

# **The Dividing Line Acts 28!**

**The place of this important chapter in God's plans for mankind**

**David Tavender**

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## **Acts 28:23-29**

[The leaders of the Jews (v.17)] arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them.'

Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" After he had said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.

## Introduction

There's no doubt about it - even the most faithful believers and the most scholarly theological minds confess that parts of the Bible are simply perplexing. Unusual events, incredible miracles, strange apparitions ... there are passages that confuse and confound; some parts even appear to conflict, but *there is a key!*

We can't claim to have all of the answers, but a good many of the questions can be answered when we understand more about the 28th chapter of Acts, a major dividing line in the working out of God's purposes. Note that the term "Acts 28" from here on will refer to the passage Acts 28:23-29 only, unless otherwise stated.

With these things in mind, we seek to illustrate:

- a) the place of Acts 28 in God's plans;
- b) the differences in God's dealings with believers before and after the events of Acts 28;
- c) the importance of acknowledging the significance of this chapter in our daily Christian walk.

Please have a Bible handy, as you are encouraged to look up the references given. All Bible quotations included are from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise stated. It is our prayer that you may keep an open mind as you read.

## Part 1 - Before Acts 28

If I had to suggest the single most common error, the place where we sometimes 'get it wrong', in interpreting the Scriptures, it would probably have something to do with failing to observe the context; i.e. what comes before the verse, what comes after, who is being spoken about, etc., etc. All too often a Bible verse pops up before our very eyes and, without giving it a second thought, we are tempted to instantly apply this verse to ourselves - especially if it means something good could be in store for us. Biblical promises of earthly riches, good health and long life are just some examples which come to mind.

The problem with this approach is that, while all Scripture is given *for* us (2 Timothy 3:16-17), not all Scripture is *about* us.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Many of the books of the Bible concern the nation of Israel only. So, when we see promises and blessings (and curses!) in these books we need to keep in mind that Israel may well be the focus of these, and not necessarily the church of today.

This process of discerning what is written about us, and what is not written about us, is called 'right division'. The term is taken from 2 Timothy 2:15 in the *King James Version*.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15; *KJV*)

One of the aims of this booklet is to help you to 'rightly divide the Word' so that you may be able to discern the things in the Bible which are about believers today, and the things which are not.

Acts chapter 28 is a passage of the Bible which has not received a lot of 'publicity' in Christian circles; yet, understanding its place in the overall plan of God will, in turn, shed light on the teachings of many other Bible books and verses. Our task here, then, is to see the significance of this im-

portant passage of Scripture, but we won't see it if we don't consider the background to the events which are described in Acts 28. Therefore we will first outline the overall 'plot' of the Bible, so that we may see the proper context in which Acts 28 lies.

## **An Overview of God's Plan**

### *Old Testament*

The first pages of the Bible cover the account of the Creation (Genesis 1 & 2). They are soon followed by the account of Adam and Eve's sin (Genesis 3). Here began man's need for regaining a right relationship with God - the underlying theme of Scripture.

Through the ages, God has commissioned messengers to tell others of this need, as well as the way to meet this need through obedience to His words. Noah was one of these messengers; very few people listened to the message that he had to say, and they suffered the consequences by way of the flood (Genesis 6-9). The descendants of Noah and his sons displayed an open sign of rebellion against God by building the tower of Babel. As a result, mankind was scattered across the earth (Genesis 11). Out from among the dispersed human race, God chose one man to continue the delivery of His message - Abram.

Abram (later to be called "Abraham") was promised that he would father a nation intended to be God's messenger to all the other nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Abram's grandson, Jacob, was renamed "Israel" and his descendants took on this name as the title of their nation.

The families of Israel's sons grew in number and were later held captive under Egyptian rule. Soon after their miraculous release from slavery, the nation was given a set of laws (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). In being obedient to these laws they would be different and set apart from the other nations. Please note that, from this point onwards, the only times we read of people who were not Israelites (such as Egyptians, Assyrians, etc.) is when these 'outsiders' (Gentiles) come in contact with Israelites.

This is important to note because it means that a large portion of Scripture details God's dealings with people from one nation only - Israel. In fact, of the 1189 chapters in your Bible, over 1100 of them relate to times when Israel is the dominant nation in God's plans. We must keep this in mind, and be aware of the prominence and importance of this nation when reading the Bible.

The writings which make up the rest of the Old Testament display Israel's constant struggle between belief and faith in God, and unbelief and rebellion. Remember that the nation was to be God's 'messenger' to the other nations; however, they were not in a position to deliver the message whilst not being faithful to the message themselves.

From the time of the book of Judges onwards, the Lord commissioned prophets (or spokesmen) to remind the people of their role as God's chosen nation. On occasions they were believed, but largely they were ignored. Many of the prophecies told not only of impending punishment for disobeying God's commands, but also of a future time when the whole nation would listen and be obedient. In that time of obedience, they would be ruled over by one known as the Messiah (Hebrew) or the Christ (Greek), which means "The Anointed One". This promised to be a glorious era in Israel's future, and something that they should eagerly await.

### *New Testament*

However, when the New Testament opens, we find that Israel is being ruled over by the Roman Empire. Most Jews at this time were looking for the promised Messiah (or Christ) to come so that they could be rid of the Romans and live in that promised time of glory as a totally free nation.

