

*The  
Unexplainable  
Church*

DEEPER DISCOVERIES

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### Overview

My prayer, should you choose to complete this optional section of the study, is that you will feel like an eyewitness to the events in Acts as they are happening. You will hear what the audience heard in real time. You will sense the awe and wonder as the early believers experienced these encounters within the cultural context of their time. You will be able to picture the cities in which they lived in your mind's eye. You will feel the intensity of the confrontation between the apostles and the leaders of the day, inspired by their boldness and faith. You will wrestle personally with the transforming faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ that led to the global expansion of His mission in less than a quarter of a century! Mostly I pray, you will be transformed into a mighty force while digging through the treasure trove of the Scriptures and sitting at the feet of your King.

### Antioch Syria

This thriving city could be coined as Paul's "home church" or "sending church". After a dozen or so years in obscurity after his conversion on the road to Damascus, Barnabas finds Paul and brings him into this thriving city which housed a burgeoning church. Paul's time in Antioch Syria provided important formative years for his ministry to the Gentiles. This church was the first to be comprised of both Jewish and Gentile believers, learning to worship together in unity. The location provided enough proximity to Jerusalem to facilitate communication, but was geographically far enough away that the church at Antioch could establish their own governing authority, namely inclusion of the Gentiles.

The city of Antioch Syria was the third largest city in the Roman Empire during Paul's ministry. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger. Originally established as a city for Macedonian Army Veterans, its location served as a hub for the Roman army with easy dispatch of troops to the empire's eastern borders. With a large population of Greeks, Romans, Jews, and easterners, the city held a cosmopolitan flare.

Housing several Roman legions of troops, the city also sat upon a common trade route during the Roman Empire, which resulted in great wealth to the city. Herod the Great built the longest colonnaded street in this city, indicating a grand commercial center here. Serving as the capital of the Syrian portion of the empire, many important Roman officials would visit.

*The Roman satirist Juvenal cites the city as being licentious, with many women "for hire".*

Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus built a Parthenon here, along with a hippodrome which housed Olympic Games. A large gymnasium was also included within the city. The gods Zeus, Apollos and Daphne were worshiped, along with the Imperial Cult and the goddess of Rome. Worship of Daphne and Apollos included many licentious rituals. The Gentiles who converted to Christianity would have been familiar with many of them, if not regular practitioners.

It was within this city that members of the church of Antioch first became coined Christians. It is uncertain how the name developed and if it were coined by the church members themselves or given to them by surrounding members of the city. Anti-Semitism ran rampant in Antioch, after revolts a few years earlier when Emperor Gaius (*Caligula*) attempted to erect a statue of Zeus, made in the likeness of himself, within the temple of Jerusalem.

Since Antioch served as the capital of the province of Syria, which included the Jews' beloved city, riots in Antioch occurred in vehement opposition. It is possible that the Antioch church sought to disassociate themselves with the Antioch Jews due to the strong anti-Semitism within the city at this time.

During this time period, the Jews grew increasingly nationalistic, while the Christians understood Messiah's arrival in Jesus did not necessitate current political restoration of Israel. Emperor Gaius sought to Hellenize or Romanize the Jews. When they refused, mobs of anti-Semitism erupted and many Jews were killed and their synagogues burned. While the early Christians were not nationalistic, their mono-theistic stance of Jesus as the one, true king of the world, still stood in stark contrast to Roman pantheism and the Imperial Cult. Furthermore, Christianity only served as an allowed religion because it was viewed as a sect of Judaism. So while Christian Gentiles may have espoused feelings of Anti-Semitism, they also acknowledged the freedom to practice Christianity due to its affiliation with the Jews. It doesn't take too much imagination to see how complex and complicated were the Jewish and Gentile Christians' relationships.

Visitors of Antioch Syria today will see nothing of the city during Paul's time. The city sits in modern day Turkey and is called Antakya. A church from the early 500's sits at the bottom of Mt. Silpius and is named after St. Peter, who they claim to be their

apostolic founder. For this reason, after Peter's disappearance in Acts 12, some believe he came to Antioch Syria, other scholars however, insist he went to Rome. The original gateway for Gentile inclusion into the unexplainable church has now become an area overtaken by Islam.

## **Galatia** **PISIDIAN ANTIOCH, ICONIUM, LYSTRA,** **AND DERBE**

When Paul decided to take the gospel message to this part of the world, John Mark turned around and went home. Pisidian Antioch stood three thousand six hundred miles above sea level and had a long, cold winter. Intriguingly, this area probably was the first area Paul would preach to an audience who had never before heard of Jesus. While a Jewish population resided there, the remote location of this area may have prevented much travel to and from Jerusalem proper.

