

CHAPTER 3

The Church of the Messiah leaves Judea

The rise to prominence of Tarsus had really begun with Alexander the Great's conquest in 334 B.C. From that time the whole of the Cilician province was subject to the Greek kings of Syria of the Seleucid dynasty, who, in turn, were influenced by the oriental customs of the Persians and others to the east. The Seleucids set up "*satraps*", or governors, over provinces, and then brought in foreigners to act as administrators, and they ran the cities of the provinces like Greek city-states.

The Jewish community in Tarsus had been first brought there from Syria and Persia by the Seleucids. Then, as the colonial provinces became Hellenist, the Jews were recognized as a distinctive "*Tribe*", bound together by permitted customs and religious rites. No person could be a citizen unless he or she was a member of a particular Tribe, and the bond of the Tribe was considered sacred by the authorities. The Tribe in each city was linked with similar Tribes in other cities of the provinces where they lived. To the Jews, the centre of their Tribe was the synagogue; but the synagogue reflected the particular interest or emphasis of the local group, such as whether it was Traditionalist or Hellenist, or some other characteristic. The Jewish citizens in any city gravitated towards the synagogue where they felt most religiously comfortable.

After his arrival in Tarsus Saul was immediately made aware of his family's radically changed attitude towards him. First his

parents, then his Traditionalist Jewish relatives—including his wife and her family, who had already declared him “dead” because of his heretical Jesus beliefs—then his many friends, ostracized him, and finally he was forbidden to teach his “false doctrine” in the family synagogue. But there were other synagogues where he was welcome, and there they found his new Messiah teachings very exciting.

He had anticipated being cut off by his Traditionalist family and friends and, having been cut off from all financial support by his family, he did as he had learned to do in the deserts of Arabia—he lived simply off his earnings as a tent-maker, making carpets, awnings or sails. It meant that, instead of living in the comfortable home of his wealthy parents or in his smaller but pleasant home with his wife, in the cool upper suburbs of Tarsus, he now had to live in the slums of the poorer parts of the city. This area was notoriously unhealthy because of its proximity to the marshlands and poor sanitation facilities, and a chronic form of malaria was rife among the labouring population there.

It was a radical change for Saul. Until then he had never had to worry about money, for either he had sufficient from family sources; or, as a respected rabbi, everything was provided for him in the way of food, drink and shelter. Now, without resources of any kind, discredited and rejected as a Traditionalist rabbi, he had to depend on what he could earn from his acquired craft. It also meant that his time to visit libraries, talk and debate with friends, read and teach was restricted to early mornings and late nights.

Saul was not totally isolated from his own people by the rejection of Traditional Judaism family and friends, nor could he be without the permission of the authorities; as a Jew with official recognition of Roman citizenship of Tarsus it was difficult, if not impossible, to excommunicate him. His family could, as they had, disown him, but neither they nor the antagonistic Jewish community could disenfranchise him.

The separation from his family and friends grieved Saul deeply. He was especially sorry for his wife, who had only had a few years of real marriage before he had left for the journey to Jerusalem that

had so radically altered his life. Despite the totality of his commitment to the Damascus vision Paul would not voluntarily have separated from his wife - some of the other apostles were married, and had children, Peter included - but the rigidity of the Traditional Jewish position practiced by their mutual families demanded their rejection of him as a son and husband because of the alleged heresy of his views. He knew they would be even more offended when they knew of his outreach to the Gentiles, which was anathema to the Traditionalist Jew.

Saul accepted the changed circumstances philosophically. If he was to be sent to all nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ, if the message he carried was to transform the world, then he would have to learn what it was like to be poor, despised, rejected and mocked. This was what had happened to Jesus, the Suffering Servant-Messiah; and, Jesus had said to his disciples, it would happen to all of them "*for the servant is not greater than his Lord.*" So Saul addressed himself to the monumental challenge of how a perfect people and perfect Church were to be formed from the dregs of society, those, such as slaves, whom the Roman authorities regarded contemptuously as "beasts."

The principal influence in Tarsus was a corrupt paganism. The leading deity had been derived from the earlier Assyrian and Seleucid period of the city's history, known as *Baal-Tarz*, "the Lord of Tarsus." He was usually represented on coins and buildings holding in his hands corn and grapes, and a purification censer; on his sceptre was the sacred bird, the eagle. The Greeks identified him as *Zeus*. To them he was the benevolent supreme deity; a lesser deity was *Heracles*, the hero serving a demanding master who slew monsters, drained marshes and provided fertile land; *Apollo* was the seer of the divine will; *Hermes* was the messenger who brought the divine purpose to men and women.

At the annual festival in Tarsus the image of the god *Heracles* was carried on a palanquin through the streets, followed by the population, and then placed on a funeral pyre constructed for the occasion. On top of the pyre was placed the eagle; and, while the city's half-million population watched and worshipped, the pyre

was lit and consumed. This annual burning of the god represented his translation to heaven.