The heart of the majority of the nation's people had changed little though. Believers were in the minority, and when God sent His Son - the one who was their Messiah, their Christ, and future king, the nation rejected Him and had Him crucified.

On the cross, one of the last things the Lord Jesus Christ said was:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."  
(Luke 23:34)

Here, He was referring to the nation of Israel, as Peter later re-affirmed in the book of Acts:

"Men of Israel, ... you killed the author of life ... you acted in ignorance." (Acts 3:12,15,17)

This explains why Israelites continued to be the focus of attention during the period covered by the book of Acts (the period following Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven) - they had been forgiven and they were being given a second chance to repent.

If the people of Israel had changed their attitude at this stage, in the years following Christ's ascension, the prophecies promising their glorious future would have been fulfilled there and then:

"Men of Israel ... repent, then, and turn to God, so that ... He may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus." (Acts 3:12,19,20)

Unfortunately, this plea to repent was largely ignored.

After some time of continuing unbelief by the majority of Israelites, the message was sent to the home of a Gentile (non-Israelite) called Cornelius (Acts 10). Prior to this, if a Gentile wanted to partake of God's blessings, he had to undergo many rituals and actually become an Israelite (Exodus 12:48; Deuteronomy 16:11-12; 29:10-12; and elsewhere). Here, for the first time, a Gentile was allowed to take part in God's blessings *without* these ceremonies; (please read Acts 15:1-31).

The intention of this change was to provoke The People Of Israel, to arouse them to envy and thus to repentance and salvation:

Again I ask: Did they [the people of Israel] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious ...in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. (Romans 11:11,14)

What previously belonged only to the Jews was being made available to Gentiles now as well. Speaking to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Peter said:

"God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them (Gentiles) by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." (Acts 15:8)

This sudden change came as a shock to many Jewish Christians who had thought circumcision and the Law were essential (Acts 15:1,5). It should be noted, however, that despite this change in circumstances, the Jew still had the prior position in God's plans.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 2:9-10)

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew ... much in every way! (Romans 3:1-2)

(Note that the book of Romans was written during the Acts Period and, naturally, reflects the conditions that were in operation at that time in God's plans.)

However, the majority of Israelites remained stubborn. As a result of continuing unbelief, a judgment was delivered by Paul to the leaders of the Jews, representative of Israel's spiritual state (Acts 28:25-28). At this point, at the end of the period covered by the book of Acts, the nation of Israel ceased to be God's chosen people. And that's where the focus of this booklet lies.

## **Summary of Part 1**

### *Old Testament*

God called out Abram from among the nations to be the instrument to carry out His will. Abram's descendants became the nation of Israel. Many promises and prophecies are made in the Old Testament concerning this nation. One of these looked forward to a prosperous time when God's Messiah (Christ) would be King over Israel. However, despite repeated warnings, the nation fluctuated between faithfulness and unfaithfulness to God.

#### *The Gospels*

God sent His Son to become Israel's Messiah (Christ) and King, yet they rejected Him and had Him crucified.

#### *Acts Chapters 1-9*

The apostles were given the job of demonstrating that the people of Israel had rejected Jesus Christ who was to be their promised King, but that they could repent and be forgiven. During this time, Israel was being given a second chance to accept Jesus as their Christ, the Son of God. However, the majority of the nation still rejected Him.

#### *Acts Chapters 10-28*

When God sent the apostle Peter to preach the gospel to a non-Israelite, this commenced a period which saw Gentiles being able to inherit the promises and blessings formerly given only to Israelites. This was done in order to make Jews envious of the fact that non-Israelites were being promised things which were previously exclusive to Israel. In this way it was hoped that Israel would be provoked into repentance. Again, however, the majority of Jews rejected the message. This situation continued right up until the last half of the final chapter of Acts.

What happened at this point, and after this, is the subject of our next two chapters.

## **Part 2 - Acts 28: The Dividing Line Itself**

### **The picture so far**

In the previous chapter, we saw that many of God's plans in the Bible revolved around the people of Israel. In the Old Testament, they were promised a future glorious land and a future godly King who was to be the Lord Himself; yet they were also promised exile and ruin for disbelief. When the New Testament opened, Israelites were hoping for the same things: the glorious land and the godly king. We noted that the gospels were very similar in character to the writings of the Old Testament in terms of the same people (Israel) in the same land, with the same hopes, laws and status over Gentiles. After rejecting Jesus Christ, their rightful King, the book of Acts records that Israel was given a second chance to repent. However, this was largely rejected.

When God sent the apostle Peter to preach the gospel to a non-Israelite (Cornelius), this commenced a period which saw Gentiles being able to inherit the promises formerly set aside only for Israelites. This was done in order to make the Jews envious of the fact that non-Israelites were being promised things which were previously exclusive to Israelites, and so provoke them to repentance and salvation. Again, however, the majority of Jews rejected the message. This continued to be the situation right up until the last half of the final chapter of Acts - Acts 28.

The Apostle Paul was travelling by sea on his way to Rome when we commence reading Acts chapter 28. The events on the island of Malta are described for us in verses 1-10, and from there, Paul and his companions set sail for Rome in verses 11-16. We will now look at the next few verses in some detail. It will help to have your Bible nearby and read the verses in full.

