seldom silent. There are many voices there constantly praising and worshipping God.

It is the majesty of God’s temple with which we are concerned today. As we stand beside John, gazing in awe at the Lord God Almighty on His throne, His immortal and glorified Son beside Him, watching the thunder and lightning which flashes and rumbles about Him, seeing and hearing the continual worship and praise of the twenty-four elders and four living creatures:
“. . . we stand in silence and awe, as we see the Lord in His holy temple in all His power and majesty. ‘The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.’”

But there is something else to notice in God’s holy temple. Just before the unleashing of God’s judgements on the nations, there is a sudden hush in the holy temple:

“When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” (Revelation 8:1)

This is in stark contrast to the continual praise and worship which is normally in the temple. Now there is silence in heaven for half an hour. God’s judgements on the nations will be a unique and tumultuous event. We are told of them in great detail in Revelation chapters 8 and 9 and 16, and also chapter 14.

Does this suggest that whenever a major event in God’s plan is about to be introduced, there is silence in heaven before it happens? Immediately after this half hour of silence in Revelation 8:1, the judgements of God are unleashed upon the earth.

One can imagine silence in heaven before the flood; and the night in Egypt when the angel of the Lord passed over the houses of the Children of Israel, their doors and lintels red with the blood of a lamb.

The day of Jesus’ crucifixion is another example. Perhaps the return of Jesus will be another. We don’t know, but we are simply told that before God’s wrath is outpoured on the disbelieving and Godless nations, it will be preceded by silence in heaven for about half an hour.

It is as if, in the silence, we see and feel the true majesty and power of God. He is about to unleash on the earth His mighty judgements against those who have chosen to reject and ignore Him.

Let’s go to another place of silence. I want to take you back to Mount Horeb, where, on the mount, we find Elijah.

He is standing on the mountain, and has just watched a catastrophic wind, hurling great rocks down the mountain. And it was not just Mount Horeb where the wind blew. 1 Kings 19:11 tells us that “a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord.” Mount Horeb is only one of the mountains in that group of mountains. The great
wind roared through all of the surrounding mountains, hurling rocks about. It must have been terrifying for Elijah.

Then an earthquake shook the mountain. Then a fire engulfed the mountain.

But we find Elijah here in the silence. Although we are told that “the Lord passed by” in the wind, earthquake and fire, Elijah didn’t see or hear Him. He found the Lord in the silence. God spoke to him in a still, small voice.

Elijah had come to Mount Horeb in the depths of depression. He had prayed to God at Beersheba, “O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” He came to Mount Horeb full of thoughts about himself:

“I have been very jealous for the Lord, ... I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19:10)

He felt he was a failure. He came all the way down from Samaria, and came to Beersheba. On he went, until he reached Mount Horeb. That journey from Samaria to Mount Horeb, is about 500 km. The journey took him through much rugged, rough wilderness country. The journey would have taken about thirty-three days. Through all of those thirty-three days, Elijah trudged on, deeply dejected, depressed, feeling sorry for himself, feeling rejected, feeling a deep sense of failure.

It had all gone so well at Mount Carmel. The Lord had answered his prayer and fire had come down from heaven and burnt up the oxen on the altar; eight hundred priests of Baal had been killed; God had sent rain after $3\frac{1}{2}$ years.

But he had failed. He had failed because Jezebel had not turned to God. She was still evil. She wanted to kill him. These thoughts burned into Elijah’s mind as he trudged southwards, day after day, week after week, southwards through the wilderness to Mount Horeb.

He finally arrived. He climbed up the mountain and hid himself in a cave. He was thoroughly sorry for himself.

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

“Go forth, stand upon the mount before the Lord.” So Elijah crept out of his cave and stood on the mountain. In terror, he cowered back as first,
the wind, then the earthquake and then the fire roared and shook the mountains. But the Lord was not in any of these things.

It’s interesting to note that we are told that the Lord passed by, and yet Elijah did not see or hear Him. You know, the Lord passes by us all the time, but we don’t see Him. He is all around us in His beautiful creation. He is with us in our trials. He is with us as we agonise over our problems. But we don’t see Him.

Elijah didn’t see Him either in the wind, the earthquake or the fire. He needed to stand before the Lord in silence, to find God in the silence.

