

Chapter 1: The Apostolic Age

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

This was the divine commission that the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples shortly before He ascended into heaven. They had to preach the gospel not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. The gospel message was to go to all peoples and nations, even to the ends of the earth.

The disciples went: they obeyed their beloved Master with great love and sincerity and proclaimed the way of salvation wherever they went.

On the day of Pentecost Peter spoke to the multitude. He proved to them from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ, the King of Israel, the Messiah promised so long ago.

It was not only Peter, but also the other apostles, who preached the gospel wherever the Lord sent them. They had seen everything. They witnessed His life. They witnessed His suffering and death. And they also witnessed His resurrection and ascension. God blessed, richly blessed, their earnest preaching.

Sure, many of the Jews rejected the sincere preaching. They rejected the gospel message, which the disciples preached to them according to Jesus' command.

However, thousands and thousands of Gentiles did believe! God's Spirit worked powerfully in their hearts so that they repented from worshipping idols and embraced the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and Redeemer.

The number of newly established churches quickly multiplied, especially after Paul was called by the Lord Jesus Himself when he was on his way to Damascus. The Lord Jesus made him 'the apostle of the Gentiles.'

From the Bible we know about the missionary travels of the Apostle Paul. He travelled to Europe, preached in Athens, Corinth, Rome, and even went to Spain. Christian churches were instituted everywhere, and elders and deacons were ordained in the new congregations by Paul and other apostles. God had commanded that congregations must be governed by elders and deacons. This is still the same today.

PERSECUTIONS

But when the Lord richly blessed the work of the apostles and God converted more and more Gentiles through the preaching, hostility against the gospel erupted. The devil did his utmost to destroy the work of God. Everywhere the most terrible persecutions started happening. We will hear more about that later.



The stoning of Stephen. Drawing by Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn.

At first, the Jews were the fiercest enemies of the Christian church, but later the Roman emperors were. The Jews stoned Stephen and cruelly scattered the first Christian church at Jerusalem. On his missionary travels, the apostle Paul experienced great opposition from the Jews. The Jews stirred up the Gentiles against the preachers of the gospel, and they eventually delivered Paul to the Romans. The Jews would have killed Paul

themselves if the Romans hadn't intervened and taken him prisoner.

The Jews killed the apostle James in Jerusalem. They took him to the roof of the temple and shoved him over the edge. He landed on the ground with a dull thud. Some writers claim that James still lived after that fall and when the Jews saw that he was not yet dead, they, in a mad fury, picked up stones and flung them with all their might at the apostle James.

But look, the faithful apostle lifts himself up from the ground and kneels. Listen! With dying lips he prays: "Lord, God, I pray you, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." His last words were not a curse, but a prayer for his enemies and tormentors.

A priest, one of those who had stoned him, hears and understands James' words. He is moved by the prayer and says to the others: "Be quiet, this righteous man is praying for us."

However, one of the Jews, in devilish rage, swings a massive club onto the head of the apostle James. The faithful servant of the Lord falls down dead. That's how James died the martyr's death.



Saint Andrew cross

Most of the other apostles died a cruel death as well. At Nero's command, the soldiers beheaded Paul and crucified Peter, probably upside down. The apostle Andrew was also crucified, not on an ordinary, typical cross, but on a rough cross made of two beams nailed together in the centre. To this day, it is still known as 'St. Andrew's cross.'

Philip was bound to a pillar and was starved to death. Most likely, the savages in India

murdered Thomas. Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon the Zealot and Thaddeus, all died the martyr's death. Mattias was first stoned and then beheaded.

One after another, they were put to death. But, the devil could not destroy their work. Their labour was not in vain. After their death, others carried on with their work.

The devil raged and brought tens, yes, hundreds of Christians to death, but hundreds, yes, thousands took their place. Not the devil, but God reigns! The devil attempted to destroy the work of God, but he failed. No one can destroy God's work!

The Lord Jesus is the King of His Church. He sits in heaven, at the right hand of His Father, for the good of His people. He rules and governs; He preserves and protects His Church.

The apostolic age is very significant because it was during this time that the Christian congregations were instituted and established.

APOSTLE JOHN

There was one apostle who did not die the martyr's death: the apostle John. This is the same John to whom the Lord Jesus said while on the cross: 'Behold your mother.' The apostle Paul instituted the churches in Ephesus and in cities around Ephesus, but when Paul was imprisoned and beheaded in Rome, John took his place and continued the work of Paul. He further shepherded these congregations and ensured good order existed there.

During violent persecutions, the heathens put John into a cauldron of boiling oil, but God showed His almighty power and miraculously preserved him. He came out of that cauldron unharmed. Finally, the cruel emperor Domitian banished John to Patmos. On Patmos the Lord Jesus appeared to him. There - on that little, desolate island - the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation.

After the death of Domitian, the apostle returned to Ephesus and continued to preach and work there for years.

I still want to tell you one beautiful story, just listen...

THE APOSTLE JOHN IN SMYRNA



The seven churches in Asia

Surrounding Ephesus were various other congregations. We can read their names in the first chapters of the book of Revelation. Repeatedly it says: 'Write to the angel of the church of...' Just read Revelation two and three. John regularly visited these seven congregations.

