

9009U

GOSNELL'S SPECIAL EFFORT - 1996

JAMES THE JUST

Speaker: Bro. Roger Lewis

Study6: Martyr of Faith

Reading: Hebrews 13:1-14

Brother chairman, my dear brethren and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, and my dear young people.

Well, you'll remember on the occasion of our last study, we came to that episode in Acts 21, when the apostle Paul had made his way south to Jerusalem, in order that he might present the Jerusalem poor fund, as the offering of grace from the Gentiles and how that whilst he was there, James sought his help in avoiding what was potentially an ecclesial division. That the circumcision party had yet again, aroused such strength of feeling within the ecclesia, that right at that time, the Jerusalem ecclesia was at a dangerous state where it might boil over with the sheer emotions and feelings that were running high in the ecclesia at that time. We saw James endeavour with the cooperation of Paul to defuse that situation; remember those words in the book of Proverbs that 'scoffers ignite and wise men defuse'. It was James' role to settle the ecclesia down, and to avoid something that would certainly have not been in the best interests of the truth.

Well then, in the course of our study this evening, we're going to have a look at the next 6 years of the history of the ecclesia. We're going to go from AD.60 to AD.65, and in the course of those years we're going to have a look at the time when Festus was appointed as procurator of Judea and a set of circumstances that transpired under his control. Two years later, Festus, in fact, died in office, and was replaced by a new procurator called Albinus, and at that time a man called Ananus became the high priest for a period of 3 months, and we're going to have a look at the circumstances that, we believe, lead to the death of James around about that time. We're going to spend a considerable amount of time this evening, on the book of Hebrews; we're going to look at the background to the book and see what the circumstances were that, we believe, brought forth an epistle from Paul and the appropriateness of his words and of his teaching in that epistle, to the circumstances of the Jerusalem ecclesia. We believe it was roundabout that time, in fact, shortly afterwards, that Peter also wrote his epistle to the circumcision, to the Jewish believers shortly before the fiery trial that was to come upon them during the reign of emperor Nero.

So we ended our last story in Acts 21, and we're going to go back there tonight just to begin the story in Acts 21 because there's something that's interesting that we just want to note before moving on, concerning what happens to the apostle Paul in this particular episode, as recorded for us in Acts 21. The particular thing that we wish to draw attention to is this, we almost stopped the record short the other night, didn't we? we had the apostle Paul going into the temple in order to purify himself, prepared to take on, remember, the expenses of those brethren who were under Nazarite vow, in order that he might comply with James' request. Well, you'll know what happened, we're told in verse 27 of Acts 21, that the Jews which were of Asia saw the apostle Paul in the temple, they stirred up all the people and laid hands on him, and verse 30 says, 'All the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut'. You know, b&s, when you read Acts 21, one comes to the conclusion that the hand of providence was at work in the life of Paul in this particular chapter. You see, I think, he dearly wanted to join issue with the circumcision party, I think he really wanted to take opportunity to discuss with them the issues of circumcision, and the question of law keeping in general; and I think that Acts 21 tells us that the divine hand of providence reached in and plucked Paul right out of that city, and took him away.

Now do you see how many days he was in Jerusalem on this occasion; he wasn't there very long so let's see if we can work out the number of days. Verse 17, 'When we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly', so that's the first day; verse 18, 'and the day following Paul went in with us', so that's the second day; verse 26 says, 'Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple', so that's the third day, but the third day begins a period of 7 days which come to a conclusion in verse 27, 'When the seven days were almost ended', you see, what we're being told in this chapter is that Paul was only in Jerusalem for 9 days, just 9 days, and he was then plucked by the Romans out of the city before he could do anything else. I'm sure he had no opportunity to discuss issues with the circumcision party, in fact, his whole approach at that time, was to settle things down by showing that he himself would walk according to the Law of Moses at that stage. He had no opportunity to discuss things with them at all, and it's almost as if God (and I can hear Paul saying, I just want to) and God says, 'no, Paul, not now, not at this time', and he's removed out of the scene.