*The high altitude of this city served as a visual vantage point for Roman armies to view the east.*

Subsequently, retired Roman soldiers were offered citizenship here under Caesar Augustus, with the expectation that in their loyalty to Rome, any threat from the east would be communicated appropriately. Hence the city held a temple in honor of the emperor who provided the city's residents Roman legal status.

This area was also famous in the ancient world for its health spas, and Paul may have ascended the high mountains for health reasons. He mentions in his letter to the Galatians that it was due to an illness that he first came to preach the gospel to them (*Galatians 4:13*).

The exact circumstances which created Paul's arrival into this region remain speculated, but what we do know is that his ministry in this area was quite fruitful.

From Pisidian Antioch he came to Iconium, where many accepted his message. However, after considerable time, he was stoned and left for dead. Paul later reminds the people of Galatia in his letter that he "*bears on his body the marks of Jesus*" (*Galatians 6:17*) implying that this stoning caused visible scarring on his body to which they were witnesses. From Iconium, Paul traveled to Lystra and Derbe, resulting in more converts, two of whom were Eunice and Lois. This mother and grandmother effectively disciplined young Timothy, who would later join Paul on his travels when Paul returned on his second missionary journey.

While many converts came from this first missionary journey, trouble also brewed. Unlike Paul's conciliatory greetings in his other letters, Paul's tone with the Galatians reflects deep anguish and disappointment with them. The question must be posed as to who these Judaizers were who came and disputed the gospel Paul had preached. Their arrival came quickly after Paul's return to Antioch and

prior to his appearance at the Jerusalem council. Who could have known he had even gone there?

Some suggest the one who divulged Paul's travel plans and missionary exploits into Galatia may have been none other than John Mark. When he left Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem, surely his arrival would have demanded an explanation! At which point, he explained that a three thousand plus foot climb into mountainous peaks was more than he could bear. The Jews then decided to set the record straight for their Jewish brothers in Galatia: Paul's gospel was wrong! This doesn't mean that John Mark maliciously reported this nor that he disagreed with Paul's gospel, it does however provide a possible link to understand how the Jews in Jerusalem became privy to Paul's whereabouts.

It also explains Paul's adamant insistence in his letter that his gospel had indeed been accepted by James and John, as well as his confrontation with Peter. The gospel of Gentile grace would repeatedly come into conflict with the Jewish Law. This would forever be a point of dispute among Paul and his Jewish brothers, and an argument he would encounter for the rest of his days as a missionary and apostle for the Lord Jesus. The intensity of Paul's letter to the Galatians sheds further light on the strained situation within the Jerusalem council (*Acts 15*). Paul's new missionary endeavors necessitated a formal church decision regarding Gentile

inclusion sooner than later. The Judaizers had gone all the way to Galatia as well as to Antioch Syria.

## **Macedonia**

At this point in Paul's missionary ventures two significant things have happened: fruitful, sustained ministry to the Gentiles and the Jerusalem Council in AD 50. In other words, Paul has returned a second time now to visit the churches he planted on his first missionary journey with Barnabas and seen with his own eyes that they are standing strong in their faith. Their reception of the gospel message was not a momentary emotional reaction or a flash in the pan that evaporated upon Paul's departure. The lives of the men and women in Galatia had forever been changed by the good news of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, the Jerusalem council had convened and Paul held within his hands documents certifying his gospel message from none other than James, Jesus' half-brother and head of the Jerusalem church and Peter himself. Paul's gospel of grace had been undeniably accepted by the Jewish Christians and eyewitness apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ.

With a spring in his step and a stamp of approval from Jerusalem, Paul was ready to widen his evangelistic efforts into new territory. He revisited the regions of Syria, Cilicia, and Galatia, where he included Timothy in his entourage. Ready to take on the world in the spread of the gospel, Paul hit several road blocks. The Holy Spirit prevented them from going west into

Asia. Then they tried to head north into Bithynia, but again they were stopped by Jesus Himself. I imagine this was a head scratcher for Paul, who was certain he was to take the gospel into uncharted territory, where they had yet to hear of Jesus (*Romans 15:20*). Finally, in Troas, Paul receives a vision from a man in Macedonia, begging them to come over and help them (*Acts 16:9*). So immediately the next morning, they began their journey there. It appears Luke begins to accompany them at this point. One begins to surmise that their travel plans were constantly directed by prayer, with little knowledge where God might direct them from one day to the next.

