

# *Introduction*

My first trip to the Holy Land was one of extraordinary moments. Some of the highlights were seeing the Upper Room where Jesus inaugurated Holy Communion, looking up at the pinnacle where Satan encouraged Jesus to jump, and entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher where Jesus' body was laid and the Church of the Annunciation where Mary had her life changing visit from the angel Gabriel. All of these were amazing, but this was just the beginning of that pilgrimage. After Israel, our group traveled to Turkey to see the Seven Churches of the Revelation. My knowledge of the Bible was at best "iffy" at that point. Our guide kept talking about Paul, Paul this and Paul that. I wasn't sure what the fuss was about. After all, Paul was not one of the 12 disciples. I always considered him an afterthought.

Over the years, the study of the Bible has revealed to me the importance of Paul, especially the book of Acts. This book chronicles the unique calling God had for him. He went from a Jewish leader full of pride who had contempt for the early Christians to a "sold out" apostle for Jesus Christ. He had an encounter on the road to Damascus with the risen Christ Jesus. From that point until the end of Paul's life, he never stopped proclaiming the gospel message: a message of freedom from sin, intimacy with God the Father and the ability to be all we are called to be by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us.

Paul has been dubbed the greatest evangelist of all time. His calling was to the Gentile people. At that point in time, the Jewish people were the only ones who worshiped the Living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You can think of the spiritual condition of the world before Abraham like this....

Darkness reigned over the earth. Our Creator God had been supplanted by gods of stone and precious metals. The moon, sun and many other created things were worshiped. Basically, there was a god for all human needs. But they were not "real"; they were but stone crafted out of human hands. Along with this idolatry came the practices of child sacrifice, sexual perversion, and vengeful killings, all a part of the darkness.

God then shined His light of faith on one man, Abraham. This man chose to follow the Living God who did not reside in idols but encompassed creation, was alive, and could communicate. Abraham's obedience resulted in God making covenants with him which extended to his descendants, the Jewish people.

Because of Abraham's faith, the Jewish people were chosen to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests and a light to the Gentiles. Over the centuries this one light of faith was as if God had lit one candle in the darkness.

Fast forward to 2000 years ago.

The Jewish people through their prophets were promised a savior, a Messiah who would emerge to establish Abraham's descendants as a nation. It would be a nation the world would honor as it revealed the Living God to all people. The Jews at the time of Jesus thought the salvation the Messiah would bring would rid them of the yoke of servitude to Rome. Yet, Jesus came into the world not as the conquering Messiah but as the servant Messiah who freed the Jews from their slavery to sin and who satisfied all the prophecies about the coming savior. This is not what the Jewish people expected. Though many of them came to faith, many rejected Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Paul was chief among these unbelievers. His passion for the Living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was so complete that he became the chief "executioner" of the early Christians who he felt were contaminating the Jewish faith.

But as God had His eye on Abraham, God also had His eye on Paul. Paul had the prerequisites to go into the world that was illuminated only by the one light of the Jewish faith and proclaim Jesus as the culmination of God's plan. By his obedience Paul would pour Holy Spirit oil on the rest of the known world, and a fire of faith in the Living God would consume mankind. This faith would have as its cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Now the covenants of Abraham were open to all who believed in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Paul would suffer for Jesus. He would be persecuted and imprisoned. It was during these years of isolation and trials that he penned the Prison Epistles: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. I have chosen Philippians and Ephesians as our study this year because of what our world has experienced with the coronavirus. The fear, doubts, anxiety, and hopelessness that can plague a world during times of trials remind me of Paul's circumstances when he wrote these letters. In these studies, we will see how Paul found purpose in isolation, the certainty of faith in a time of uncertainty, and the foundation of hope in a time of doubt. It all revolves around a man named Jesus who rose from the dead and sent us the presence of the Holy Spirit. We will come to know this third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as we journey with Paul. We will look at the ancient covenants that God established with the Jewish people and how they translate to our world and our faith.

Most importantly, we will learn from Paul how to navigate a world that is experiencing transformational changes and yet stay at peace because we are assured of the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

—Meg Rice