### **Acts 28:16-28**

*Acts 28:16-17: When we got to Rome ... three days later he [Paul] called together the leaders of the Jews ...*

We note that, even in Rome, Paul gave priority to speaking first to the leaders of the Jews there. They were still the chosen race, and it was still Paul's desire that they should believe that Jesus was the Christ. He met with these leaders because they were representative of the Jewish community in Rome; and he met specifically with the Jewish leaders because meeting with the Jewish community first had been his custom everywhere else (Salamis - Acts 13:5; Pisidian Antioch - 13:14,45,46; Iconium - 14:1; Thessalonica - 17:1,2; Berea - 17:10). At that time the Jew was first and Paul "had to speak the word of God to you [Jews] first"; see Acts 13:46 and note Romans 1:16, quoted earlier.

***Acts 28:20: For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.***

The people of Israel were still very much part of God's plans at this stage. They had not been set aside earlier, at the Cross, as is often claimed and which is clearly incorrect as a reading of Acts shows. It was still Paul's desire that they would repent and thus be blessed with the return of the Messiah (Christ) to become their king in a glorious land. This was the hope of all Jews, and note that this was also their hope some 35 years earlier when two of the disciples were discussing the crucified Lord.

"But we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:21)

It is obvious that God's purpose for Israel had not been terminated before Acts 28, because, as Paul said in Acts 28:20, "It is because of the ***hope of Israel*** that I am bound with this chain."

***Acts 28:23(a): They [the Jewish leaders in Rome] arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared ...***

"From morning till evening..." The need for this rather lengthy meeting was most likely to ensure that all points of view on who the Lord Jesus really was could be discussed and debated fully by both parties. It seems that Paul would not allow the Jewish leaders any reason or excuse for rejecting Jesus Christ as their Messiah.

**Acts 28:23(b): ... he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.**

Here again, we see that not much had changed since the time of Christ on earth. We noted in verse 20 that the hope of Israel was still the same as earlier; i.e. the glorious land and king. Now compare Acts 28:23 with some verses from Luke 24, and more similarities come to light.

(a) The theme in both cases is "concerning Jesus":

"[Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning Himself*." (Luke 24:27)

"... tried to convince them *about Jesus*". (Acts 28:23)

(b) The basis for the teaching in both cases was the Old Testament Scriptures:

"And beginning with *Moses and all the Prophets*, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in *all the Scriptures* concerning himself." (Luke 24:27; also v 44)

"... tried to convince them about Jesus, from *the Law of Moses and from the Prophets*." (Acts 28:23)

In other words, the messages and conditions at the end of Acts were similar to those much earlier. In the Gospels, the advent of the Messiah to establish His kingdom was what Israel was looking forward to. This hope had not been abandoned or forfeited yet. Thirty or so years after the cross, when the events of Acts 28 took place, Israelites were *still* looking for the advent of the Messiah to establish His kingdom - and they were right to do so, for the nation of Israel had not yet been set aside by God.

**Acts 28:24-25(a): Some were convinced by what he said but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves ...**

In each locality that Paul preached during Acts, there was always some positive reaction to his message from some of the Jews, which was often

outweighed by many negative reactions. This situation of 'some convinced, others not believing' is rather indicative of the fact that the Jewish people were not ready, in their entirety, to accept that Jesus was the Messiah they had been looking for.

***Acts 28:25(b),26,27: ... and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them.' "***

This quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Old Testament forms the central part of God's judgement against Israel. We will now look at it closely to see its significance here in Acts 28.

Briefly, Isaiah 6 describes the prophet Isaiah himself being in the midst of an unbelieving people - Israel. He is then told to go and tell them that they have turned from God and that the Lord will now harden their hearts, close their ears and shut their eyes, so that they cannot be healed. The people were exiled from their land and this hardened state was to last until the land was desolate. Read this short chapter (Isaiah 6) for yourself to get a better feel for Isaiah's situation.

Having read Isaiah 6, the question needs to be asked: Why would God deliberately hinder people from hearing and believing His word? It would seem that even God, who is more patient than all of mankind put together, has a limit to His patience. People can continue to refuse to listen to Him until a point is reached when He does not allow them to turn back.

That's exactly what happened to Pharaoh in Exodus 7 and 8. After a while, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:3,4) so that he would not listen to Moses' pleas for the release of His people. In case we think this was unfair, we must remember that Pharaoh had already hardened his own heart without any outside help (see Exodus 1:15-20 & chapter 5). This type of hardening was also to come upon Israel later on. They were to be spiritually blinded and deafened, and they were not to be healed, but only because

they, themselves, refused to listen, time and time again, to God's messengers, His prophets or His apostles.

What is prophesied in Isaiah 6 is a scene of desolation and dispersion. This was fulfilled with the exile of the Northern kingdom of Israel about 40 years after this prophecy. In the Southern kingdom of Judah it was also fulfilled about 160 years later. This terrible fate, prophesied in Isaiah 6, was issued in response to a nation's refusal to listen. Once they had reached a point of no return in God's eyes, they were sentenced to be exiled and ruled over by another nation. These events took place just as they were prophesied. But the story doesn't end in the Old Testament.

After the pronouncement of Acts 28 we see Israel again no longer treated as a nation, but, about 8 years later in 70 A.D., Jerusalem was destroyed and its people exiled in similar circumstances to the exiles of the Old Testament. The city was completely levelled and it is believed that 100,000 people were led away to work as slaves.