Having the benefit of hindsight, this is a pivotal moment in the history of the church. Macedonia is eastern Europe and if you know anything about history, between the Italians, Dutch, Spanish and British, the men of Europe sailed to every corner of the world. And the unexplainable church, founded upon the gospel of Jesus Christ, went with them. While Paul had his sights set on Rome, which was considered to him to be the “*ends of the earth*”, this trip into Macedonia changed the course of history forever and was the initial step in delivering the gospel globally. So while Paul sensed doors closing all around him, the door opening to Macedonia truly crossed a bridge to the world.

This venture into Macedonia also resulted in cultural change for Paul and his companions. The Greeks viewed the

Macedonians as backward and Barbaric. Being a Jew educated in the Hebrew as well as the Hellenistic tradition, Macedonian practice of polygamy and familial marriage would have been doubly immoral to a man like Paul. Also, the further west they traveled the more Romanized the culture became. While Paul was fluent in Greek and educated in Hellenistic literature, rhetoric and tradition, once he stepped into Roman colonies, things changed slightly. Many retired members of the Roman army spoke Latin, especially those of the former Imperial Regiment. The Imperial Cult trumped Greek philosophy. And loyalty to Rome was fierce.

We see many “God-fearers” respond to Paul’s message. These are Gentiles who have already embraced mono-theism and Judaism, without total adherence to the Mosaic Law. The further west Paul travels, new forms of opposition arise among those Gentiles who are totally unfamiliar with Judaic theology. These Roman westerners were superstitious and anyone’s refusal to worship the Roman gods invoked divine wrath and invited disaster upon the empire. We also see a rise in Anti-Semitism as those who were loyal to Rome resented Jewish nationalism. Natural disasters were often blamed on Jews because of their refusal to acknowledge the protection of the Roman patron gods of the various cities.

As we will see in Paul’s travels and missionary endeavors in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, there were some

cultural shifts Paul needed to make in his own heart in order to effectively preach the gospel in these new lands.

## Philippi & Thessalonica

Philippi was a Roman colony and the leading city in the district of Macedonia. Paul's strategy appears to take him to large urbanized areas to preach the gospel. Not only does this allow he and his companions to travel along Roman roads, which would be safer, it also relies upon the necessity of the surrounding villagers to enter into the cities to purchase commodities and be exposed to the gospel before returning home.

After the Battle of Philippi in 42BC, this colony was founded by army veterans. Often after service, soldiers were either given a sizable pay or land upon which they could settle and live. These veterans would also be granted Roman citizenship.

Philippi considered itself a mini-Rome and due to its location on the Aegean sea, as well as being situated on the Via Egnatia, a prominent Roman road, Philippi remained in close communication with Rome. Its lack of a synagogue, though so sizable a town, reflects just how "Roman" Philippi was.

It appears from Luke's use of pronouns, that after Paul and Silas were released from prison in Philippi, they left, but Luke remained. He changes from "we" to "they" and continues to use such wording in his account of what happened in Thessalonica. Some scholars attribute Philippi as Luke's hometown, which may

account for why he would be chosen to stay behind and shepherd the young church there. Paul would not return for another four or five years.

Their next stop was the largest city in Macedonia, Thessalonica, which was about ninety miles further west. A Greek city, Paul would be more culturally familiar with its residents. As was "his custom", he first went to the Jewish synagogue to preach. In this city, Jews, God-fearing Gentiles and pagan Gentiles all accept the message. We know this is so because in Paul's letter to them, he refers to the Thessalonians as those who "*turned to God away from idols*", which would not be strictly Jews and God-fearers (*1 Thessalonians 1:9*).

This city was a "free city" meaning the emperor had granted them the ability to rule themselves in exchange for their pledged allegiance to Rome. This explains why the rulers of the city are called "politarchs" rather than a governor or chief clerk. During this time, the emperor Claudius had issued edicts across the empire warning of rising Jewish nationalism. He had also expelled all Jewish residents from the city of Rome. For the Jews to cause rioting within their city was a problem and so they dealt shrewdly with it. They took "*security money*" from Jason. In other words, if Paul and company left town, Jason was free to go, but if he returned, Jason would be thrown back into prison. Hence, Paul needed to leave quickly and could not return without Jason possibly facing death, due to a charge of insurrection against Rome.

Between the circumstances Paul faced in bringing the gospel to each of these towns, the intense travel conditions to arrive there and his own words in his letters to the people he left behind, we get a sense of Paul's heart for those to whom he ministered. He shares of his intense longing to know how they are doing (*1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, 3:1-3, 6-10, Philippians 2:19,28*). He speaks of how he did not just share the message of salvation with them, but his very life as well (*1 Thessalonians 2:8,11-12*). Paul's intention was not that these churches would only remember the message he preached, but how he lived his life as well (*Philippians 4:9*). What a great reminder for us today! Our very life is the gospel on display. You and I, going about our daily lives, are the unexplainable church.