Now you know where he was taken, he was taken to Caesarea; come and have a look at chapter 25, he was in Caesarea for a while wasn't he? awaiting trial, and in Acts 25 verse 1 we're told, 'Now when Festus was come into the province, after three days he ascended from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Then the high priest and the chief of the Jews informed him against Paul, and besought him, And desired favour against him, that he would send for him (that is, Paul) to Jerusalem, laying wait in the way to kill him'. So you see, had the procurator agreed to this request, there was a further opportunity wherein Paul may have returned to Jerusalem at this time, but it was not to be! because Festus made a ruling in verse 4, 'Festus answered, that Paul **should be kept at Caesarea**', and the opportunity passed, and Paul never did get the chance to get back to

Jerusalem; and just as well he didn't because we're told that the Jews under the chaperonage of the high priest, were lying in wait to kill him. So in fact, we're told in verse 7 that when he was come back to Caesarea, the Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove. While he answered for himself, Neither against the Law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all. But Festus, **willing to do the Jews a pleasure**, answered Paul, and said, (now look at this question, verse 9) 'wilt thou go up to Jerusalem, and there be judged of these things before me?' Ah, so you see, one last opportunity now for the apostle to get back into the city that he might have dealings with the ecclesia; one last chance. Paul says, verse 10, 'I stand at Caesar's judgment seat', and Festus says in verse 12, 'Hast thou appealed unto Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go', and the last chance for Paul to return to Jerusalem was gone! He was now irrevocably committed to the long journey that would take him to Rome; I wonder what the apostle Paul's thoughts were as he finally boarded the boat that slipped away from the Palestinian coast into the waters of the Mediterranean, drifting ever further and further away from Jerusalem and from the ecclesia and from his dear brother James. God, as it were, seems to take the apostle and to move him further away from Jerusalem, at the very time that the apostle would have loved to assist James in his struggle against the advance of the circumcision party at that time.

It was not to be! you sense the distinct hand of providence here, let me come back to that, I think there was a reason, you see, I think that God had a reason for why Paul was being removed at this particular time. You can see also, by the way, in this chapter, Acts 25, the growing hatred of the priesthood against the ecclesias; they killed the Lord, they had murdered Stephen, they had convinced Herod to kill James ben Zebedee, now they sought to remove Paul, but their plans were frustrated. God says, 'I don't want Paul to return to Jerusalem, but his life is not forfeited at this stage, I have further work for this man'; and we believe God's hand overshadowed Paul because he did have further things to do, as yet with the Jerusalem ecclesia. But for the moment, James was left on his own to continue that struggle.

You know, b&s, there are those that somehow feel that maybe James did do the wrong thing. In Acts 15 and Acts 21 he seems to be focused on keeping the ecclesia together, maybe he tried to keep the ecclesia together at **all costs**, maybe he should have dealt with the issue, maybe he should have got the circumcision party together and dealt with it 20 years before! and then we wouldn't have had all this bitterness in the ecclesia, maybe he should have done that! It's easy to feel that way, especially with the benefit of hindsight looking back at this, this is what he ought to have done! You see, I think the story of James and what he endeavoured to do, is there for the learning, and I know what the spirit of James was, you see, I think we tend to over simplify the difficulties that faced this particular brother. This wasn't just any controversy! this wasn't just some difficulty in an ecclesia that ought to be brought to a head and dealt with; this issue was so enormous that it affected every single member of this ecclesia. Every single member of the Jerusalem ecclesia had been brought up under the Law; they loved the Law, they

knew that the Law was just and holy and good, it affected their diet, it affected their jobs, it affected their fields, it affected their human relations, it affected everything they did. It governed their life! and they had been trained in that for over a 1,000 years of history, and every member of the ecclesia felt that way about this Law. You couldn't just walk away from that over night, it was just too large a problem; I don't think that James was a 'peace at any price' man, I think that what James was trying to do was to keep the ecclesia together so that there would be more time to educate people, and the real issues involved that one day they would need to put the Law behind them, but it was going to take time. I know what James' motive was, his motive was in these words, 'brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins'. I think James was quite clear in what he wanted to do, and what he knew, b&s, was that it would take time. He knew that this controversy would come to a head one day, but what James wanted was that when the controversy finally did come to a head, that brethren and sisters would understand the principles involved and would have knowledge of what to do. Had that work been pursued 20 years earlier I think there would have been far greater havoc in this ecclesia. Do you know what would have happened, if the whole matter had been prosecuted earlier in time in the Jerusalem ecclesia, do you know what would have happened? What would have happened is this, the ecclesia would have said, 'right, we're dividing! the circumcision party to this side, James to that side! there would have been those who said , we follow James and those who would say , we follow the circumcision party and there would be another group in the middle that would say, 'well, I don't understand all this battling and all this controversy, I don't understand and I don't know which group to follow, so I'm out of the truth completely, I'm gone! and there would have been a group that would be lost to the truth absolutely. James didn't want that to happen!