In the year that Saul was in Tarsus since his return from Jerusalem Caesar Caligula had become even more mad and decadent, with an increasing hatred of the Jews because of their refusal to worship him as a god. Having committed incest with his sister, Drusilla, he commanded that she also be deified when she died. He appeared in public in the dress and with the insignia of various gods, and even established a temple for his own divinity. When the Jewish delegation from Alexandria led by Philo, to protest against the imperial decree of divinity of the Emperor, reached Rome, they found that Caligula had already given a command to his newly appointed governor of Syria, Petronius, for his image to be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem. In a series of humiliating meetings for the delegation Caligula informed them contemptuously that *"men who think me no god are more unfortunate than criminal."* Saul could imagine the carnage that would follow as fanatical Jews would die rather than submit to this religious blasphemy.

The prophetic words of Jesus just before his death were already looking like being fulfilled:

"When you see the abomination of desolation set up where he ought not to be then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away, and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak . . . For in these days there will be such tribulation as has not been seen from the beginning of creation which God created until now, and never will be."

Caligula had already ordered the king of Mauretania, Ptolemy, to kill himself so that he could annex his kingdom. He dethroned the king of Armenia, making enemies of Persia, so that he could divide the kingdoms of Thrace and Pontus and Commagene between his friends. He was now reported to be making preparations to personally invade Germany and the isles of Britain as proof of his invincible godhood.

Recent Roman emperors and Senate had been struggling to forge the lands they conquered into a single imperial entity, instead of the

earlier provincial units. Orators were being encouraged and employed to use the decree in their public speeches and debates, and poets were rewarded for eulogizing it. Both Virgil and Horace had written about it before disillusionment set in and they began to look elsewhere for a better life and hope. The cry of the whole world was for a deliverer, someone who would bring peace and stability, instead of the endless violence, bloodshed, oppression and corruption.

In A.D.40 Paul began to move beyond the confines of the city of Tarsus into the neighbouring towns and villages of Cilicia to preach his Jesus gospel. Sometimes he went in response to an invitation from friends or people interested in what he had to say regarding Jesus as Messiah, and his teachings about the kingdom of God; and on other occasions he simply visited and spoke in the synagogues and houses of acquaintances.

At first these preaching visits had been empirical in character, as he sought to familiarize himself with a technique that was partly rabbinic by experience and partly originating from his own theories. But it quickly became apparent that there was a fundamental weakness in the approach, because he was never really confident that he was in the place where God wanted him to be, or saying the things God wanted him to say. So, after noting that Jesus in his public ministry of itinerant preaching was always guided by his Father—*“the Son can do nothing of himself, except what he sees the Father doing,”* he had declared - Saul prayed first about the location, then what his message in that place should be. He found a dramatic improvement immediately.

In many ways it was like returning to school again, but with the Holy Spirit as guide; the learning of complicated first principles in simplified forms, the building of living brick by living brick of a majestic spiritual structure that spanned heaven as well as earth. He was learning to know intimately every brick in that building in Tarsus, then the province of Cilicia, before being launched on the world.

For about three years Saul travelled tirelessly across the mountains and valleys and plains of Cilicia. He visited farmers in

remote valleys, and herdsmen in mountain grazing grounds. He went to the lawless and licentious towns and villages of the silver and iron mining communities. He stayed at the great horse-farms where the famous Cilician horses were bred and sold to wealthy buyers from all over the world. He talked with slaves and peasants, officials and aristocrats, native Cilicians and foreign travellers, soldiers and merchants, scholars and mockers.

Between times he had been beaten and tortured by suspicious officials, captured and robbed by avaricious bandits, exposed and frozen on snowy mountains, and burned in scorching deserts, and had been imprisoned by both religious and secular authorities. But everywhere he went he left behind individuals or small groups of believers in Jesus as the Messiah of God. And the reputation of "*the former scholar of Tarsus*", and "*former persecutor of the Jews*," was now expanded to include "*founder of Messianic, or Christian, churches in Cilicia*," as travellers carried stories of his memorable experiences.

The years had effected many changes in him. The persecutions and trials he had been subjected to had transformed his previous noted stillness into a remarkable serenity. His hair had thinned to early baldness, but this had only enhanced the broad forehead and piercing eyes in the browned, now gaunt and even more hawk-like face. His ease of manner in any company had increased with his many experiences among the poor and exploited, and there was a natural compassion and understanding about his attitude now that made him warmer and more companionable than the aloof scholar of the past.

At just over forty years of age his passion was undimmed; if anything, it had intensified as his knowledge of God had deepened. With an intellect honed by his many experiences to a dagger-like sharpness, and unique knowledge of history and religion and culture above his contemporaries, he was outstandingly distinctive wherever he travelled and talked. He was also conspicuous for a distressing disfigurement, which became evident under tension or emotional pressure. It had happened after one of the most memorable experiences of his life.

He had returned to Tarsus to rest and recover from some of the

beatings he had received, and from the effects of the debilitating fever he had picked up from the marshlands and which had left him very weak. Although his family had rejected him, he still had a large number of friends in Tarsus, and they had looked after him until he recovered. He spent his convalescence in the celebrated libraries of Tarsus, and in resting and reflecting in the warmth of the sun.