### **Athens & Corinth**

When Paul arrived in Athens he undoubtedly suffered great emotional angst. First of all, he was alone. Never before in any of his travels had he been without at least one companion. Secondly, he had suffered torture and imprisonment in Philippi, a mob trying to kill him in Thessalonica, and that same mob hunting him down in Berea, causing him to flee. While Luke had been left to shepherd the church in Philippi, no one was left in Thessalonica and Paul worried for them. While it would have been tempting to set up shop, keep quiet, and mind his own business until his friends arrived, Paul's heart was grieved at the presence of so many idols. How ironic that the center of

Hellenistic thought and the melting pot of some of the greatest modern minds of antiquity should remain completely ignorant of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? When Paul could stand it no longer, he had to speak! As Paul said himself, "*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*"

While the glory days of Athens had long passed, the city held a certain mystique. The Parthenon, the temple of the goddess Athena, remained a majestic site and an architectural marvel. An imposing site, high upon the acropolis, Paul had to feel like the last man standing in a losing battle. How could little Paul, as his name implies about his stature, attempt to preach to a city so large? The philosophers whom Paul encounters treat him with contempt and do not understand his message at all. In fact, they sneer at his mention of resurrection.

In Hellenistic thought, the idea of a bodily resurrection seemed absurd. The soul was thought to be eternal by some, but the flesh was viewed as corrupt. Death allowed the soul to be released from the corruption of the body. We see this Hellenistic thinking invade the early church, as Paul addresses it in his letter to the Grecian churches (*1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 15*). Bodily resurrection was a doctrinal issue Paul needed to explain over and over again due to the influence of Greek culture on this subject. This behooves us to consider how our current cultural beliefs influence our doctrinal stances. For just as Paul referred to Israel's history to serve as warnings for the early churches (*1 Corinthians 10:1-14*),

so early church history ought to serve as warnings and guidance for us today, should it not?

After a seeming unfruitful experience in Athens, Paul arrives in Corinth. At this point in time, Paul still had no word as to how the fledgling Thessalonian church was faring. After being ridiculed in Athens after his Macedonian persecution, it is no wonder Paul describes his first arrival in Corinth as “*coming in fear and trembling*”. Still alone, Paul encounters a Jewish brother Aquila along with his wife Priscilla. This couple have heard the gospel and believed and Paul labors alongside of them making tents or working with leather (*the same Greek word is used for both professions*). The mention of Priscilla’s name before her husband’s suggests that she either came from a prominent family or was of a higher social class than Aquila. Some scholars suggest she may have come from the prominent Roman family Prisca. During this time, the Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome due to a Jewish uprising in regard to “Chrestus”, which many believe was a dispute among the Jews and the Jewish Christians, with Chrestus meaning Christ. God graciously offered this companionship to Paul while he continued to wait for his friends.

The city of Corinth, notorious for its debauchery and sexual immorality, birthed the term “to Corinthianize” or “Corinthianizer”, meaning a person of extremely loose morals. The city hosted the temple of Aphrodite, famous for its cult prostitution. The temple prostitutes

cut their hair very short, which explains Paul’s admonition to the women of the church to grow their hair long and wear head coverings. (*Jewish women always worshipped with their head covered and it would have served as a distraction for Jewish men to have Greek women worship with their heads uncovered.*) The Corinthians seemed to have particular difficulty conceding one to another for the sake of unity, rather they boasted of their differences.

A wealthy city with two ports: one on the Italian and the other on the Aegean side, literal boatloads of visitors and goods poured into the city. Many ships would dock at one end of Corinth, unload, be drug across a three-mile trail on carts, and reload on the other side to avoid sailing around the Peloponnese Islands, which were notoriously difficult to navigate, hyped by legends in Greek mythology. Thus Corinth became a hotspot for commerce and an extremely wealthy city.

Paul’s interest in the city no doubt stemmed both from its size as well as it serving as a point of passing for many travelers. Those who stopped in Corinth, received the good news of the gospel, could then take it with them to wherever they would be traveling. A Roman colony, he would be somewhat protected under his Roman citizenship. The city also served as the capital of the province of Achaia, making it a seat of Roman government. How ironic that Paul sought cities in which he would be protected by pagan rulers from abuse by his own countrymen!

In AD 51, the Emperor Claudius appointed Gallio proconsul of Achaia. A brother of the philosopher Seneca, Gallio was known as being a wise, amicable and sensible ruler. Quite possibly Gallio was residing in Rome in AD 49, when Claudius expelled the Jews out of the city for their “Chrestus” uprising, as he would have previously been serving in the Roman Senate. Piecing together this history helps shed light on Gallio’s responses and actions to the Jews’ accusations against Paul. He would not be very sympathetic to Jewish disputes amongst themselves.