In both the Old Testament, and here in Acts 28, Jews refused to hear and obey the word of the Lord. As a result they suffered their land being ruined, and themselves being taken from their homeland.

### **Isaiah 6 Quoted in the New Testament**

This portion from Isaiah 6 appears in the New Testament several times and is a real key to understanding this aspect of the plan of God. Isaiah 6:9-10 is quoted on three different occasions. A look at each of these will show how this portion of Old Testament Scripture is used, and will shed more light on the passage in Acts 28.

***1st occasion** (Matthew 13:14,15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10)*

These passages are directly related to the rejection of the Lord Jesus by Israel and appear amidst some parables. This is well worth noting, because the parables were disguised truths about the earthly kingdom of which Christ was to be king. He told the parables to the crowds, but not so that they might learn, as is often thought. Notice the reason the Lord Himself gives for speaking in parables:

"This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding ...'" (Matthew 13:13-15)

The parables were spoken to the crowds, but most of them would not listen because of unbelief and stubbornness, or were not interested enough to seek the meaning of the parable. However, a few, like the disciples, were (Matthew 13:10; Luke 8:10).

**2nd occasion** (*John 12:37-40*)

Not surprisingly, the verses surrounding the quote once again describe the unbelief of the Jewish people.

"Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, [the crowd] still would not believe in Him ... For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says ... 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts ...'" (John 12:37-40)

**3rd occasion** (*Acts 28:25-27*)

Please note that this portion of Isaiah's prophecy was not just quoted on any occasion - but as a specific response to the Jewish people rejecting their Messiah again. The use of this quote in each instance is not merely to provide an illustration from the Old Testament to support Paul's argument to the Jewish leaders, but signifies God's direct hand in the events, for it is God who has, from this point, hardened the hearts of the listeners.

We still have one more verse from Acts 28 to consider.

***Acts 28:28: "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"***

A question is often raised with this verse. If, at Acts 28, God set Israel aside, how can it be that His salvation "has been sent" (past tense) already to the Gentiles. We will see that this statement is entirely consistent with earlier portions of Acts.

In each city that Paul visited in his travels, he would visit the Jews first. But, as his message was often given a hostile reception by the Jews, he would then go to the Gentiles of that city and speak to them.

*In Antioch:*

"... [the Jews] talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you (Jews) first. Since you reject it ... we now turn to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 13:45,46)

*In Corinth:*

"But when the Jews ... became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them ... 'From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 18:6)

As we can see, Paul spoke, and was rejected by the Jews. He then made a point of saying that his words would not be wasted on the Jews of that place, and that the Gentiles will be offered the message. The same thing happened in Acts 28:28.

### **Summary of the significance of Acts 28:23-29**

In the gospels, the Lord quoted from Isaiah 6 after the people rejected Him. He pronounced them as being stubborn in their unbelief. Their fate of blindness, deafness and remaining in an unhealed state is predicted here in the gospels, as it was back in Isaiah 6. Thus the Jews of Christ's time had rejected the Christ.

On the cross, however, the Lord said, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), which referred to the Jewish nation. Hence, the book of Acts is a record of Israel being given a second chance to repent. Yet throughout the Acts period they continued to refuse to believe that Jesus was their Christ, their rightful King.

In an attempt to provoke the Jews into repentance and belief, from Acts 10 onwards Gentiles as well as Jews began to be accepted by God. Despite this, Jewish repentance was still the major goal of God's plan, as the blessings associated with belief in the period from Acts 10 to 28 were Jewish in

nature. We note that Romans tells us that the Gentiles at this time were likened to a branch which had been grafted into the olive tree of Israel.

If some of the branches [of Israel] have been broken off, and you [Gentiles], though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others [Israel] and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root [Israel], do not boast over those branches [Israel]. If you [Gentiles] do, consider this: You [Gentiles] do not support the root [Israel], but the root [Israel] supports you [Gentiles]. (Romans 11:17-18)

Note that Paul tells the Gentiles, "You do not support the root, but the root [Israel] supports you" (see Romans 11:18).

Sadly, this provocation of Israel did not have the desired effect, and Israelites continued to refuse to believe. So, in Acts 28, their fate is predicted again! They had now reached the point of no return after refusing one time too many. Acts 28 is the culmination, the final breaking point, after which the offer of the glorious kingdom on earth was totally withdrawn. At this point they ceased to be a people before God. Their status as the chosen nation, was withdrawn. Soon after this, their land was sacked, and many Israelites were exiled, just as it had been predicted, in consequence of their unbelief.

This being the case then, what now of God's plans to bless the world through Israel? How can He bless through the people of Israel if He has rejected them? How can He bless the world? This would seem to be a fatal blow to God's purposes, but it is not the case. What we see, from this point onwards, is that God's plan takes a completely new direction - one that no longer relies on the obedience of Israel for its accomplishment.

## Part 3 - After Acts 28

We have seen how Israel was the chosen nation, through whom God would carry out His purposes for mankind. Despite being chosen, that nation was stubborn and disobedient. As a result Israel was set aside as a chosen nation before God. No longer did He favour Israel above the other nations.

It is natural, then, that the writings *before* Acts 28 should reflect the fact that Israel was still the chosen nation. Conversely, the writings *after* Acts 28 should reflect that Israel was no *longer* the chosen nation, and this is exactly what we find.