One day, while he was meditating on the Scriptures with the mental disciplines acquired from the Essenes in the desert, he was caught up in an ecstatic experience unlike any that he had previously experienced. In marshalling all his faculties to concentrate on the Scriptures that he was considering with focused attention, he had found himself being lifted through several levels of consciousness into what seemed a vision of Paradise itself.

It was an enraptured experience, a state in which he felt consciously in the presence of God—like the Damascus Road experience, but without the presence of Jesus—with an illumination of intellect and consciousness such as he had never known, an experience of communion with God which was indescribable. All the spiritual contradictions and paradoxes that troubled his mind in a “normal” state were stripped away, and the divine mysteries unfolded to reveal the answers he had earlier sought and considered impossible of solution. He seemed to be carried to levels of understanding of all things in heaven and earth in a condition of immeasurable serenity and inevitability—an ultimate *summum bonum*.

The Tabernacle in the wilderness, the Temple of Solomon, the city of Zion and Jerusalem, the prophetic Temple of Ezekiel, the meaning of Daniel’s visions, the words of Jesus, the events of the future Millennium and beyond, passed before his wondering gaze, and the voice of Jesus unfolded their cosmic significance in the purposes of God. He was more at home in heaven in this spiritual state than he was on earth in his corporeal state. The essential unity of things in heaven with visible things on earth became clear to him, and their inter-relationship one with the other. This is what it must have been like for Adam, he thought, in the beginning of Creation when he walked and talked with God, before he sinned and alienated himself for ever.

The experience passed, but it left Saul with a physical disfigurement and spiritual burden. Following on his return to "normal" he found himself with acute spasms of the face, head and neck. The contractions were constant and increasingly severe, pulling his mouth open or clamping it shut, forcing his tongue into the roof of his mouth; and the neck muscle on the left side would go into spasm and bend his neck forward. Eyelids, forehead and throat were also affected. As a consequence he had difficulty in breathing through his nose, his speech slurred and stuttered, and spasms of coughing almost choked him.

He tried every physician and medical theory he found in Tarsus, seeking a cure for the desperate condition, enquiring of travellers if they had come across the illness and possible treatment in their countries, but without success. He set himself to pray to God for spiritual healing, spending hours with fasting for long periods, without success. On the final occasion he prayed and pled with God for healing he was told by God that the condition had been given to him deliberately because he might be tempted to seek the ecstatic experience too often as an end in itself; and this, in addition to his other gifts and visions, would provide him with a dangerous hubris which could leave him vulnerable to Satan.

Both the condition, which would certainly be used by Satan, and the grace of God, which he would require constantly to overcome the personal suffering and public humiliations, would work God's purposes in him to increase his spiritual growth and maturity into Messiah-likeness. Through this condition he would learn the divine paradox that God's power is made perfect in weakness. For only an omnipotent God could use such a flawed vessel to effect such a monumental task of establishing His kingdom in a rebellious world.

Fortunately, it did not adversely affect Paul's intellectual processes, his senses or sensibilities, and it seemed to disappear during sleep. But when he preached, or was involved in the intensities of discussion or debate, it increased with the pressures, and often forced him to stop. It was when the weakness and despair overwhelmed him that he remembered the words of God, and cast himself upon Him for the strength to continue.

Five years after leaving Jerusalem for Tarsus he was experiencing one of these depression attacks when he had an unexpected visit from his friend from Jerusalem, Barnabas of Cyprus. The news that Barnabas brought produced mixed feelings in Paul. On the one hand, said Barnabas, there was tremendous encouragement that the Messianic gospel of Jesus was spreading in Jerusalem and surrounding areas, and many Hellenistic Jews who had been forced to flee from the Judean persecutions had carried it into Syria and other places throughout the Dispersion—even in places where there was no synagogue. But, on the other hand, the scattering, and lack of an overarching unified concept of the kingdom, was producing confusion and tensions and disunity. They needed Saul's help.

Reports had been brought to Jerusalem from Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch in Syria, of Saul's work in Cilicia over the past years, and Barnabas had been sent to Tarsus to persuade Saul to come to the church at Antioch to teach them the things he had learned. The Antioch church had now grown to a considerable size, and was a meeting point for many of the Jewish dispersed groups of Messiah believers in the Mediterranean coastal countries.

Saul listened to the exciting and challenging descriptions outlined by Barnabas, the persuasive and genuine appeal to his own greater experience, and he knew that he had been prepared by God for this time. Yet he was also aware of his physical weakness, the embarrassment of his disfigurement at the critical moments of greatest passion in preaching, the personal humiliation when he was mocked publicly by unfeeling hecklers.

But from the depths of his weakness Saul reached out for the strength from God to grasp the opportunity he craved more than anything else in the world - to turn men and women everywhere to a knowledge of Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed of God, and to transform them into perfectible creatures fit for communion and an eternal inheritance with God. Saul could see that he was moving into a critical stage where his own unfolding personal destiny in launching the spiritual Church of the Messiah on a conflicting rising curve met with the descending political destiny of the Roman empire.