You know, b&s, I think you see, that we have this fallacy that says, **the only thing that's important in the truth is the right principle!** that we've got to be right on the issue, and as long as we're right on the issue then we can prosecute that and be safe! That's just not right in ecclesial life, is it? there's actually 4 things that are important: 4 things that are important, all ranking if you like, with equal degree of importance, and they are the 4 things of wisdom that come together in the right conduct of ecclesial life and they are this; **the right issue, and the right motive, and the right approach, and the right time!** If you want to insure ecclesial controversy, then just ignore those 4 principles. It's just too simple to say that we must be right on the issue, and ignore the other 3!

So James is on his own and Paul has gone! Now you see, Paul arrived in Jerusalem on this particular visit in AD.58 and he was there imprisoned in detention at Caesarea for 2 years, AD.59 and AD.60, and the following year he made his faithful journey via a ship and a shipwreck on the way to Rome, which was AD.61 and we're told in the book of Acts that for the next 2 years he dwelt in Rome and those years, b&s, were AD.62 and 63 and I want you to take a note, a mental note at least of those dates. He was in Rome for the years AD.62 and 63, and during that time the apostle was busy; he was a man

who wrote many things, he wrote some epistles and that brings us to the next stage of our story tonight which is the story of the epistle to the Hebrews, and it is a story in a sense, there are lots of bible stories, and you see, this is an intriguing one because you see, there's been a lot of controversy over the epistle of the Hebrews in terms of who it was written to and who it was written by and what it was written for. Now can anyone tell me, apart from the epistle to the Hebrews which I'm going to cover now in reasonable detail, can anyone tell me what other epistles did Paul write in his first imprisonment in Rome? AD.62 and 63? Well maybe this is a good chance for an advertisement, I don't know if you've seen this little chart here, I think it was produced in Adelaide for a Sunday School class, but it's a chart of the activities of the apostle Paul in the New Testament era, and it lists all the epistles and when they were written. Excellent in terms of the chronology of the writings of the New Testament? Well, he wrote the following epistles: he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and he wrote Philemon during that particular imprisonment, those 4 epistles that we know of, and I believe, that in that same burst of epistle writing, he also wrote the epistle to the Hebrews.

Now I'm going to spend a bit of time dealing with the epistle to the Hebrews and I'm going to make quite a few comments about Hebrews because, you see, I think by the time we get to the end you'll understand why, because it's critical to this whole story, you see, of the Jerusalem ecclesia and in fact, of James' own labours. So let's start by working out therefore, who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews? You might think that's easy by the way, because you turn up your bible and it says across the top of it, 'the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews', but that wasn't necessarily always understood, in fact, in earlier times there was a great deal of controversy over who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews; it was thought by some that James himself wrote Hebrews; it was thought by others that Barnabas wrote Hebrews; it was suggested by some that Silas wrote Hebrews. Some others believe that Apollos wrote Hebrews, yet a further school of thought was that Priscilla wrote Hebrews. Some believe that Clement of a later generation wrote Hebrews and among the higher school of criticism, the German erudite scholars of higher criticism, they were united in this that although they all had varying views on who did write the epistle to the Hebrews, the one thing on which the German school of criticism was united, was that **Paul didn't write Hebrews**, which as brother John Carter says 'is probably the best reason why we should think he did'!

Now basically the arguments about the writing of Hebrews rests on linguistic evidence; it's all to do with the actual formation of the Greek text and the argument runs that the actual syntax and the grammar of this epistle are different to every other document that Paul wrote; therefore he cannot be the author. On the other hand however, I've seen a very copious argument where after several pages of closely typed evidence, there is amassed a proof that shows that there is phrase after phrase and word after word that are unique to the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews, if he did write it, and only elsewhere in the divine record in Paul's other writings. You'll find there are a lot of arguments that rest on linguistic evidence that are probably not conclusive either way; and we disappear off into the realm of expertise that most of us don't have, and so one of my fond sayings is that Christadelphians, or most of us, will not be good textual scholars