The man who worked in the city needed to leave behind the demands of his work and the clamour of the city to spend time for a while in the silence of the mountains. Elijah needed to leave behind his depression, his sense of failure, his self-centredness, his feelings of rejection.

He needed silence on Mount Horeb to find God.

We do, too. We need to stand in the silence from time to time to feel the presence of God.

All of us experience anxieties and worries and feelings of inadequacy for various reasons. We need to take time to be by ourselves, to stand or sit in the silence, to pray, and to feel the majesty of God in the silence.

Look at His wonderful creation and see Him there. Reflect on the fact that He allows us to live amongst His creation, to enjoy it. We see Him in the mountains, the valleys, the trees, the flowers in their richness of colour. We revel in the blueness of the sky, the call of the birds, the tiny honey-eaters and the majestic eagles. God has made all of these wonders.

We rush and tear past all of these things every day. But we need to stand in silence and feel the peace and majesty of God.

At night, we look into God’s heavens and marvel at the stillness of the stars and the serenity of the moon.

In the peace of the silence, think about how your prayers have been answered in the past. Be confident that they will be answered in the future. Ask God for guidance in dealing with your anxieties.

The man who worked in the city knew that he had to go back to the daily pressure of his work and the noise and clamour of the city. But by being in the silence of the mountains, he was refreshed, and able to cope with
going back to the city. His work didn’t change. The pressure didn’t change. But he could cope with it as he remembered the peace and tranquillity of the mountains.

God doesn’t take away our problems. He gives us strength to cope with them. He didn’t take away Elijah’s problems. He sent him back to Israel knowing that the Lord was with him. We, too, need to dwell in His presence in silence to feel Him with us.

In the same way, we need to feel the presence of Jesus, our risen Lord. We recall his words, that for those who gather together in his Name, he is in the midst of us.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still, small voice of calm,
O still, small voice of calm.
One of the most beautiful pieces of music I know is Dvorak's ninth ("New World") Symphony. Its haunting melody is said to be taken from the Negro spiritual, "Goin' home", although Dvorak always denied that!

This melody is particularly poignant because these African Americans had been snatched from their African homes and transported to America where they were sold as slaves. Their constant yearning was to go home, back to their beloved Africa.

They hated slavery, as all slaves do, and all they wanted was to go home. Going home was constantly in their hearts and minds, so they composed a song about it, and that's the song said to have been incorporated into Dvorak's "New World" Symphony. "Going home".

We find the same yearning for home in the hearts of the Children of Israel, as they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept, when they remembered Zion, their home.

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!", demanded their Babylonian captors. But they replied, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

These Jews, the Children of Israel, had rejected their God back in Israel. It was because they had rejected Him over many years and many generations, and had worshipped other gods — it was because of this that God allowed them to be captured by the Babylonians.

God had not been in their hearts before they were taken captive. Now they were crying as they remembered Zion, and wanted to go back there.
Note that their grief was for Zion. It was not for God. It was Zion they were remembering. They were not reaching out to God.

Their sorrow is understandable. We all love our homes. We love our countries. We can understand their grief at having been taken from Israel to become slaves in Babylon. Just as the African slaves felt.

But the Children of Israel were focussing their thoughts on the wrong thing. They were grieving for Zion. Their homeland. But if they had really had God as the centre of their lives, they would have realised that He was with them in Babylon.

They had rejected Him when they were in Israel. He was not part of their lives there. Now, here in Babylon, He was still not a part of their lives.

It was not God they reached out to as they sat beneath the willows of Babylon. It was Zion. Zion couldn’t do anything for them, but God could. They should have realised that God was with them wherever they were. Their spiritual home was not Zion, but with their God. They had not realised where their real and spiritual home was. It was with God. They should have realised that.

Of course, our natural homes mean a great deal to us. That’s why the Children of Israel and the African slaves were so sad. They missed their homes deeply. It is quite natural to feel that way. We all love our homes. Home is integral to our life. We find security and comfort in our homes. I know when I’ve been overseas, I miss Australia dreadfully. I love Australia, as we all love our own countries.