The situation in Judea had been in a state of mounting crisis for years, but was now approaching catastrophe as various factions of Jews and Romans prepared themselves for a battle to the death. The new Roman governor of Syria, Petronius, seeing the inevitable disaster ahead if he had to install Caesar Caligula's image in the Temple, had sent an urgent message to Caesar to postpone the imperial edict. Herod Agrippa, Caligula's sycophantic friend, had also left Jerusalem precipitately for Rome, to urge Caligula not to proceed. In response, a furious Caligula had commanded Petronius to commit suicide for his disobedience, and for Herod Agrippa to observe the imperial edict or face the same fate as Petronius.

Then the megalomaniac Caligula's short reign of tyranny and oppression ended as it began – with murder. An imperial Praetorian Guard named Cassius Chaeria decided to avenge the insults he had received at the hands of Caligula and, with the help of two Prefects of the Guard he assassinated Caligula in a bloody plot.

In the confusion and uproar of the public assassination the bumbling, but wily, uncle of Caligula, Claudius, hid behind a curtain for fear of his own life.

Herod Agrippa was present at the incident, and, ever the opportunist, he had been the first to pick up the bloody body of Caesar Caligula and cradle it in his arms, while the Praetorian Guards imposed order ruthlessly. He saw the frightened Claudius slip away from behind the curtain in the confusion. When he himself could get away, he cautiously visited the home of Claudius and offered himself as a mediator between him and the Senate to make Claudius the new Caesar, and Claudius agreed. Herod Agrippa then went quickly to the Senate, where all was rumour, confusion and panic, and addressed them:

“O Senators, may you be able to compass what you have a mind to; yet will I immediately tell you my thoughts, because they tend to your preservation. Take notice, then, that the army which will fight for Claudius has been long exercised in warlike affairs; but our army will be no better than a rude multitude of raw men, and those such as have been unexpectedly made free from slavery, and ungovernable; we must then fight against those that are skilful in war, with men who know not so much as

how to draw swords. So my opinion is we should send some persons to Claudius, to persuade him to lay down the government, and I am ready to be one of your ambassadors."

Herod Agrippa quickly returned to Claudius and informed him of the Senate situation: that the senators had ordered the immediate death of Caligula's wife and daughter to stop all family claims to the succession, the Praetorian Guards were refusing to take orders from the Senate, and Claudius had to take prompt action if he wished the imperial purple for himself. Claudius agreed, and he sent a messenger to the Senate that if he were approved as Caesar he would not rule as an imperial autocrat, but in cooperation with the Senate. Both the Senate and the Praetorian Guards agreed that innocuous Claudius—nicknamed "the Fool"—should be the new Caesar.

The first act of Claudius as Caesar was to put to death the Praetorian Guard who had assassinated Caligula; his second act was to confirm Herod Agrippa as King of the Jews, with expanded territories in Judea, or Roman Palestine. And in the ceremonies honouring his accession as Caesar, Claudius publicly demonstrated his approval of Herod—"a person very dear to me"—by giving him assurances regarding the rights of the Jews:

". . . the same rights and privileges should be preserved to the Jews which are in all the Roman empire, which I have granted to those of Alexandria. I very willingly comply therewith; and this grant I make not only for the sake of the petitioners, but as judging those Jews for whom I have been petitioned, worthy of such a favour, on account of their fidelity and friendship to the Romans. It will therefore be fit to permit the Jews, who are in all the world under us, to keep their ancient customs without being hindered to do so. And I do charge them also to use this kindness to them with moderation, and not to show a contempt of the superstitious observations of other nations, but to keep their own laws only. And I will that this decree of mine be engraved on tables by the magistrates of cities and colonies, and municipal places, both those within Italy and those without it, both kings and governors, by the means of the ambassadors, and to have them exposed to the public for full thirty days, in such a place, that they be plainly read from the ground . . ."

Herod Agrippa had then returned to Jerusalem loaded down with imperial honours. The Senate had raised him to Praetorian rank four years previously, but now Claudius made him a Consul. He was given a gold chain by Claudius that was equal in weight to that of the iron chain with which Tiberius, the former Caesar, had bound him in prison. When he arrived in Jerusalem Herod Agrippa hung this golden chain in the Temple treasury where the Jewish worshippers placed their donations—the same place where Jesus had drawn his disciples' attention to the widow woman giving her mite, her "*all*"—as a testimonial to his "*reformed character*".

Herod removed the ruling high priest, Theophilus, and had him replaced by his nephew, Boethus Caentheras, son of his older brother, whom Claudius had appointed king of Chalcis. Now that he had the power he had coveted for so long, Agrippa could afford to make conciliatory gestures in pursuit of public support for his rule in Judea.

Even when one of the extremist Jewish leaders publicly demanded that Agrippa be excluded from the Temple Courts because he was a renegade Idumean and not a true Jew, Agrippa sent for him and dealt leniently with him, so that the man begged his pardon for causing offence.

