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eadings: Acts chapters 9, 13-14, 16-18, 27-28, 2 Corinthians chapter 11.

We first hear of Paul when he was named Saul, and he witnessed the stoning of Stephen: "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death" (Acts 8v1).

The next we hear of him is the account of his extraordinary conversion: "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."" (Acts 9v1-6).

Suddenly the man who had wanted to wipe the Christians out was arguing powerfully in the defense of the Christian gospel. As a consequence he had to escape and he went to Jerusalem where he was met at first with suspicion, but Barnabas defended him. He then ministered in Jerusalem until attempts on his life meant he was sent to Tarsus (Acts 9v19b-31).

The Acts of the Apostles II, the Apostle to the Gentiles

"This man is My chosen instrument to carry My Name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My Name" (Acts 9v15,16)

When Barnabas saw how the church in Antioch had grown, he found Paul in Tarsus and Barnabas and Paul taught the church in Antioch. We are told that "The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch" (Acts 11v26).

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul out as missionaries (Acts 13v1-3).

Paul's first missionary journey, from 44 – 46 AD was with Barnabas and John Mark, although John Mark left them part way through.

Paul's second missionary journey, from 49 – 52 AD was with Silas.

Paul's third missionary journey, from 53 – 58 AD, was also his last. Luke was with him on this journey, as Luke uses the word "We" for this journey unlike the others.

Even though Paul was the missionary to the gentiles, he also had a great love for his own people, and longed for them to be saved. In Romans 9 – 11 he gives teaching on the doctrine of election, and on Israel's place in God's redemptive plan now that the Messiah had come: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the

full number of the Gentiles has come in ... As far as the gospel is concerned they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and His call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you." (Romans 11v25-31. We may perhaps see the fulfillment of this in the fact that now that the Gentiles have been nearly fully evangelised, many of them have taken the gospel to the Jews.

Paul's strategy was always to start preaching in the local synagogue wherever he went, so that the Jews had the opportunity to respond to the gospel. Once he had been thrown out of the synagogue then he taught the Gentiles wherever he could. Wherever Paul went he faced persecution, mainly from the Jews, but also wherever he went there were many Gentiles who believed the gospel and were saved: "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13v48).

Paul suffered enormously for

the sake of the gospel, but his greatest agonies came from seeing his beloved churches straying into sin and falling prey to false apostles. It was in addressing the accusations of some of these false apostles that he leaves us with an understanding of some of what he went through: "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:23b-29).

The churches Paul sought to pastor from a distance often rebelled against the truth of the gospel, just as the Israelites had rebelled against the Law and the

Prophets, and just as churches have been doing ever since. We can hear the agony of soul he was going through when he asked the Galatian church: "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16).

During his third journey Paul stayed in Caesarea, where the people pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem as it had been prophesied that he would be bound in chains by the Jews of Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles. Paul's response was, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the Name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13).

Arriving in Jerusalem Paul visited James (Acts 21:18) and soon afterwards went to the temple with four Jewish converts (Acts 21:23-26). Jews from Asia who hated Paul, believing he had brought a Gentile into the Temple area, caused a riot (Acts 21:27-30). Roman troops heard of the tumult and raced to the scene, saving Paul from certain death (Acts 21:31-32).

From there Paul was taken first to Jerusalem and then, finally, on to Rome. In both Jerusalem and Rome he was tried many times, and bore witness to Christ before many courts (Acts 22-28). The last we hear of Paul is in Rome where we are told: "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.

Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 28:30-31). Christian tradition has it that Paul was beheaded by the Romans around the middle of 68 AD.

During his missionary journeys Paul carried the gospel from Jerusalem to Europe. He traveled altogether about 6,750 miles in days when travel was always dangerous, and usually on foot or by ship. He planted and encouraged countless churches, and wrote a large part of the New Testament as he taught the churches by letter and responded to situations that arose. The best summaries of his life are given in his own words:

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Philippians 3:7-8).

"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).