But our homes in this life are merely temporary. Our mortal life is temporary. We live in our homes temporarily. We live in Australia, or America, or Britain, or Africa temporarily. Our real home is with our Heavenly Father and with His Son.

If we can come to grips with this fact, then it doesn’t matter where we live in this life. In a spiritual sense, our natural homes in this life are not vital, for they are not our real and permanent home.

Of course, we love to live within reach of our children and grandchildren. They are an integral part of our life. This is natural. To love our homes is natural. But we need to keep things in perspective.
There are quite a number of people in scripture who accepted that their real and permanent home was with God. For example, Ruth, Joseph, David, Daniel — each of these realised and accepted that their real and permanent home was with God. And so did Abraham. I’d like to think a little about Abraham today.

Abram and Sarai, as we know, left their natural home of Ur. God told them:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)

Let’s think about that. They left everything behind. Their city. Their country. Their relatives. Their friends. Their family home. The familiar streets and buildings of Ur. They left all of this behind. They left their home.

This must have been a tremendous personal wrench for Abram and Sarai. But even at that point, Abram realised that this unknown land he was to go to was a land of God’s choosing, and so he went.

How would we respond if an angel appeared to us and told us to leave our home and go to live in Manchuria, in northern China. A completely unfamiliar country for most of us. We would leave behind everyone we knew and loved. We would leave behind all the familiarity and security we depend on in the country we call home.

It was even worse for Abram. We know a little about Manchuria, between China and Russia. Abram knew nothing about the land he was going to. He didn’t even know which country it was. God simply told him to “go to a land that I will show you.”

So they went.

In due course, when they arrived in the land, which we know was Canaan, Abram found that there was no-one who worshipped God there. Later, he met Melchizedec, but in the beginning, he found that he was the only one who worshipped God in Canaan. He was alone in spiritual isolation, with only Sarai, his nephew Lot and his servants.

Did Abram sit down and pine for Ur? I’m sure he and Sarai missed it dreadfully, but Abram’s spiritual strength and faith made him realise that Ur was not his spiritual home.
Here, he was in a land of people who didn’t worship God. But it was God’s land. God was with him, and so Abram and Sarai knew they were in their spiritual home. They were with God in this strange land.

Have you noticed that wherever Abram went in the land, he built an altar? When he first arrived at Shechem, he built an altar. Then he moved south, to a mountain east of Bethel, and built another altar. Later, he moved to Hebron. Again, he built an altar.

Why did Abram build so many altars? Because his mind and heart were centred on his God. The various altars he built helped him feel close to God. He didn’t sit and pine for Ur, his natural home. He looked to God — that’s where his real home was — and built altars to worship him.

Did the Children of Israel do that? No. They sat down and wept for Zion. Unlike their forefather, Abram, they didn’t realise that their real home was with God. They didn’t realise that God was with them in Babylon if they would accept Him. They did not recognise that. They sat down and pined for Zion.

There is a real lesson for us in this. It’s not just that we must realise that our natural homes are not our permanent homes. That’s a big part of the lesson, but there is something else as well.

We must also get our thinking right about our spiritual and permanent home. Our spiritual and permanent home is not about bricks and mortar at all. The Children of Israel pined for Zion, with its beloved memories of buildings, and natural homes, and the hills around Jerusalem and all that Jerusalem meant to them. They pined for the physical reality of their home in Zion. Which is very understandable from a human, mortal point of view.

But our spiritual world is not about the streets and hills of Jerusalem. Of course, Jerusalem and the surrounding country will be wonderful, but is that all we understand about our permanent spiritual home?

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that Jerusalem won’t be an important part of the Kingdom. Of course it will. It will be where Jesus has his throne. The focus of the world will be on Jerusalem, the city of the great King. It will be our focus, too, for wherever Jesus is, there will be our focus.
But if we just think about the glory and majesty of Jerusalem, we are missing the point of where our home will be in the Kingdom. It won’t be in Jerusalem. It won’t be in any city or town. Jesus told the woman of Samaria:

“... believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain [in Samaria] nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... The hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21–24)

If we think of Jerusalem as being our home in the Kingdom, we are making the same mistake as the Children of Israel made in Babylon. They looked to Zion.