The authority of Agrippa was further strengthened by a final decree issued by Claudius in November A.D.41, through the Alexandrian delegation led by Philo, in reply to their protest regarding Caligula's edict to place his image for worship in all temples:

"... I adjure you now once more that the citizens of Alexandria for their part conduct themselves in a considerate and neighbourly manner towards the Jews who have lived in the same city for a long time, and offer them no outrage in the practice of their customary divine worship but allow them to follow their customs as they did in the time of the deified Augustus—customs which I too have confirmed after listening to both parties. The Jews, on the other hand, I bid for their part not to agitate for more than they have previously enjoyed, and never again to send two embassies, as though they lived in two separate cities—the like of which has never happened before... They must not bring in or invite Jews who sail in from Syria or

Egypt; this is the sort of thing which will compel me to have my suspicions redoubled. Otherwise I will proceed against them with the utmost severity for fomenting a general plague which infests the whole world . . .”

Claudius Caesar also decreed that the invasion of Britain, which had been proposed then aborted by Caligula, should take place in A.D.43. Julius Caesar had invaded Britain some ninety years before, and since then there had been a series of battles as various British tributary kings fought against the colonizing Roman legions. A few British kings, who had been captured in the fighting, were now living in Rome.

What confirmed Claudius in his decision to invade Britain was the widespread influence of the national religion of Druidism; intensely nationalistic and anti-Roman. So Claudius Caesar mustered 40,000 Roman legionaries in three divisions to sail against a threatening new British king, Caraticus. While Claudius was organizing this venture against Britain in Gaul, his wife Messalina was conducting a life of unbridled licentiousness and cruelty in Rome. At the same time, a Roman Senator, Scribanianus, from Dalmatia, decided to use the unsettled situation to lead a revolt against Claudius, but was defeated by the Praetorian Guard.

It was in this climate of rumour, plot, politics and war that Saul and Barnabas travelled from Tarsus to Antioch in Syria. Syrian Antioch was known as “*the queen of the east*”, the third metropolis of the Roman world, after Rome and Alexandria, the official residence of the imperial Legate of Syria. It had been founded in B.C.300 by the Seleucus Nicator and named for his father, Antiochus. Later members of the Seleucid dynasty had enlarged and beautified Antioch-on-the-Orontes—from the river of that name—as had the Roman legates and Jewish Herodian kings, and made it the Syrian capital.

It was five years since Saul had gone to Tarsus from Jerusalem, most of the time spent travelling constantly in Cilicia and North Syria. During these years, Barnabas told Saul, the church in Antioch had not only grown considerably, it had become the centre of a vital spiritual movement throughout the region.

When Saul and Barnabas arrived there in AD 43 the buildings were of marble, the quadruple-colonnaded streets were almost five miles long, with wide centre thoroughfares for horses and chariots; and the shaded sidewalks for the pedestrians were ornamented with trees, fountains and statues. It had been united with Saul's province of Cilicia, and it had a population of over five hundred thousand people.

It was a wealthy city, enriched by a prosperous merchant community trading worldwide by sea and land, but with very few claims to any reputation in science and art. The oriental mix of inhabitants had produced a combination of sophisticated cultures and a conglomeration of religious and Mesopotamian cults of refined luxury and sensuality which was said to surpass even that of Rome. The Grove of Daphne, the ten-square-mile pleasure garden in the centre of the city, was notorious for its orgiastic revels. Priestesses and slave-girls devoted to the goddess of the grove occupied the many temples set on the terraced slopes, and were available for prostitution. The religion practiced in Antioch was a composite Greek-Anatolian mixture of pagan idol-worship dominated by two female deities, *Cybele* and *Artemis*. This theocratic system had been forcefully changed by the Romans from authority of the gods through the priests to authority of the priests from the Roman Procurator, who became official chief priest of the cult representing Caesar. This resulted in an orgiastic worship of the female deities and the male emperor.

Broad bridges spanned the river, and there was an excellent system of aqueducts supplying the city with water for the public as well as private baths, for garden fountains, and for cooling the houses of the wealthy. The court of the Legate of Syria, Vibius Marsus, paraded all the pageantry and pomp of Roman authority, with a multitude of nobles, courtiers, and officials, with their attendant retinues.

There were basilicas, theatres, amphitheatres, gymnasia, to entertain the demanding public; and the racing stables of Antioch were famous throughout the empire. Even at night the streets were like daylight, with flaming torches on street standards. It was a city

of jugglers, acrobats, musicians, sorcerers, pantomimes, and priestly impostors of many kinds. There were constant performances of every imaginable kind to meet every sensuous demand. The great *Corso*, or central thoroughfare through the heart of the city, provided a steady stream of movement and colour and noise. Life in Antioch had been described as "*an intoxication, a dream of Sandanapalus, in which all pleasures, all debaucheries, unfolded themselves.*"

There was also a large colony of Jews. From the time of Antiochus Epiphanes—the king the Jews had declared "*the Abomination of Desolation*" because of his desecration of their Temple in Jerusalem—they had lived in Antioch. Antiochus had even given them some of the plundered Temple vessels for use in their synagogue. He also gave them equal citizenship privileges with the Greeks, and by the time of the Romans the Jewish community had their own *ethnarch*, or governor, and was supplemented by a considerable number of Greek proselytes. But the ritualized religiosity of the Jews had made little impact on the overt paganism of Antioch. The many synagogues were located side-by-side with temples and shrines to every known deity, and they were known for their sophisticated tolerance of the moral degeneration of the city.