Every two years, the city of Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympics. Since Paul resided in Corinth for at least eighteen months, he may have been in the city during one of the events. Regardless, Paul’s frequent illustrations about running the race, strict bodily training and the like would be easily understood to the citizens of Corinth, who prided themselves on hosting these games. Again, drawing upon Paul’s wisdom, cultural awareness of that which unbelievers view as important, can help us draw parallels to teach biblical principles and how the truth and the wisdom of the gospel should be woven into people’s everyday lives.

The interesting thing about the planting of the church at Corinth is the absence of the mention of any women. In every other church planted by Paul, a point is made to mention the women who responded to the gospel message. Other than

Phoebe (*Romans 16:1*) who is messenger sent by Paul to Rome from Cenchrae, women in the church at Corinth are never commended. In fact, Paul addresses their error and impropriety in worship. Also, it is believed that Paul wrote a total of five letters to the church at Corinth, correcting doctrinal error and inappropriate practices, and visited them three times. If we were to read all of Paul’s letters side by side, the church at Corinth undoubtedly was the “problem child” of all of Paul’s spiritual children. The piety and graciousness of women within the church, or lack thereof, should not ever be underestimated. In many ways, the attitude of women, which clearly make up a minimum of half of a church body, influences the life and health of the church. Will we be helpful and commendable, or divisive and demanding?

### **Ephesus & Colossae**

Ephesus held a special place in Paul’s heart. He stayed in this city longer than any others, discipling this body of believers. Although Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia, Ephesus was the largest city. It was the greatest trading center west of the Taurus mountains and housed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. Although Paul taught for such a lengthy time here, we are told of only a couple of incidents that occurred during his time here. If you added up the daily hours which Paul lectured in the Hall of Tyrranus during his three year stay here it would be close to 3500 hours! That’s a lot of sermons!

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he explains that he has not returned to them but remained in Ephesus because "*a door for effective ministry has opened for me*" (1 *Corinthians 16:9*). Most scholars agree that Epaphras heard the gospel from Paul in Ephesus and took it back to Colossae and planted a church there (*Colossians 1:7*). It is also assumed by several scholars that it was during Paul's time in Ephesus that the six additional churches in Revelation 2-3 were started, presumably by followers who first heard the gospel from Paul in Ephesus. Indeed, this could be described as a door for effective ministry and Paul notably maintained this pattern of seeking to plant himself in a large city where the gospel could spread concentrically outward from this urban hub.

Paul also mentions in a later letter to the Corinthians that he suffered intense hardships in Ephesus. So intense, he struggled with even wanting to live (2 *Corinthians 1:8-9*) and we are not told in Acts what this entailed. He mentions a "*plot of the Jews*" against him that took place in Ephesus when he met with the elders at Miletus (*Acts 20:19*) but again we are not given any clear details. He also mentions in his letter to the Romans that he had been imprisoned (*Romans 16:4, 7*) and also mentions to the Corinthians that he had been imprisoned frequent times (2 *Corinthians 11:23*), but Acts only tells us of three occurrences, none of which include Ephesus. What we can gather from all of these bits of information is that many other events occurred in Ephesus during Paul's three year stay there and the ones which were recorded undoubtedly hold special

significance for our instruction today. We therefore should be diligent in gleaning all that we can from these events.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians stands in stark contrast to all of his other letters to the churches. It is the only one which does not address a problem in either doctrine or practice within the church body. This body of believers stood strong in their faith, firm in their doctrine and sensible in their praxis. Considering the licentious background of Ephesus along with their frequent use of black magic and occult practices, the health of this church offers an inspiring model for us today. Paul's intense devotion to prayer and teaching sparked revival in this dark city and lasting change in the lives of the believers whom he taught. What encouragement for us today to diligently pursue instructional and discipleship opportunities in order to stand strong in our faith in a morally lapsing culture! These faithful believers committed themselves daily to instruction in the Scriptures and fellowship with one another. The church of Ephesus also exhorts us to further expand the effects of the gospel into the cities surrounding us.

We have already mentioned how Colossae was one such city for the church at Ephesus. Unlike the Ephesian church, however, Paul needed to write to this church over doctrinal error. They fell into false thinking that they needed Christ plus something else: either works, special knowledge or a heightened religious experience. Paul's letter emphasizes that believers need Christ and only Christ in

order to be saved. Even though Paul never officially established this church nor taught there, we know of his concern for this body of believers, because he writes of his plan to visit them after his release from his imprisonment in Rome (*Philemon 22*).