The letters written after the end of the Acts period speak of a *new revelation* in God's plan for mankind which only came to light after the rejection of the Israelite nation:

"... the mystery, made known to me by *revelation* .... the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been *revealed* by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together ... members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 3:3-6)

### Equality

Did you notice that the word "together" occurred a few times in those verses? When the New Testament was originally written, it was written in Greek, and the Greek words here really emphasise just how "together" these two groups are. We could re-translate some of these words to say that we are "... *joint-heirs* and a *joint-body* and *joint-partakers* of His promise". Or "... *equal-heirs* ... *equal-members* of one body and *equal-partakers* of the promise." In other words, equally joined together in every way without regard for nationality. No longer do Israelites have the prior place in God's plans for mankind, as was the case during the Acts Period; rather, believers, whether Gentiles or Jews, now share equal status and are all referred to as nations. There is no specially favoured nation for the time being.

The plan so far, then, looks something like this:

the nations  
all nations treated equally in God's sight  
(Genesis 1 to 11)

the nations scattered  
(Genesis 11)

the nation of Israel  
dominant in God's plans  
(Genesis 12 to Acts 28)

the other nations  
not mentioned unless in  
contact with Israel

Israel disobedient

the nation of Israel  
set aside  
(Acts 28)

all nations  
all nations treated equally in God's sight  
(after Acts 28)

### **The Mystery**

You will notice that Ephesians talks about this new revelation as "the mystery":

"... the mystery made known to me (Paul) by revelation ..."

"... the mystery of Christ which was not made known to men in other generations ..."

"... this mystery is that ... the Gentiles are heirs together ..."

"... this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden ..."

"... the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations,  
but is now disclosed to the saints ..."

"... the glorious riches of this mystery ..."

(See Ephesians 3:3,4,5,6,9; Colossians 1:26,27.)

We tend to think of a mystery as being, well, mysterious I suppose! But that is not what the Greek word means here. It really means "secret". Look at the verses above again, and substitute "secret" where you see the word "mystery"- it will make much more sense.

"... the *secret* made known to me (Paul) by revelation ..."

"... the *secret* of Christ which was not made known to men in other generations ..."

"... this *secret* is that ... the Gentiles are heirs together ..."

"... this *secret*, which for ages past was kept hidden ..."

"... the *secret* that has been kept hidden for ages and generations,  
but is now disclosed to the saints ..."

"... the glorious riches of this *secret* ..."

You might care to think of it like this. Look at the cover of this booklet and you will see the author's first and last names, but the author's *middle* name is a mystery, or a secret. Now, if I tell you that my middle name is "John" I will have revealed the secret. Not really very mysterious, was it? But until it was revealed, it was, nevertheless, a secret. The "mystery" in the verses above is something like this, too; it was a secret which has now been revealed.

God knew well before this world was created that His chosen nation would reject Him and that it would be set aside. He also knew that believers from all nations would be blessed equally. However, these facts were not known at all until they were revealed to Paul **after** Acts 28. Up until that time, they remained a secret.

These weren't the only things revealed, though. The letters written after the Acts period speak of many different circumstances which concern today's body of believers - Gentile or Jewish. However, before we consider these we should ask, what about all of the promises specifically related to the people of Israel concerning their time of glory on the earth? These will still come to fruition, but at a future time, when all the blessings which were prophesied long ago will be fulfilled. For the moment however, those promises have been put on hold.

To discover some of the differences before and after Acts 28, we should compare the teachings found in the letters written before and after Acts 28 - and that's exactly what we'll do in the next chapter.

## Part 4 - Some Comparisons Before and After Acts 28

In this chapter we will summarise some of the different conditions in operation before and after Acts 28. Those *before* are recorded in the book of Acts and the epistles written during that time, whilst those *after* are to be found in the last seven letters of Paul: *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Titus, and 1 & 2 Timothy* (see page \*\*\*). Here, then, are some of the differences, 'before' and 'after', with Scripture references for further study.

### **The Mystery**

#### *Before Acts 28*

The mystery (or secret) of Ephesians was not yet revealed.

#### *After Acts 28*

The secret that believers from all nations are now fellow-heirs, joint-heirs, equal-heirs, is revealed (Ephesians 3:5,6). Previously it had been hidden (Colossians 1:26). The church of the mystery is a new creation (Ephesians 2:11-15); therefore, the term "mystery" is never used of the church during the Acts period.

### **The Body**

#### *Before Acts 28*

The term "body" was simply an illustration of the groups of Christians within each locality. The relationship of Christ as Head of the body did not yet exist, as shown by 1 Corinthians 12. Here, various members of the body were compared with the eyes, ears, nose, etc.; i.e. parts of the head (1 Corinthians 12:12-20; Romans 12:4,5). Note that the Greek of 1 Corinthians 12:27 says "you are a body (not "the" body) of Christ".

#### *After Acts 28*

The Head is Christ and the body is the group of believers (Ephesians 1:22,23; 4:15,16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19). The term "*The Body of Christ*" is now the title of the church today, and not just an illustration, as was the case previously.

### **Israel's Hope**

#### *Before Acts 28*

Israel's hope of the glorious kingdom was active right up until Acts 28 (Acts 28:20).

#### *After Acts 28*

There is no mention of Israel's hope, because plans for Israel as a nation have been temporarily laid aside.