It was into this corrupt environment that Saul and Barnabas arrived in the late summer of A.D.43. They entered by the elaborately ornamented "*Gate of the Cherubim*", and made their way to the home of Barnabas' friends in the residential quarter next to the Senate House and Forum in the Street Singom. A church of Jesus believers had been established with the return of Jewish pilgrims from the *Feasts of Passover* and *Pentecost* at the time of the baptism of the Holy Spirit when several thousands of the pilgrims had become believers on hearing Peter preach the Jesus gospel. These had multiplied so rapidly in Antioch that they had become publicly identified by the name of "*Christians*". Among them were Manaen, the foster-brother of Herod Antipas, whose sick son had been healed by Jesus; Simon Niger, the black man from Cyprus who had been coerced by the Roman soldiers into carrying the cross for the staggering Jesus; Titus, and Luke his brother, a physician, who had been a disciple of Jesus; and Barnabas from Cyprus, who had stayed

on in Antioch. Because of the rapid spread and influence of the Christian community in Antioch the church had seen its potential for expanding throughout the Mediterranean region and had sent Barnabas to Tarsus for Saul to come and teach them more of the "Church of the Messiah" and his world vision.

On the first Sabbath after their arrival they attended the synagogue, sitting, as was their custom, in the front seats reserved for rabbis. After the first Scripture lesson for the day had been read from the *Law* and the *Prophets*, and after prayers had been said and hymns sung the synagogue asked Saul and Barnabas to address the congregation. The most popular hymn in the Antioch church expressed this Messianic emphasis:

*"The Messiah Jesus, who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death -
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that 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."*

The name of "Christians" had been given to them by the Gentiles of Antioch in half-sneering sport, an expression of their contemptuous indifference. It was more often than not mistakenly spoken as *Chrestos*, a common slave name meaning "useful", and not *Christos* meaning "anointed". But those known as *Christians* accepted the designation as being an acceptable distinction, servants of a worthy Lord. They were no longer confused with the

Gentile-hating, isolationist Judaisers; they were a loving, joyous, God-serving, communal brotherhood. But Saul was careful to emphasize that the Greek *Christos* should not become a divisive Greek term from a Greek city separating them as Jesus believers from the proper and *Covenant* prophecy of the "*Messiah*." Like Jesus, they were separating themselves from Traditionalist Judaism but not from Israel's *Law of Moses*.

Day after day Saul preached in Antioch: on the open streets, like the Stoics; in the synagogue; in the homes of various believers, at different levels of society. He and Barnabas launched themselves into the campaign to establish the kingdom of God in this vice centre of the Mediterranean world. In his previous five years in Tarsus and

Cilicia Saul had been able, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to initiate a form of community gathering of Jesus believers in which they could meet, grow and expand without the rigid structures of priesthoods or buildings; and whose only rituals would be the Remembrance Feast of breaking bread and drinking wine commanded by Jesus, prayers, the approved Apostles' teaching and communal fellowship, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Men who were devoted to the study of the Scriptures, to prayer, and to the instruction of Jesus believers, would be the "*elders*" or "*overseers*" of each autonomous church in any locality by virtue of their spiritual relationship with God, and every individual in every church would be a priest with personal approach to God.

This was not just an idealistic theory, but the revelation of God, and Saul had seen it working for the previous five years in Cilicia. This experience now played a major part in establishing the church in Antioch. His lucid articulation of the spiritual principles, which were at the core of the individual and corporate practice of the church's responsibility in the community, found an excited response in the hearts and minds of the Antioch believers.

What had, until then, been a rapidly spreading, Messiah-centred, but simple fellowship of committed individuals following the basic teachings of Jesus, now, under Saul's teaching, ably assisted by the eloquent Barnabas, became a Christian community-cell of variously

gifted spiritual members, capable of counselling, teaching and endlessly replicating themselves throughout the pagan city. The thousands of Jesus believers hitherto meeting randomly in Antioch were gathered into household “cells” in each street or community, forming a corporate city-wide “*Spiritual Body*” whose head was Jesus the Messiah and whose guide was the Holy Spirit. When each church became unmanageable for whatever reason—numbers of converts, ejection from synagogues, persecution by the authorities—it was easily reconstituted in a different location again under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this way it would not be a “*Church of Saul, or Barnabas*”, but always a “*Church of the Messiah*.”