### **Ephesus Later in History**

Nearly forty years after Paul left the church of Ephesus, these believers still stood strong. In AD 97, the apostle John writes a commendation given by Jesus to these faithful saints. The one thing that broke Jesus' heart regarding this church was how they had fallen from their first love. They had become so concerned with doctrine they had forgotten the One whom they fought so hard to defend. Due to the darkness of the city of Ephesus, it should not surprise us that they needed to contend so diligently for the truth. From Paul's letters to the other churches it is obvious that doctrinal error was a common problem for these early churches. Ephesus seems to be the only church which rose above this.

Church history suggests the Apostle John became bishop of the church at Ephesus. He may have fled there when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70AD. Early church fathers Irenaeus and Polycarp affirm this. It may be during John's leadership in Ephesus that his gospel of John was constructed. Timothy also spent a great deal of time in this church, although he also was with Paul in Rome during his imprisonment there.

The city of Ephesus faced some unique challenges. Already a temple guardian for Artemis, in later years, Ephesus also became a temple guardian for the Imperial Cult. Emperor Domitian, known for his wide persecution of Christians, builds a temple in Ephesus dedicated to the worship of the emperor. He also set up a provincial assembly whose mission was to cultivate and enforce emperor worship within the province. Under Emperor Domitian, the apostle John was boiled in oil and exiled to Patmos, where Revelation was written. He also heralded himself as "Lord" and "God" and insisted he be addressed as such. It is not difficult to imagine how this would have been received by both the Jews and the Christians.

At this point in history, the Jews had revolted in Egypt, Jerusalem, and finally after a long siege, were defeated at Masada. Rome had been battling Jewish uprisings for the past twenty years and with Christians affiliated so closely with the Jewish religion, it is no wonder they faced persecution as well. One of Rome's biggest battles with the Jews came from their refusal to participate in the Imperial Cult and pay taxes for its upkeep. They paid taxes toward the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. With a weakening empire, the Jews cost the Romans money and military focus. At this time Christians were still considered a sect of Judaism.

Ephesus also claims to be the place of martyrdom for Timothy in 96AD when he opposed the festival to Dionysus. The residents of Ephesus clubbed him

severely and he died two days later. For another two hundred years the church of Ephesus prevailed under various bouts of persecution until 391AD when the Edict of Theodosius made Christianity the state religion. This would last for another thousand years until the Ottoman Turks take over and with them came the spread of Islam. Jesus' warning that if the Ephesians did not repent and turn back to their first love, namely Himself, He would come and remove their light from them (*Revelation 2:4-5*). The light of Ephesus burned brightly for nearly 1500 years. For how long will our light shine?

## Jerusalem

During the time of the early church, Jerusalem grew increasingly volatile. During Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, we learn of a revolt that had occurred there under an Egyptian rebel three years prior in AD54. James, Jesus' half-brother, and head of the Christian church in Jerusalem was martyred in AD62. Paul was released from his first imprisonment in Rome about this same time. In AD67, Emperor Nero sends Vespasian to Jerusalem to put down another revolt. In AD70, the city is completely destroyed under Titus. A group of Jews fled to Masada outside of Jerusalem and remained under siege until their fortress was finally penetrated in AD73 only to find the remaining Jews there had committed suicide, rather than be captured by the Romans.

Paul desired to return to Jerusalem to personally deliver a collection of funds from the churches he had planted

throughout Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. There had been a famine in Judea and no doubt the Christians there suffered greatly. With persecution from their Jewish brethren, hatred from Rome, the Gentile Christians were their only hope of aid during these turbulent times. On top of providing economic relief to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Paul undoubtedly fostered the underlying desire for this tangible gift to facilitate greater reconciliation between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. He may have even dare hoped it might open the door for more of his Jewish brethren to listen to his message after the Gentiles expressed such goodwill to the Jerusalem church. We sense some of Paul's angst over how the gift would be received by the Jewish Christians (*Romans 15:31*).

Jesus Himself had prophesied regarding these difficult times ahead and wept over the city prior to His crucifixion (*Luke 21:5-24*). We also know He will return to His beloved city on the Mount of Olives when He comes for His Messianic Reign. Currently within the walls of Jerusalem sits the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic Mosque. The Jews believe that Messiah will not come until their temple is rebuilt. The nation of Israel has already created architectural plans for this reconstruction and are excavating day and night in hopes of finding the Ark of the Covenant and other items from their beloved temple. The original temple foundations are as deep as 300 feet underground. Visitors can tour portions of the excavation process and view their plans for the new temple

at the Temple Museum in Jerusalem. The exact location of the original Holy of Holies of the temple continues to be debated, with some suggesting that it is not where the Dome of the Rock currently sits. Until Jesus returns, Jerusalem will continue to be the place to watch!

