

# The Gospel Age Work Begins

*“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.”*

—Matthew 24:14

## **WE ARE PLEASED TO PRO-**

vide our readers in 2017 a series of articles under the general heading, “The Search for God’s People.” These articles will cover the formation

and development of the Early Church, beginning with Jesus’ earthly ministry, and as it continued through the work of the apostles. It was the efforts of those faithful brethren of the first century which began the fulfillment of Jesus’ commission given in our opening text—to give witness to the Gospel message throughout the world. Indeed, without the ministry of these early servants of the Lord, we would not have an understanding of the beautiful truths of God’s plan of salvation.

The general concept taught in Christian churches throughout the world is that God’s purpose now in having the Gospel message proclaimed is to convert the world to Christ, and to save the souls of mankind. If one hears the Word and responds, he will go to heaven. If he ignores the message, he faces eternal

torment or, at the very least, eternal separation from God. A careful study of the Bible, however, reveals that this is not so. God's objective for this age in sending forth his Word is to find "a people for his name," an expression used by the Apostle James concerning the early Christian converts.—Acts 15:14

The search for those who will be of the Christ class has progressed from the time of our Lord's First Advent until our day—a period of nearly 2,000 years. We note that as this search continues, its objective has not changed, and is no different today than it was in the days of the apostles. It is only when this special work of selecting and preparing the footstep followers of the Master has been completed that God will turn to the remainder of the people, including all those in the grave, whom he will raise, for their conversion through the Christ—head and body.

## **ISRAEL FAVORED FIRST**

As we look back at those beginning days of the search for God's people, we note first the Heavenly Father's faithfulness in keeping his word to Israel. For centuries God dealt exclusively with the nation of Israel, even as he said through the Prophet Amos, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."—Amos 3:2

As indicated by the words of the prophet, God's special favor to Israel brought penalties for unfaithfulness. Among those punishments was their captivity in Babylon. Daniel, one of those taken captive, went to God in prayer during this period of exile,

seeking the return of favor to his people. God answered that prayer through the angel, Gabriel, who revealed to Daniel how God would subsequently bless Israel with a period of favor.

In Daniel 9:24-27, Gabriel tells of the seventy weeks of favor to Israel. The key to understanding the time features of this prophecy is obtained from Daniel's contemporary, the Prophet Ezekiel, who was given this vital detail by God: "I have appointed thee each day for a year." (Ezek. 4:6) The seventy weeks, then, were not intended to be 490 days, but rather 490 years. Within the seventy weeks, however, a period of sixty-nine weeks—or 483 years—are mentioned, spanning the time when the decree would go forth to "restore and to build Jerusalem" unto "Messiah the Prince."—Dan. 9:25

True to Gabriel's prophetic announcement, after Babylon was conquered by Medo-Persia, Cyrus, the king of Persia, made a decree to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:1-4) This decree, however, was not to rebuild the city. It was not until Nehemiah asked King Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild Jerusalem, and that work was begun, that the prophecy given to Daniel began to be fulfilled. (Neh. 2:1-6) Four hundred and eighty-three years later, in AD 29, Jesus came to Jordan to be immersed by John the Baptist. Israel's Messiah had come and started his earthly ministry.

Additionally, the prophecy recorded in the ninth chapter of Daniel stated that Messiah would be "cut off, but not for himself," and that this would be "in the midst of the week." (Dan. 9:26,27) Three and one-half years after Jesus began his ministry, he was put to death in the middle of that "week" of seven years.

## **SENT ONLY TO THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL**

This last week of favor, from AD 29 to AD 36, was a very important time indeed, and was particularly mentioned in Daniel's prophecy. There was no doubt that special opportunities were given to Israel during this time. Nevertheless, during Jesus' ministry there were times when Gentiles also sought the blessings he had to offer. One such incident involved a woman of Canaan, whose daughter was vexed with a devil. As she pleaded with Jesus, "he answered her not a word." Although ignored, this woman was so persistent that the disciples besought Jesus to send her away. Jesus then told her plainly, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." However, she still would not be denied, and continued to beseech him. Jesus again said to her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." "Truth, Lord," she responded, "yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." This expression of faith touched Jesus' heart, and he healed her daughter.—Matt. 15:21-28

This woman was one of several Gentiles who received blessings from Jesus, but they were few in comparison to the great majority of natural Israel, who received the benefits of our Lord's teaching and healing liberally. This special favor to Israel was shown in other ways. The twelve apostles were all chosen from Israel, and became foundation members of the church.—Rev. 21:14

One of these, Judas Iscariot, failed in his calling and had to be replaced. The remaining eleven apostles thought to do this themselves, using a very proper and approved procedure—casting votes for

the selection. (Acts 1:15-26) However, they had overlooked the fact that it was not their task to select apostles. This appointment could only be made by the Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus. They had forgotten our Lord's words to them, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." (John 15:16) The principle here stated by our Lord applies to all selected as "people for his name." Later, Saul of Tarsus, also a Jew, was chosen by God to replace Judas.