Saul presented to them the worldwide vision he had himself inherited from the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He challenged his listeners with his call to unquestioning sacrifice, unwavering faith, undaunted courage, unclouded insight, and unsullied triumph, in bringing to fruition, in their lifetime, the immemorial spiritual kingdom of God revealed by Jesus Christ. The worldwide Church of Jesus the Messiah, his Spiritual Bride composed of members of his Spiritual Body on earth, was being born again here in Antioch, the offspring of their Jewish-Messianic mother church in Jerusalem, and linked to the other churches spread throughout Judea, Cilicia and North Syria. What they were living and creating now, Paul told them, was not just a small slice of earthly history, but a vital part of God’s plan for earth and heaven and eternity.

In the winter of that year, A.D. 43, a visitor from Jerusalem, called Agabus, who had the spiritual gift of prophecy, or foretelling of events, declared the imminent threat of a great famine which would afflict the whole region, and which would seriously affect the communal interdependence of the many believers and churches in Judea. They would then be even more dependent on the help of their fellow-believers outside Judea than they had been in the past.

The political situation was also deteriorating critically. Herod Agrippa had given his sister, Drusilla, in marriage to King Azizus of Emeza, on condition that this Gentile king was circumcised. This action followed an unsuccessful attempt to marry her to the son of

Antiochus, on condition that he accepted the Jewish religion. Agrippa's expedient manipulations had brought him into disfavour with the Jewish leaders. To salvage his reputation Herod Agrippa was persuaded by the Jewish leaders to arrest the Jesus troublemakers.

Then a Jewish magician, Theudas, who had declared himself a prophet, called on a large number of his followers to go with him to the River Jordan where he would divide the waters like Moses and take them over on dry land. The new Procurator, Cuspius Fadus, sent a troop of Roman horsemen to stop them, and in the ensuing fighting large numbers of Jews were killed. Fadus captured Theudas and, after cutting off his head, he carried it into the city in full sight of the inhabitants as a warning to others. Instead, the action precipitated a further crisis in Jewish-Roman relations. Adding to the mounting tensions, as Agabus the prophet had said, there was shortage of food from famine, and this was producing panic and protests. The Zealots and the terrorist Sicarii used the shortages to stir up resentments against both Roman and Jewish authorities.

It came as a shock to the Antioch believers to hear that Peter and James, the brother of John, had been arrested by Herod Agrippa; James had been put to death right away, and Peter detained for trial. When the news was brought to Antioch by John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and younger companion of Peter, it was agreed that Saul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem to discuss with the church leaders there what must be done in the light of the crisis, and that they should take with them the collection they had made to help the starving poor of Judea. Herod Agrippa had declared a great celebration to be held in Caesarea in honour of Caesar Claudius' triumph in Britain, and this would take up the attention of most of the political and religious leaders from Jerusalem, and away from the Jesus believers for a time.

Saul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem to find that the night before Peter was to have been brought before Herod Agrippa for trial, he had been asleep, lying bound with chains to two guards, and with sentries at the door of his cell. Suddenly, an angel had appeared inside the cell and, after wakening Peter without

disturbing the sleeping guards, he handed his clothes to him and said, *"Quickly, get up."* The chains miraculously dropped from Peter's wrists and ankles.

"Put on your clothes and sandals," the angel said softly. *"Wrap your cloak around you, and follow me."* When Peter did so, the angel opened the cell door and led him past the sleeping or unconscious sentries. The same thing happened when they reached the other guards on the way out of the prison. When they came to the outer gates they too opened to let them through at the touch of the angel. Once outside the gates, the angel departed and Peter walked on alone.

Until then Peter had thought he was dreaming, but finding himself walking down the street he acknowledged *"Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."*

He made his way to the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, where many of the Jesus believers were gathered to pray for him. Peter knocked at the door of the outside courtyard, and a servant girl called Rhoda came in answer to the knock. When she heard Peter's voice, in her excitement she forgot to open the door, and ran back inside the house to tell the others that Peter was at the door.

"You are out of your mind", they said to her incredulously; but, when she insisted that it was true, they suggested that she must have heard Peter's angel. Eventually, she persuaded them to come to the outside door, where they found Peter waiting. After spending a little while with them Peter left them, for he did not want to be there when the authorities found out his mysterious disappearance from prison. When Peter's escape was reported to Herod Agrippa he was furious, and ordered an intensive search to be made for him, and that the prison guards should all be executed. But Peter had left the city to be with friends and he was not found.

Meanwhile, Herod Agrippa was involved in the celebrations for Caesar Claudius in Caesarea. On the second day, he was arrayed in full silver-threaded royal regalia and sitting on his gold and jewel-encrusted throne while making a welcoming speech to the Phoenician delegation, and paying tribute to Caesar on his British victory and August birthday. The sun reflected scintillatingly on the

royal splendour, and the crowds acclaimed him: *"This is the voice of a god, not of a man"* when he suddenly stopped speaking, staggered a few steps, and collapsed. Five days later he died. Those who remembered the clairvoyant's prophecy some years before, that he would die five days after seeing an owl, never knew or reported that if it had occurred.

Saul and Barnabas remained quietly in Jerusalem, in the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, supervising the administration of the wheat, corn and other necessities purchased by the money brought from Antioch. They did no public preaching, but quietly encouraged those they visited by giving them news of what was happening in Antioch and from Paul's ministry in Cilicia and North Syria.