## **Pharisees & Sadducees**

These two sects of Judaism were constantly at odds with one another. The Sadducees focused on their Jewish ethnicity and used religion as a source for power. Comprised of the wealthy, aristocratic class, along with some priests, they catered to their Roman rulers in order to ensure continuation of their power and their funds- namely the temple tax and exemption from Roman tax toward the maintenance of Roman temples. They did not believe in the spiritual realm of angels nor demons, neither did they espouse the resurrection of the dead. The miracles of old served as inspirational stories and while they believed in Jehovah as the Creator God, they did not necessarily purport His miraculous power interfering with everyday life. They perceived God much less involved in the affairs of men than did the Pharisees. They preferred to secure their power pragmatically.

This put them at odds with the Pharisees, who interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures literally and believed that God would not send Messiah until His people obeyed Him in the strictest sense of the law. The Sadducees' laxity frustrated the Pharisees. The Sadducees seemed to elevate Torah above all other Scriptures

and did not support the oral traditions of the Pharisees, which later became equal in importance to the written law. While both were zealous for the maintenance of the temple, their motivation behind it was vastly different. The Pharisees believed Messiah would rule from the temple and it must be holy and maintained for his arrival. The temple served as a tangible power base and source of revenue for the Sadducees. They also believed the temple would be the position of rule for Messiah, but its maintenance served more immediate and pragmatic needs on top of future nationalistic ones.

Another vast difference between the Pharisees and Sadducees was the doctrine of resurrection. The Pharisees were the only sect of Judaism who believed in a physical resurrection from the dead. This was madness to the Greeks and the Sadducees may have been influenced through the Hellenization of the east or may have done away with the belief over time out of an effort to cater to their Roman rulers. When Jesus claimed that He would rise from the dead, we can surmise what these two groups of tribunal members thought of this claim!

After Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus in AD70, the center of religious life for the Jews moved north into Galilee. Still recognized by the Roman Empire as a legitimate religion, the Pharisees reinstated the Sanhedrin around 100AD, although it was no longer located within Jerusalem. Under the Emperor Hadrian, the Jews were forbidden to enter into their

beloved city. In the northern part of Israel, Pharisees continued to set up religious schools for the perseverance of their law.

There is no further mention of the Sadducees after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70. No documentation exists specifically identifying who comprised this group and what they collectively believed. From what little we can gather, they held power granted them by the Romans, but the majority of the Jewish people sided with Pharisaical thinking. Most of what we know comes from statements of those who opposed them, namely the Pharisees. Interestingly, we see the same Sadducee attitude in many of our Christian churches today: laxity in Scriptural interpretation, pragmatism over a pursuit of holiness, and greater concern over present day affairs than eternal consequences.

## Rome

The center of the world. Or so it was thought during the time of the early church. Emanating from within this city, the vast empire's power reigned over every church Paul had planted. Paul had longed to come to this city for many years. Now he would at last arrive, albeit as a prisoner. The church in Rome had its own share of problems. Originally founded by Jews returning from Pentecost, a number of Gentiles also received the message of Christ and became followers. In AD49, the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Presumably, Gentile Christians may have had the opportunity to remain in Rome, since they would have probably

targeted the Jews ethnically more than religiously. This left only Gentile members in the church in Rome. Then in AD54, the Emperor Nero allowed all Jews to return to the city. When the Jewish Christians returned, issues arose trying to blend these two groups of worshippers together. This history gives us further understanding into Paul's great emphasis toward unity within the church in his letter to them, which was most likely written around AD57.

Many scholars view Paul's letter to the Romans as his "*theological masterpiece*". Unlike his other letters which seem to predominantly address specific circumstances, his letter to the Romans lays out a theological treatise on the sinfulness of all men and God's plan of redemption for the all mankind. While Paul's thought in writing this letter served as an attempt to universalize the sinfulness of man and the necessity of the cross for atonement, whether one was a Jew or a Gentile, this beautiful letter comprises a modern day example for us of the full picture of the gospel message: God's plan to reconcile the world to Himself through the shed blood of His Son Jesus Christ. As Paul lays out the mercy of God in fulfilling this plan, he cannot help but stop and burst into praise at the kindness and goodness of the God of Israel toward all men (*Romans 11:33-36*). From there he admonishes all members of the church to graciously defer toward one another in order to spur one another on in their faith journey and to never do anything that might make another stumble or fall away.