but we ought to be all excellent contextual scholars (we compare bible passage with bible passage). So where would we start as Christadelphians, as bible students, where would we start to work out who wrote Hebrews? and the answer is, we'd ask if there was any scriptural evidence? The answer is, 'yes, I think there is!' because if you come to the second epistle of Peter chapter 3, I think we have a scriptural basis for assuming that Paul wrote Hebrews. Now you'll remember what we know about the apostle Peter so far, Peter is the apostle to the circumcision and the epistles that Peter wrote were to the Hebrew believers, to the 'diaspora'; Peter was a writer of letters to the Hebrew believers, as part of his apostleship to the circumcision. But at the very end of his epistles in 2 Peter 3 verse 15 he says this, 'And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him, hath written unto **you**', now the question is, 'who's the you?' and the answer is **Hebrew believers**, Jewish believers, to whom Peter himself was writing as the apostle to the circumcision. So here we're being told by the apostle Peter, that Paul had written to the Hebrew believers, and not only that but verse 16 says, that it was one of his epistles, and not only was it an epistle of Paul but at the end of that verse, verse 16, Peter says 'that it was counted as scripture', 'they wrest it as they do also the other scriptures'. So we have a writing of Paul to the Hebrew believers that was an epistle from his hand that was counted as being scripture.

What type of an epistle was it? Well, we're told in that particular verse, verse 16, Peter says, 'As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to be understood'. Now I don't know if you remember these words but you might tell me where they came from? 'Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered seeing you are dull of hearing', do you know who says that and where? that's the apostle Paul in Hebrews 5 verse 11, 'we have many things to say and hard to be uttered seeing you are dull of hearing' and the apostle Peter says that in this particular epistle of Paul, there were things written that were hard to be understood (a good cross reference-Hebrews 5 verse 11) Hands up those who have just taken a pencil and put that in their margin! Rule #1, always check your marginal reference, it's already in your margin! all we've got to do is circle the appropriate number, it's already there. So let me summarize it for you on this overhead.

Peter was the apostle to the circumcision, he wrote his epistles therefore, to Hebrew Christians. He indicates that Paul also wrote an epistle to the Hebrew Christians, which was received as scripture. Now if this does not answer to the epistle to the Hebrews, then we've got a problem. What we have is a recognized scripture of Paul to the Hebrew Christians that is lost, if it is not Hebrews, and yet we also have an anonymous epistle to Hebrew Christians that is found in the bible, the book of Hebrews, and so we assume, in fact, that they are one and the same document. That there is no missing letter of Paul, that this is the very one written to the Hebrew believers containing things hard to be understood, but counted as scripture nevertheless. So that's interesting, isn't it? in terms of, in fact, a scriptural basis for assuming the authorship of Paul.

Now just notice this though, in terms of some further evidence in that regard. You know,

that one of the things mentioned, in fact, our reading brother mentioned it in his reading tonight, he talked about 'remembering those who are in bonds', remember those words in Hebrews 13? 'remembering those that are in bonds'. Do you know, b&s, that in every epistle of his first imprisonment, Paul mentions his bonds; it's mentioned in Ephesians, in Philippians, in Colossians, in Philemon and in the book of Hebrews. Every epistle of the first imprisonment mentions Paul's bonds. So that's interesting, isn't it? and in addition to that we're told in this particular book, the book of Hebrews, whoever the writer is, he's a close associate of Timothy's, and his hope of release to visit them would be, that when Timothy was set at liberty, that he hoped to come and visit the ecclesia with Timothy at a later time. The reference to Timothy and, of course, to the apostle's dear friendship with his son in the faith, is a common element in the other epistle, written at that time, of Paul's first imprisonment. So we believe, that the epistle was written by Paul.

Now part of the problem, by the way, is to how this controversy arose, is because you know how Paul begins most of his letters, 'Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ', but that's not how Hebrews begins, is it? How does Hebrews begin? **God who at sundry times and in divers'...** and there's no mention of apostleship. You see, I think there's a reason for that, because you see, well, what do you think? why do you think that Paul doesn't mention his apostleship at the beginning of the letter to Hebrews? any ideas on that? The problems were so great that he might not have the weight, he didn't want to perhaps needlessly antagonize the circumcision party which would be a particular group that he'd be appealing to! Any other thoughts? he might have closed their ears in so saying, so he just begins the letter abruptly, 'God'; I think another reason is, because who was Paul the apostle to? Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, he's now writing the one letter that he would write to Hebrew Christians, to the circumcision; he wasn't an apostle to the circumcision. His apostleship was to the Gentiles, he's now writing to the one group that he wasn't an apostle to! so he simply opens the letter and starts with the work of God in sundry times.