### **National Differences (1)**

#### *Before Acts 28*

The gospel of salvation was to the Jew first. In each city that was preached to, Jews were given the first opportunity to believe (Acts 3:25,26; 13:5,14,45,46; 14:1; 17:1,2,10; 28:17).

#### *After Acts 28*

The gospel of salvation is no longer to the Jew first. All national priorities are abolished. Gentile believers have become equal with Jewish believers in every way. A literal translation of Ephesians 3:6 is that Gentiles are equal-heirs, in an equal-body, and equal-partakers of the promise in Christ by the gospel. This emphasises the new equality in status.

### **National Differences (2)**

*Before Acts 28*

There was an advantage in being a Jew, and circumcision was profitable (Romans 3:1-2; Acts 16:3).

*After Acts 28*

There is no longer an advantage in being a Jew, and there is no profit in circumcision (Philippians 3:5-7).

### **National Differences (3)**

*Before Acts 28*

There were two distinct orders of believers. These were called "Jews that believe" and "Gentiles that believe" (Romans 1:16; 2:9-10). There were different rules of life and requirements for these two groups of believers. The Jewish believers rightly continued in following the Law of Moses, whereas the Gentiles had to observe just four rules (Acts 15:19-20).

*After Acts 28*

No such distinction exists among believers today. God's rule for one believer is God's rule for all. "Gentiles (i.e. nations) are fellow-heirs". All believers are the same because Jewish Christians no longer have to follow the law with its commandments and ordinances (Ephesians 2:14-15; 3:6; Colossians 2:14).

### **National Differences (4)**

*Before Acts 28*

The blessings that came to the Gentiles were related to God's desires and purposes for Israel. They were given to the Gentiles in order to provoke Israel into salvation (Romans 11:11,14).

*After Acts 28*

The blessings that belong to the Gentiles now have no relationship to Israel whatsoever. Believers of all nations are blessed independently of Israel.

## **Foundation of the World**

### *Before Acts 28*

The hope of believers was linked with ages "*since* (or from) the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34 *KJV*).

### *After Acts 28*

The hope of present believers is linked with ages "*before* the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4 *KJV*).

## **Grace**

### *Before Acts 28*

God's administration was not one of pure grace. Some of His acts were gracious, others were acts of justice, and some acts were designed to punish. People died for sinful actions on some occasions (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:30).

### *After Acts 28*

God's administration is one of pure grace. All of his acts are gracious. All direct judgement against human sin is on hold for the time being (Ephesians 3:2).

## **Covenants**

### *Before Acts 28*

Every covenant that God had made with Israel was in operation. Some of the blessings that came to them were the result of God keeping a covenant (Acts 3:25-26; Romans 9:3-5).

### *After Acts 28*

No covenant is in operation, because the people with whom they were made (i.e. Israel) have no standing before God (Ephesians 2:12).

## **Paul's Preaching**

### *Before Acts 28*

Men (mostly Jews) had constantly opposed the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:44-50; 17:4,5,13; 21:27-29; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

### *After Acts 28*

Paul preached without hindrance (Acts 28:31).

## **The Lord's Coming**

### *Before Acts 28*

During Acts the Lord's coming was to be "soon" (Acts 3:19,20; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:8; Revelation 22:7,12,20). This is why Paul advised widows and the unmarried not to marry (1 Corinthians 7:8-9; compare Matthew 24:3,19).

### *After Acts 28*

The Lord's coming to rule in Israel has been postponed and does not relate to the hope of our dispensation. Hence we do not find phrases such as "the Kingdom of heaven is near" after Acts 28. Note that Paul now advises younger widows to marry (1 Timothy 5:14).

## **Ordinances**

### *Before Acts 28*

Ceremonies such as water baptism, the Sabbath, and the Lord's Supper (Passover) were observed by Jewish believers (Acts 2:41; 13:44; 1 Corinthians 11:20-21,34).

### *After Acts 28*

Observance of these ordinances, which were for Israel, are now not necessary (Colossians 2:13-17).

## **Baptism (1)**

*Before Acts 28*

Water baptism was an essential requirement along with faith for salvation for a Jew (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38).

*After Acts 28*

Water baptism is not essential for our forgiveness or redemption (Ephesians 1:7; 2:8,9).

## **Baptism (2)**

*Before Acts 28*

At least two forms of baptism were in operation, water and spirit (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44-48).

*After Acts 28*

Only one baptism is now in operation, that of being identified with Christ in His death (Colossians 2:12; Ephesians 4:5; compare with Luke 12:50).

## **Miracles**

*Before Acts 28*

Belief in Christ as Saviour was confirmed by visible, miraculous signs that accompanied this belief. This was true of every Christian at the time (Mark 16:16-18; Hebrews 2:3-4; Romans 15:18-19; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Miracles were called "signs" because they were designed to indicate, or signify, something, usually to Israel (Acts 2:22; 1 Corinthians 1:22; 14:22).

*After Acts 28*

Believers are no longer accompanied by remarkable, evidential miracles. This is because the nation of Israel has been temporarily set aside. There are no references to any miracles occurring after Acts 28.

## **Healing**

*Before Acts 28*

Paul could heal by his word, his touch, and even a handkerchief (Acts 19:11-12; 28:8-9).

*After Acts 28*

Paul was now no longer able to heal. (1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20).