In Paul's thinking, how on earth could a Christian demand their right to walk in freedom after all that God had done for them if it should somehow strip away freedom from a brother or sister? Any Christian who behaved in such a manner mocked the grace of God!

Paul's long list of greetings highlights Paul's familiarity with the members of this church. There were many within it whom he personally knew. How beautiful that when he finally arrived, about ten years later, many from the church traveled a great distance along the Appian Way to greet him. During the two years in Rome, he was able to rent his own apartment and welcome visitors. Most scholars agree that this would have been quite costly. Also during this time, he wrote several of his epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. He cites Timothy as the co-author of all of them except the letter to Ephesus. So one of his visitors must have been Timothy.

Certainly, the Christians in the city of Rome and throughout the empire feared Paul's fate. The Emperor Nero began his reign with much promise, but as the years went on, he became increasingly mentally unstable. Whatever ruling he ordered for Paul, could subsequently be ordered for them. Up until this time, the early Christians obtained protection as a governmentally approved religion by being associated with Judaism. However, Jewish nationalism was rising and along with it Anti-Semitism throughout the empire. However, if Christianity were not considered a sect of

Judaism, it would not be a state approved religion and anyone who practiced it could be killed. The tension soared. If Paul was indicted by Nero and killed, every follower of Jesus immediately became open to the same fate. No wonder Paul was so greatly encouraged when members of the Roman church came out to greet him. Association with Paul could prove deadly.

These circumstances also shed light upon Paul's later comment to Timothy that during his first trial under Nero "no one came to support me" (*2 Timothy 2:16*). Indeed, not! For as soon as the verdict was issued, the crowd immediately could have turned upon all of his supporters. However, it appears from his letters that he was acquitted and from there his travels become less certain. Some believe he revisited previous churches, others that he went to Spain, and still others that he never actually left Rome. Luke's abrupt ending to the story leaves us all trying to piece together the size and scope of Paul's whereabouts much like a paleontologist trying to reconfigure a dinosaur using only five bones.

What we do discover in Paul's deeply intimate letters to his "*true son*" Timothy is that Paul's last years were fraught with heartache. He felt deserted and alone and desperately sought Timothy's return to Rome to visit him. He also desired face to face time with John Mark. In the midst of this final trial of loneliness, imprisonment and ever pressing concern for the church, still his dear friend Luke was faithfully by his side (*2 Timothy 4:11*). Tradition holds

that Paul was beheaded just outside the city of Rome around AD64 or possibly AD67. Peter was crucified upside down about the same time. Most scholars hold their martyrdom in conjunction with the great fire of Rome and Nero's blame upon Christians for this incident. One must wonder what the maniacal Nero thought of Christians after his first encounter with Paul. Shortly after this Nero committed suicide at the news that the Roman Senate voted to strip him of his emperorship. His last and greatest evil included stripping the world of two of the greatest followers of God who ever lived.

After Nero's suicide in AD68, a power struggle ensued in Rome. After a year Vespasian was crowned emperor. The first Jewish revolt occurred in AD66, when the Roman procurator of Judea took money from the temple treasury. Vespasian had originally been sent by Nero in order to take control of this rebellion. Once he was crowned emperor, Vespasian returned to Rome and his son Titus took over the military campaign. Jerusalem was burnt to the ground and the temple was destroyed in AD70. The Arch of Titus was built in Rome by Vespasian to celebrate his son's victory. From this point on, the Jerusalem Church no longer stood as the head over all of the churches. Leadership of the Unexplainable Church appears to move to Ephesus.

Vespasian ruled until AD79 and then was succeeded by his son, Titus who reigned only two years. In AD81, Titus' younger brother Domitian, only nineteen at the time, assumed the throne. His reign was marked by cruel terror and it was during this time the apostle John was exiled to Patmos. He greatly expanded the Imperial Cult and insisted he be address as "*Lord and God*". Domitian reigned until 96AD when he was assassinated. Despite this time of intense persecution, the unexplainable church pressed on, followed by a time of peace under Emperor's Nerva and Trajan, only to be persecuted again under Hadrian.

Back and forth Rome swayed in their response to the Jesus followers, with countless numbers martyred for their faith, but the gospel of Jesus Christ still being proclaimed. As Tertullian aptly stated, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed." Paul spread the seed of the unexplainable church in his tireless travels preaching the gospel, only to produce an eternal harvest of souls through peace, prosperity, and persecution- for until the return of Christ, the life on the unexplainable church lives on! You, dear one, now stand in the center of your own world, be it in peace, prosperity or persecution, will you scatter the seed of the gospel in your day and age? Will you play your part in the unexplainable church?

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