As for all these language arguments, these linguistic arguments, the language in the text and the words of Hebrews is special and different to every other epistle that Paul ever wrote, of course, they're different! because I think you see, the apostle realized that he would never ever write a letter like this one, this was going to be a special epistle like none others that he had ever written, to the Hebrew believers and on the subject of the Law. It was unique even amongst the apostles and literature, and do you notice this also, that what we have therefore, in the canon of scripture is all the letters to the circumcision joined together, notice that? Paul to the Hebrews, James to the Hebrews, Peter 1 and 2 to the Hebrews, all the letters to the Hebrew believers are brought together in the canon of the New Testament. These 3 great men who in so many respects worked together in this regard, Paul, James and Peter their letters are found in that particular way, and so here is a letter then to the Hebrew believers. But it was more than that, b&s, it was certainly more than just a letter to the Hebrew believers, and I'll show you why! because although no ecclesia is specifically mentioned, the epistle was obviously intended for a particular ecclesia, because the

writer refers on several occasions to his readers, as if they were a definite community. There's no ecclesia mentioned, is there? but somehow one gets the sense that he's writing to a particular group, in fact, so much so that in chapter 13, Paul says that he intends to visit **them**. Now he could only say that he intended to visit them, if they were a compact group in such a way, that by visiting one he could visit them all at the same time. It was an ecclesia, you see, that he was writing to!

The apostle in this particular letter is obviously known to the writer because he mentions in chapter 13 verse 19 that he's visited them in the past and, of course, so Paul had, he had been in Jerusalem in Acts 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, he remarks on their faithful beginnings in the face of persecution chapter 10; and that was the very experience of the Jerusalem ecclesia in the early years, they were faithful amidst great persecution from the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. In chapter 6 he remembers their gracious spirit of ministering to those that were in need, and wasn't that an early characteristic of the Jerusalem ecclesia that they sold that which they had and gave to the common good and the common need of all the members of the ecclesia? So you see, the very circumstances that are recounted by the apostle, in writing this letter, do seem to be appropriate to the Hebrew brethren in Jerusalem. Actually, notice this, although he makes reference to previous persecution, he also, I think, he hints of further persecution to come, because in Hebrews 12, just notice this phrase in verse 4, and I think this is quite significant if you just give emphasis to one word and that's this, he says, 'Ye have not **yet** resisted unto blood', and I think the key word of verse 4 is '**yet**', oh, it was coming, b&s, it was coming upon this ecclesia very shortly, there were only a few years left, you see, before the great holocaust of AD.70 would come upon them and they would resist unto blood, they would know all about resistance unto blood in but a few years! further persecution was to come upon this ecclesia to whom he writes. But not yet! not just yet! says the apostle.

Another couple of interesting features with regard to whom he is writing to. The tone and the content of the epistle is thoroughly **Hebrew**; it does imply that the writer was addressing a congregation of Hebrew Christians. On many occasions the writer makes sweeping applications of the Law that obviously assume that his readers understand the Law. They had to know about the dietetic regulations, sacrifice upon the altar, the special offerings for holy days, the liturgical use of the blood, the duties of the priesthood. Now what ecclesia would have special knowledge of all those circumstances of the Law? Well, of course, there might have been several, but especially the Jerusalem ecclesia, because remember what it says in Acts 6 and verse 7, it says, 'a great company of **priests** were obedient to the faith, and in Acts 15 verse 5 it says, 'and certain amongst the sect of the Pharisees who believed. So there was a strong Pharisean and Sadducean element of the Jerusalem ecclesia, oh, there were lots of brethren in this meeting that knew all about the Law, and not only the Law, b&s, and the aspects of the Law, but one other thing in particular, that seems to be marked out in this epistle, and that is, a **special knowledge of temple services**, and of the priestly ministrations involving the temple services. So we ask ourselves the question, what ecclesia in particular would have special knowledge of the temple system? and

the answer is, the Jerusalem ecclesia. In fact, you'll remember what we're told in Acts 2 and Acts 5, that in fact, they met together in the very precincts of the temple, did this ecclesia. Oh yes, they knew all about it!