They wept for Zion. They did not look to their Heavenly Father. They didn’t realise that their real home was with Him.

Let’s not think that just because the throne of Jesus will be in Jerusalem that that’s the only place he will be. Like his Father, he will be everywhere, through the Spirit. He is everywhere now, through the Spirit, just as God is everywhere now, and not just in heaven.

Our spiritual home is where God is. We find in Hebrews:

“For he [Abraham] looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:10)

That city, I suggest, is not a city of bricks and mortar. Yes, Jerusalem will be a central part of the Kingdom of God, and, yes, it will be a real city — a physical city, a city of bricks and mortar. But this is not the city Abraham looked forward to:

“... they desire a better country [a better home], that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” (Hebrews 11:16)

This city is a heavenly one, we are told. It is a heavenly city because that’s where God is. It’s not saying it will be in heaven. God is everywhere, and wherever He is, is heavenly. Wherever He is, is where our real and permanent home is.

That applies to today as well as the future. Wherever we live, Beechworth (as I do), or Timbuctoo, or California, or Western Samoa, or Scotland, or Manchuria, God is there. We have access to Him in those places just as
much as we have access to Him in the places where we currently live. Our home is where our Heavenly Father is.

God is everywhere. His creation is part of Himself. We know that He and our Lord Jesus dwell within our hearts. Romans 8:9–11 tells us that the Spirit of God dwells within us, and that the same Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, dwells in us. Paul stresses that in Romans.

And he also stresses it in 2 Corinthians 1:22, and 5:5, and Ephesians 1:13–14, and 2 Corinthians 6:16–17. They all tell us that God, through His Spirit, lives within us.

This is the heavenly city spoken of in Hebrews 11. It is a spiritual city, and not a physical one. You see, the temple in Jerusalem will not be for the immortal saints. It will be for the mortal population of the earth who come to worship in Jerusalem each year. The saints won’t need a physical city to call home. Their home is with God. Wherever the saints are located in the Kingdom, they will be at home, for God, and the Lord Jesus their King, will be with them.

All of this raises the importance of feeling the presence of God in our daily lives. It’s important to take time, each day if possible, to focus on the presence of God and our Lord Jesus with us.

They are with us every minute of every day. We need to focus on this fact every day. “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world”, said Jesus.

Paul wrote about God’s presence with us.

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.” (Romans 8:11)

Of all the people in scripture who realised that their spiritual and real home was where God is, our Lord Jesus is the greatest example.

As a mortal man, he would feel an attachment to Nazareth. That’s where he was brought up from boyhood. That’s where his mother and Joseph lived and his where brothers and sisters grew up with him. They had played together in the streets, and wandered together with their friends on the hills surrounding Nazareth. It was where Jesus had worked with Joseph, his step-father, in his workshop and where he learned his trade of carpentry, or it could have been stonemasonry.
But our Lord knew that Nazareth was not his spiritual and permanent home. He looked beyond the temporary to the permanent — beyond the physical to the spiritual. He knew his home was with his Father.

Jesus dreaded death on the cross. But he looked beyond the cross to what lay beyond it. Paul reminds us that because of the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross.

It was the joy of knowing that, beyond his suffering, beyond his rejection, beyond the verbal and physical abuse he was suffering, there was the joy of knowing his Father was with him, and that he would shortly leave this mortal body behind and go to be with his Father in heaven.

His position of being a mortal man was temporary. His permanent and spiritual home lay ahead, and nothing, nothing, could change that.

If only the Children of Israel had realised the same thing as they sat and wept under the willows of Babylon. Instead of looking backwards to Zion and pining for it — the place where they had sinned and rejected God — they should have looked onwards and upwards and around them, knowing that God was in their midst if they would accept Him there.

But they didn’t. Their spiritual insight was flawed. They didn’t look to their permanent and spiritual home with their Father.

We have around us, an invisible bubble, as it were, of God’s love protecting us. Outside the bubble are the atrocities and Godlessness of the world, witnessed increasingly in recent years, but also over the centuries behind us. But inside the bubble, we are at home with God.

Wherever we are in the world and whatever our circumstances, it will always be our home. For our Father is there.

And where He is, that’s where we belong. With Him, and with our risen Lord, we are at home.