When Saul and Barnabas finally left Jerusalem, in the autumn of A.D.44, they took with them John Mark. The young man had an intense interest in the words and works of Jesus from the time he was a child listening to his parents. As a youth he had listened to Jesus and the disciples, and, after the departure of Jesus, he had worked closely with Peter in keeping an account of all that had been, and was being, done. He now wanted to do the same in company with Saul and Barnabas in their work in Antioch.

The Apostles and elders in Jerusalem also gave to Saul and Barnabas a letter from them to take to Antioch and all other churches regarding their united decisions that only a few Jewish rituals which they recommended should be observed in the new Church of the Messiah:

"... We have heard that that some men who went from our group have troubled and upset you by what they said: they had not received any such instruction from us ... We send you then Judas and Silas who will tell you in person the same things we are writing. The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to put any other burden on you besides these necessary rules: eat no food that has been offered to idols; eat no blood; eat no animal that has been strangled; and keep yourselves from sexual immorality. You will do well if you take care not to do these things ..."

As a leading international *entrepôt*, Antioch drew merchants from the furthest reaches of the Roman empire, and even beyond the

empire, from India and China and Africa. As travellers from many of these distant places brought news to the Christians of Antioch of spreading groups of Christian believers in regions through which they had passed, and of their many difficulties because of their lack of good teaching, the gifted leaders of the church in Antioch were very concerned. It was this concern which had first caused them to send Barnabas to bring Saul from Cilicia to Antioch for them to benefit from his greater spiritual experience.

Saul and Barnabas were even more concerned, for their own individual reasons. Saul had his heavenly vision reaching out to the world, and Barnabas felt a personal responsibility for his home island of Cyprus. Cyprus was only about one hundred miles' sea-voyage from Seleucia, Antioch's nearest port on the Mediterranean coast to the west. The island took its name from the wealthy and productive copper mines which had contributed to Barnabas' family fortunes. Some of the other church leaders also came from Cyprus, so there was considerable prayer regarding some form of missionary outreach to the island, as well as the other places mentioned by the travelling merchants and pilgrims.

They had no illusions regarding the immensity of the task facing them. All the vices of Rome and Greece were practiced in Antioch, but the source was really in the western regions of Galatia and Phrygia. Seneca had spoken of Rome as "*a cesspool of iniquity*", and Juvenal had described Rome as "*a sewer into which had flowed the abominable dregs of every Achean and Syrian stream.*" From Rome to Antioch in every city of the empire, the prevailing practices were pantheistic superstitions, debased priestcrafts, erotic cults, bloody mystery sects, and other indescribable expiations. When an occasional concerned Senator, such as Valerius Maximus, tried to legislate against them no workman could be found to break open the doors where the orgiastic revelries took place, and the Senate attempt to suppress them failed ignominiously.

It was this world that Saul had faced in Tarsus, Cilicia and North Syria, and latterly in Antioch, and which he would confront in Galatia and Phrygia, Athens and Rome, if the Church of the Messiah was to be extended. But he faced the challenge with supreme

confidence, for he had already seen how God had worked in and through him. The Christians in the Antioch church had given themselves to prayer and fasting as they sought the mind of God for the best way to proceed.

Fasting was more practiced in Antioch than in famine-threatened Jerusalem, probably because enforced deprivation was more a fact of life in Judea than in wealthy Antioch. As a strict Pharisee, Saul had practiced fasting as a spiritual discipline, and it had been taught by Jesus to his disciples as a necessary corollary in overcoming certain satanic opposition. The Prophet Isaiah had stated God's definition of fasting:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? . . ."

So fasting, linked with prayer, was a very practicable exercise for the Antioch church, as they had demonstrated with their help for Jerusalem and Judea; a means of expressing their deep concern for the material needs of others, as well as a spiritual means of uninterrupted self-examination before God. While they fasted and prayed God spoke to them: *"Set apart for me Saul and Barnabas, for the work to which I have called them."* The leaders of the Antioch church took this to mean that Saul and Barnabas were to be released from their responsibilities in Antioch in order to devote themselves to the wider vision of founding similar churches elsewhere.

In keeping with his conviction and teaching emphasis—that to build a spiritual kingdom of God, every action, indeed every thought preceding every action, must be spiritually received from God—Saul prayed for guidance about the places to be visited next. It was not enough to have personal preferences, like Barnabas for Cyprus. God had made it clear in the past that the personal preferences of even the Patriarchs, or Samuel, or David, or Elijah, were of no primary concern to Him; that He had His own plans for the smallest matters.

It could be no less true now for the divinely-purposed worldwide

Church of Jesus the Messiah, where men and women could meet with him face to face. As Saul and Barnabas, together with the church, prayed for God's guidance, they were directed to begin their first missionary journey with Cyprus, and afterwards go into the province of Galatia. The total church membership "*laid hands*" on Paul and Barnabas as they left to go on their mission for God in a demonstration of their spiritual unity and fellowship.

Chapter 4

will be available on this site on the 1st January 2012