We might expect that the work of finding members of the body of Christ would require a certain amount of organized effort, and we find that this was so. Certain individuals were motivated by the influence of the Holy Spirit to relocate to other geographic areas, so this work could gradually be extended. At first, all witness activity was centered in Jerusalem. The eleven apostles as well as other disciples continued to reside in that city, because Jesus had told them to tarry at Jerusalem until the helper, the Holy Spirit, would be sent to them.—Luke 24:49

## **PERSECUTION BEGINS**

After the Holy Spirit came, many new converts continued with the apostles in Jerusalem. However, it was not long before hostility against the disciples grew until it became very severe. This compelled them to resort to a communal arrangement for survival, since the means of earning their livelihoods was not readily available. Persecution continually made matters more and more difficult, and so they lived by pooling their resources.—Acts 2:41-47; 4:34,35

Word of this increasingly perplexing problem was communicated to other disciples living in outlying areas as well as those who came to Jerusalem from

time to time to worship. It was probably in this way that the Lord touched the heart of a Levite named Joses, who lived on the island of Cyprus. He possessed property there, but sold it and came to Jerusalem, laying the money “at the apostles’ feet.” (Acts 4:32-37) This was the Lord’s way of bringing Joses, surnamed Barnabas, to Jerusalem where he was needed and could be used.

There were many Israelites in Jerusalem who had come to Judea from other lands at various times to celebrate the Jewish feasts. Some of these remained and became disciples of our Lord. Among these were the Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews. The widows of this group began to complain that they were neglected in their share of community supplies. Word of this situation soon reached the apostles, who corrected it by having deacons appointed to oversee this service.—Acts 6:1-6

One of these deacons was Stephen, who is believed by some Bible historians to have been a Hellenist. His preaching concerning Jesus as the Messiah caused confrontations with other Greek-speaking Jews who were not believers, which eventually led to a trial and conviction, followed by a sentence of death by stoning.—Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-60

Stephen’s death had a severe impact upon the disciples in Jerusalem. Because of this evidence of increasing persecution, many chose to leave the area and settle in distant places. Some left for former homelands, and others went to regions of Palestine where they perhaps hoped there would be less hostility. We read: “At that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout

the regions of Judaea and Samaria. . . . Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.”—Acts 8:1,4

## **SAUL OF TARSUS**

There was a young man, Saul of Tarsus, who was present at the stoning of Stephen who consented to his death, and participated by guarding the cloaks of those casting stones. Afterward, Saul went about with great zeal, creating havoc in the Early Church at Jerusalem—having Christian men and women arrested and imprisoned. Not content to limit his activity to Jerusalem, Saul decided to pursue some who had escaped. He obtained letters from the high priest to bring these disciples back for trial, and set out for Damascus, in Syria.—Acts 8:3; 9:1,2

While traveling with his party, Saul was stopped, and struck blind by a brilliant light from heaven. He heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4) When Saul realized that the one confronting him was the Lord Jesus, whom he was opposing, he was greatly frightened and confused. His self-confidence and assurance was suddenly gone. He was told to go to Damascus, where he would receive further instructions from the Lord. The other members of the group led him by the hand and brought him to the home of a man named Judas. There he sat in the darkness of blindness for three days, not eating or drinking, but devoting himself to prayer.—vss. 5-11

If we were to place ourselves in Saul’s situation, we too would be turning over in our minds all our former misdeeds and misguided zeal. Then, beginning

to realize that our actions had not been according to knowledge, we would beg the Lord for forgiveness. Through this very moving experience, Saul had a complete change of heart. Additionally, his former misguided zeal would now be turned in the proper direction.

There was at that time a disciple living in Damascus named Ananias, to whom the Lord appeared in a vision, instructing him to go to Saul. The Lord said to Ananias, “Go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth, And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.” (vss. 11,12) We note that the prayers of Saul did not go unanswered. Ananias at first questioned the Lord’s instructions, saying, “Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name. But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.”—vss. 13-15

This experience occurred near the close of the last prophetic week of special favor to Israel spoken of in Daniel’s prophecy. (Dan. 9:24-27) In these words to Ananias, our Lord gave a direct indication that Gentiles would soon be invited into the body of Christ. In the end, Ananias did as he had been instructed, and went to the home of Judas where he greeted the blind man with the words, “Brother Saul.” Immediately Saul’s eyesight was restored, and he was baptized into

*(Continued on page 36)*

*(Continued from page 31)* Christ. Having been without food for three days, he ate and was strengthened, and stayed with the disciples at Damascus for several days.—Acts 9:17-19

It would appear from the subsequent verses in Acts chapter 9 that Saul immediately went out and began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus was the Christ. However, the question arises as to how he could have immediately begun to witness effectively without first learning God's plan from the Scriptures. When Luke wrote the account in Acts, he did not tell how Saul obtained this understanding. However, this information is supplied by Saul himself—later known as Paul—when he wrote letters to the churches of Galatia and Corinth.