One day he visits one of those congregations, probably Smyrna. While the apostle John is working there, he meets a handsome, robust, young man who listens very attentively to John's preaching. His keen and respectful attitude captures the apostle's attention. When John finally leaves the church there, he says to the bishop: "Pay special attention to that young man; care for him like a father." In those days, every church had her own preacher or overseer, called a 'bishop.'

The bishop assures John that he will keep a watchful eye on the young man. And so, the bishop keeps his promise and takes the young man into his house. He instructs him in God's Word and cares for him as a father cares for his son. The bishop grows to love him. Finally, the young man is baptised and becomes a member of the church.

But what happens? The young man chooses the wrong company, and they lead him down the wrong path. It often happens today too, that young people follow the path of sin because of poorly chosen friends.

That happens here as well.

Those wicked friends take the promising young man along to various feasts and drinking parties, where all sorts of wrong and sinful things happen. He starts going there more frequently.

One day he leaves the bishop's house, where he had been cared for and looked after for so long. With his wicked companions, he goes to the desolate and inhospitable mountains in the vicinity of the city. There they form a gang of robbers, and the young man becomes their leader. They rob the travellers, mistreat the merchants and take everything from them. Yes, at times they even kill those innocent people. Terrible! Who could have ever imagined that? That promising young man becomes a thief, a murderer and a criminal whose name brings fear and trembling to the people. He and his gang terrorise the whole district.

Years later, the apostle John visits that congregation again. Immediately he asks the bishop: "Where is that young man whom I entrusted to your care?"

The bishop sighs deeply and faintly replies: "He died."

"Oh, really?" asks John, surprised, "what sickness did he die of?"

The bishop answers: "No, I do not mean it that way. He is lost to us because he has become the leader of a cruel band of robbers who make the entire district unsafe. That's why I said that he was dead. I mean that for us, he is dead. We have no contact with him anymore. All the concern and care I showed him was in vain."

When he hears that terrible news, the tears well up in John's eyes. Deeply moved, he stares at the bishop.

Then he suddenly says: "Saddle me a horse. I am going to look for him." The bishop looks doubtful and advises John not to go. He fears for the life of the beloved apostle, but since John insists, he sighs and obeys his command.

Completely unarmed, the old apostle John rides through the desolate mountains. How dangerous! How does he dare? Suddenly the bush on the side of the road rustles, and several ruffians jump in front of him. They seize the bridle of the horse and take John prisoner. That's what the bishop was afraid of! The grey-haired apostle begs them: "Do not kill me but take me to your chief."

The robbers mockingly laugh because they know the chief is more cruel than they are, but they'll give that old fool his wish. He'll be in for a shock! Grinning, the robbers take him along to where their chief is waiting for them.

When the chief sees John, he quickly rises and looks piercingly at the prisoner standing before him. He looks again...and then...and then...?

Then that ruffian, that criminal, suddenly turns around and flees. He recognises that grey-haired man and is ashamed. He does not dare to face him.

His wicked friends look at him, surprised and confused. They don't understand this at all. Is their chief, who otherwise is afraid of nothing and is capable of anything, now scared of a defenceless, old man? They are puzzled.

But the old apostle understands it very well. He runs after the fleeing young man, as fast as his old legs can go. Loudly he cries out to him: "Why do you flee my son? Do you flee from one who is unarmed and already very old? I won't harm you!"

When the chief hears those words, he stops. He throws his weapons away, covers his face with his hands, and bursts into tears. When John finally comes to him, he sobs and asks to be forgiven. John looks at the chief, full of

love and compassion. He comforts him and assures him, that the Lord Jesus will forgive him his many and great sins. He says: "Though your sins are so great and many, do not be afraid. Leave your evil and wicked life and come back with me."

And....? The robber-chief listens to those admonishing words. He leaves his evil friends behind and returns with John to the city, where he is lovingly received.

History tells us that this former criminal became a God-fearing man. That's how John - moved by love - brought back this young man, even though he had strayed so very far.

Eventually, John became so old that he could no longer preach. When he could no longer walk, he had himself carried into church and spoke only these words: "Little children, love one another fervently."

Finally, when he was very old, he quietly and peacefully entered eternal glory.

Blessed John! Aren't you jealous of him?

The apostle John lived the longest of all the apostles. When he died, the apostolic age had come to an end.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE.

During the Apostolic Age, the Bible was completed. The four Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. After that, various epistles of Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude were included. The last book of the Bible is the 'Revelation to John.'

Since that time, not one Bible book has been added. Of course, many books were written later, but they do not belong to the Bible. This is also one of the reasons why the Apostolic Age is of such great importance.

QUESTIONS.

1. Why did early persecutions fail to destroy the church?
2. Summarise the life of the apostle John after Pentecost.
3. How did John show his love for the young man who left the church to lead a very sinful life?
4. Give two reasons why the Apostolic Age was of such great importance.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Is prosperity or adversity usually a better time for the church? Why?
2. List the seven churches of Asia named in Revelation 2 and 3. Draw a map of Asia Minor and place them in the proper location.
3. What did the Spirit have against each church?
4. Were there any churches that received no warnings, but only encouragement? Why do you think they received help?
6. Why is the minister of each church called an angel?