**Content of Writings**

*Before Acts 28*

In his messages, Paul only declared that which was also covered by the writings of Moses and the prophets in some way. "It is written", referring to the Old Testament, occurs over thirty times in Paul's early epistles; (see, for example, Acts 26:22; Romans 2:24; 9:13; 11:7-8).

*After Acts 28*

Paul declared truths revealed to him which Moses and the prophets knew nothing about. This is because, in previous ages, they were "not made known" (Ephesians 3:5,9), but were "disclosed" at that time (Colossians 1:27). The term "it is written" does not occur at all after Acts 28.

**OT References in the NT**

*Before Acts 28*

Quotations from the Old Testament and references to Old Testament people, places and events abound. Because Israel as a nation still featured in God's plans at that stage, there were many references to the Old Testament which featured Israel.

*After Acts 28*

There are very few quotations from the Old Testament, and of this number, not one can be said to teach the mystery revealed to Paul. These few may be found in Ephesians 4:8; 5:14,31; 6:2; and 1 Timothy 5:18.

## **Word Occurrences**

### *Before Acts 28*

Words and phrases associated with "Israel" and its part in God's plans are very common. Such phrases include: Jew, Israel, Israelite, Abraham, Moses, the Lord's Supper, tongues, interpret(ation), heal(ing), miracles, circumcise, circumcision, and other terms related specifically to Israel.

### *After Acts 28*

Terms such as these are virtually non-existent, and there is not even one reference to Abraham. The few times they do occur, they emphasise the fact that there is no difference between the Jewish and Gentile believers. For example: Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 2:11,12; Philippians 3:3-9; Titus 1:14; 2 Timothy 3:6-8.

## **Summary**

We have attempted to show some of the differences in the way that God has dealt with His people before and since the Acts 28 dividing line, and how the relevant Scriptures reflect this. It is our hope that we may all come to a better understanding of the unique and blessed place of the church under this current dispensation of God's immeasurable grace.

## Part 5 - Practical implications of the Acts 28 dividing line

Allow me to now relate some of my personal history. Some years ago, I used to believe that Israel was an important nation in the Old Testament only, and that, of course, all of the sacrificial laws and ceremonies were part of Israel's relationship with God. However, I also believed that when we turned the page from the Old Testament to Matthew chapter 1, the nationality of the people in the New Testament became irrelevant. This implied that, suddenly, all of the disciples and believers threw off all of their Jewish ties, heritage and complicated rituals and simply 'put their faith in Jesus'.

Effectively, this meant that whenever I read of someone receiving a blessing or a command in the New Testament, I would think that it would automatically apply to me also. By the way, that was tremendous if it meant that something good was in store for me. But this also presented me with a problem that I was never able to resolve until I began to apply the principle of right division to the Word.

The problem was this: My church was a mainstream orthodox Christian denomination which did not speak in tongues, perform miraculous healings, or frequently receive inspired visions or prophecies from the Lord. However, frequent occurrences of each of these phenomena are found in the New Testament and were apparently God-inspired. I didn't know what to make of all this.

In addition, there are some churches which *do* claim that these phenomena are present in their midst. For example, I heard of the miraculous healings of people, but on investigation often found that they had little wrong with them. I heard of people with prophecies of major events, but with the passage of time they failed to come to pass. Then there were the people who succumbed to pressure to speak in tongues, and who babbled random sounds and syllables, possibly to satisfy the expectations of some who were listening. Then, again, when there was a failure of people being healed of genuine ailments, often the healer blamed that failure on a lack of faith on the part of the ill person. I now believe that the desire for these - healing, prophesying, tongue speaking, and other Acts-period miracles - are the consequences of not rightly dividing the Bible.

Many such miraculous events are sought after today by some genuine Christians who believe that this is the way that God deals with His church today. Occurrences of healings, tongues-speaking and many other miracles are what we find in the Bible *before* Acts 28, but never *after*. We find that they are linked with God's dealings with Israel while those people were still a nation in His eyes. Now, it is not our aim here to study in detail those kinds of unfortunate misuses of Scripture listed above. We simply wish to point out some of the difficult problems and sad results which arise when Christians fail to see and acknowledge the Acts 28 dividing line. Personally, taking this approach to the Bible has given not only myself but many others peace of mind about that whole issue of the miraculous, and many other issues. It has given us confidence in the Scriptures.

### **Approved unto God**

Observing the principle of right division is important for one other very good reason. 2 Timothy 2:15 says: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (*King James Version*)

The Lord would have us be aware of how to rightly divide the Scriptures and "correctly handle the word of truth" (*NIV*). If we do so, we will have no need to be ashamed of how we have interpreted His Word. Shortly after the above verse appears in 2 Timothy, we read about some people in Paul's time who did *not* rightly divide the word.

"... Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some." (2 Timothy 2:17-18)

Note that these people did not deny the resurrection of believers, but they put it in its wrong place. They had taken something which belonged *later* on in God's plans and purposes, and put it in the *past*, claiming that it had already happened. We could say, indeed, that they "wrongly" divided the word, and hence, their teaching was not approved by God.

But, not only did these two get it wrong. They caused other people to be adversely affected in the process as well. This is but one instance of 'wrong' division in the Scriptures, and, it is a sad fact, there are many mod-

ern versions of this story today also, where teachers who 'wrongly divide' the Word adversely affect the faith of their followers. Occasionally, we hear accusations that diligent Bible study and the approach of right division results in mere head knowledge. We beg to differ, for the reasons given here.