## **PAUL LEARNS THE SCRIPTURES**

In the opening verse of the letter to the Galatians, we learn how Paul confirms his appointment as an apostle by Jesus and the Heavenly Father: "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)." (Gal. 1:1) However, this great honor never made him high-minded. He was always aware that first he had gone entirely in the wrong direction. He later wrote, "I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."—I Cor. 15:9

One might wonder why our Lord did not send Saul to Jerusalem immediately following his conversion, to be instructed by the other apostles. Perhaps one reason was because of their feelings about Saul. His persecution of the church initially caused a barrier between him and the apostles, so God taught

him the Truth in a different way. Later in Galatians the first chapter, Paul writes, “When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.”—vss. 15-17

Just prior to this, Paul told of his complete conversion from obeying and pleasing men, by his zeal for the “Jews’ religion,” to obeying and pleasing God. Paul’s experience should remind us that we can all too easily fall prey to the improper course of obeying and pleasing men, instead of striving to obey and to please God. He said, “Do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”—vss. 10-14

The special call of Paul and the direct revelations Jesus and the Heavenly Father gave to him are confirmed again in his letter to the Corinthians. There he observed that anyone who had undergone experiences such as these might tend to boast about them. “Is it necessary to boast? It is not profitable

indeed, but I will come even to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man, in Christ, who above fourteen years since—(whether with a body, I know not; or without a body, I know not; God knows;)—such a one suddenly conveyed away to the third heaven. And I know this very man, (whether with a body, or without the body, I know not; God knows;) That he was suddenly conveyed away into paradise, and heard indescribable things spoken, which it is not possible for a man to relate. Respecting such a person I will boast; but respecting myself I will not boast, unless in my weaknesses. For if I should desire to boast, I shall not be unwise; for I will speak the truth; but I forbear, lest anyone should impute to me more than what he sees me to be, or what he hears from me. And in order that I might not be unduly elated by the transcendancy of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me—an Angel-adversary—that it might afflict me; so that I should not be too much exalted.”—II Cor. 12:1-7, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

## **RETURN TO DAMASCUS AND JERUSALEM**

We do not know how long Saul was in Arabia receiving these special revelations, but it might be safe to speculate that it was at least several months. After this he returned to Damascus, “And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20) The reaction of the unbelieving Jews in Damascus was one of amazement, knowing that Saul had come there to take those believing in Christ as his prisoners. His logic was so compelling and clear that none could refute his powerful preaching of the resurrected Christ.

Therefore, his opposers decided it would be necessary to seal his lips by killing him. When the brethren learned of their plot, they helped Saul escape and make his way back to Jerusalem.—vss. 21-25

The apostles and disciples at Jerusalem were at first afraid of Saul, knowing of his previous persecution of Christians. Even though most of them found it difficult to accept him as a follower of Christ, one of them, Barnabas, realized that the matter had to be resolved, so he sought out Saul to talk with him. After he had learned of his peculiar experiences, obviously from God, and was convinced of his conversion, he took Saul to the apostles and insisted that they know the truth of the matter and of the complete change that had occurred in his life. The apostles and disciples then accepted Saul, and he became one of them, entering into their activities and speaking in the name of the Lord Jesus.—vss. 26-28

Saul's preaching at the beginning of his ministry brought him in contact with the Hellenists. We read of this in Acts 9:29: "He spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him." The word Grecians should be translated "Hellenists"—that is, Greek-speaking Jews. Here again, as before in Damascus, his logic and clear understanding of the Scriptures were so persuasive that none could disprove him. Similarly, these Hellenists decided the best way to silence the debate was to kill Saul, as those in Damascus had thought to do.

## **PERSECUTION EASED**

When the brethren learned of the plot, they decided that for Paul's safety he should return

to his home in Tarsus—a city in Asia Minor in the province of Cilicia. They provided for his safe escort by way of Caesarea, a port city from which he could sail to Tarsus. After Saul's departure, a respite came to the brethren for a period. We read, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied."—Acts 9:30,31

This was a meaningful change in conditions throughout the region. The Heavenly Father provided relief from the severe persecution that had existed since the time of Jesus' crucifixion. This was no doubt beneficial to the church, helping them in a temporal way, since they then became more acceptable in Israel's society, and employment was more readily obtainable. Thus, the communal arrangement became less and less important, and soon ended. It is noteworthy that there is no further mention of this type of shared, close-living social structure continuing, or being revived, among them.

The primary import of this period of rest is the spiritual growth of the church which resulted, as well as their growth in numbers. Three thousand were baptized on the Day of Pentecost, and another five thousand who "believed" are mentioned shortly thereafter. (Acts 2:41; 4:4) The increase of the brethren in the church from that fruitful beginning, nearly all we believe from the ranks of Israel, shows how God's blessing was still upon this nation, even as the last week, or seven-year period, of special favor drew to a close. ■