### **Some things stay the same**

Perhaps the most frequent questions raised are about the gospels, and about letters like Romans which were written before Acts 28. Do these fundamentals of the Christian faith still apply? Does it mean that the crucifixion of our Lord was only for Israel? Is there still "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)? And what about "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 19:19 *KJV*)?

Although some of the conditions which are in operation today are different from those before Acts 28, some things have *never* changed. For instance, God *always* loves man; mankind *always* falls short of God's perfect standards; God *always* offers mankind a way of meeting His standards.

So, we are not suggesting that we should only pay attention to the letters written after Acts 28. Rather, by comparing one verse of Scripture with another, we find that those verses from before Acts 28 quoted just a moment ago are very much in harmony with what is written in the epistles after Acts 28. For instance, our faith would be worthless without truths like this from Romans:

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (Romans 3:22; compare with Philippians 3:8-10, written after Acts 28.)

But this same epistle of Romans, written during the Acts period while Israel was still God's chosen nation ahead of the Gentiles, also says:

"I ask then, Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself ... " (Romans 11:1)

"What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew ... Much in every way!" (Romans 3:1-2; see also Romans 1:16; 2:9-10.)

The conditions stated in these verses do not apply today, because we read after Acts 28 that believing Jews and Gentiles are equal in *every* way (Ephesians 3:6 - see Part 3 of this booklet). So, as a *general* rule then, if a particular verse written before or during the Acts period conflicts with one written after the Acts period, then the one written after Acts should be taken as the condition which applies today. We should always give greater weight to God's later revelation.

Understanding the place of Acts 28, Israel and other Biblical matters and topics through the right division of Scripture, not only eliminates many of the problems we have with certain portions of the Bible, but it is something that the Lord would have us do. He has a plan for believers today, and He wants us to see it and comprehend it properly.

## Part 6 - Summary

Today, I am convinced that the church which comprises all Christian believers (Jew or Gentile) began after Acts 28, as set out in this booklet. Here then, is a brief overview of the ground we have covered.

Acts 28 marks the point when Israel was rejected by God as His chosen nation. It is common among Christians today to believe that this point occurred much earlier in Bible history, yet it becomes evident that the nation of Israel continued to be the chosen nation right up until the end of the period covered by the book of Acts.

There are many differences on either side of this chapter in Scripture. Before Acts 28, we read of events, characteristics, commands and blessings which are typical of the situation whilst Israel, as a chosen nation, dominated God's plans, when all of the other nations were 'kept in the background', so to speak. The writings during the period covered by the book of Acts are also quite characteristic of the time in which they were written: i.e. whilst Israel was still God's people. Therefore we should consider what we read in those books in light of this situation.

On the other hand, after Acts 28, we read of features which reflect the new equality amongst believers of all nations, regardless of their nationality. We encourage you to re-read Part 4 of this booklet to further understand the conditions under which God deals with believers today.

Recognising that a major change took place after Acts 28, and acknowledging the conditions which pertain to the body of believers today, is a necessity; not only so that we may avoid the sort of confusion which abounds within the church today, but also so that we will have no need to be ashamed before God as a result of being careless with His Word.

So, when did our church today commence?

Not at Genesis 12 - the calling of Abraham.

Not at Matthew 1 - the beginning of the New Testament.

Not at Matthew 27 - the crucifixion.

Not at Acts 2 - the day of Pentecost.

Not at Acts 9 - the conversion of Paul, apostle to the Gentiles.

Not at Acts 11 - the blessing of Cornelius, a Gentile.

Not at Acts 13 - Paul's first appeal to Gentiles.

No, it commenced after Acts 28, when the nation of Israel was set aside as the dominant nation in God's plans. After that, Jewish and Gentile believers began to be blessed equally in every way.

## **The Books of the New Testament**

### ***Historical:***

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke  
John  
Acts

### ***Letters written during the period covered by the book of Acts:***

Romans  
1 & 2 Corinthians  
Galatians  
1 & 2 Thessalonians  
Hebrews  
James  
1 & 2 Peter  
1,2,3 John  
Jude  
Revelation

**- - - - DIVIDING LINE - Acts 28! - - - -**

### ***Letters written after Acts 28:***

Ephesians  
Philippians  
Colossians  
1 & 2 Timothy  
Titus  
Philemon

# **The Dividing Line**

## **Acts 28!**

### **The place of this important chapter in God's plans for mankind**

Even the most scholarly theological minds, even the most faithful believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, even the most devoted students of the Bible all confess that parts of the Bible are far from easy to understand, even perplexing - even contradictory? Unusual events, incredible miracles, strange apparitions - there are passages that confuse and confound; some parts even appear to conflict! However, *there is a key* which will unlock the Scriptures and which will make many parts clearer and will certainly remove or explain apparent contradictions and seeming conflicts.

The author does not claim that this key will enable Christians to have all the questions answered, but a good many of the puzzling questions Christians often have about the Bible can be answered. That key is to understand more about the 28th chapter of Acts, which is a major dividing line in the working out of God's purposes. This booklet seeks to give readers an understanding of the role of that passage, and so enable them to answer many of their questions themselves.

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