You might think we're labouring the point, b&s, but you see, this is important! Because what we're saying is that this was a letter to the Jerusalem ecclesia. It wasn't just to any ecclesia, it wasn't just to Hebrew believers, it was written to the very ecclesia whose circumstances we're following in the course of our story, the story of James and the Jerusalem ecclesia. This was a letter to this particular group of people, amongst whom, of course, was James and the circumcision party. I want you to notice something else interesting about the epistle. On 3 occasions in chapter 13, the apostle says, 'obey them that have the rule over you; submit to them that have the rule over you; follow those that have the rule over you', chapter 13 verses 7, 17, 24 and the obvious of Hebrews as far as the writer is concerned is that they had a faithful and honourable group of leaders **that ought to be supported**. So what we're being told is that Paul had no problem with the leaders of this ecclesia. But he does have a problem because in chapter 5, he speaks of the fact that they were going **backwards** in certain spiritual things; and the problem that this writer has is not with the leaders of the ecclesia, but some other group in the meeting.

Well, that's the Jerusalem ecclesia, isn't it? We know, you see, from Acts 15 and Acts 21, that Paul was absolutely in harmony with the leaders of the Jerusalem ecclesia, and with James in particular! His argument was with the circumcision party!

That was the controversy, wasn't it, as far as Paul was concerned? In accord with the leaders, but he wishes to make an appeal to a particular group within the ecclesia. Finally then we make note of this, that throughout the last few chapters of Hebrews, Hebrews 11, 12 and 13, he makes references over and over again to **a city, a city to come**, he says, the city of the living God which was to be the heavenly Jerusalem, and finally in chapter 13 he says, 'here we have no continuing city', now who would he be writing to when he says that? but an ecclesia that were so focused on the **city** in which they were! the city of Jerusalem, the city of the temple.

Yes, I think he was writing to the Jerusalem ecclesia, b&s, I'll tell you something interesting also, not only does he never mention his apostleship in opening the circumstances of this letter, but there's another word that is never ever found in the book of Hebrews. Now when you stop and think about what Hebrews is all about, it's about the exposition of the Law, isn't it? and as you read the book of Hebrews you have blood and bulls, and goats, and sacrifices and furniture and all sorts of things, but there is one word, now what do you think that word might be? bearing in mind who he's writing to? **Circumcision**, that's exactly right! you'll never find the word 'circumcision' anywhere in this letter; you see, Paul didn't want to do anything that would needlessly antagonize people before they listened to what he had to say; he doesn't want to upset anyone, he doesn't want any controversies; 'look, I just want you to listen to the arguments that are laid out in this particular letter'. So what was the theme then, of the

epistle to the Hebrews? Well, I'm going to just read a couple of extracts for you from brother Barling's book on Hebrews, because I think he's got some comments here that are just excellent with regard to the spirit of this letter and the circumstances of the Jerusalem ecclesia at this particular time, it just captures I think exactly what was actually happening. Now this is what brother Barling says,

'This letter envisages a Christian community of a peculiar character, one intimately familiar with, if not actually engrossed with, the ceremonial observances of the Law of Moses. The conclusion is inescapable, these men were not only Christians, but also Jews; Jews steeped in their age old Law, fondly attached to it, zealous guardians of it, needing to be convinced that it's prescriptions were no longer valid, but could and should be dispensed with utterly, to give place to the worship of God in spirit and in truth. The discussion of these capital themes in the letter, is not coldly academical, but throbs with passion precisely, because for the readers as Jews, so much was at stake. The issue held fast for so long after the day of Pentecost, only because the converts made during that time, were without exception, Jews; and because the whole Christian community in Jerusalem was content to remain strictly Orthodox in its religious practices, even though it was **unorthodox** in its fundamental article of faith'.

I think brother Barling captures, you see, the very spirit, if you like, of what the letter was endeavouring to do and who it was writing to on this occasion. What do you think the writer had in mind, what objective did the writer have in mind? Well, brother Barling goes on to say this in terms of the aim of the letter.

'The writer here is not intent on giving reasons why the Gentile element in the ecclesia, should be exempted from the observance of the Law; he is not seeking to settle the thorny problems of religious conscience peculiar to a mixed assembly of Gentiles and Jews, he handles a far more explosive matter. He sets out to convince actual Jews, long accustomed by habit to think it their sacred duty to continue to practice that observance, that it is now, no longer legitimate for them to do so. He has to bring about an intellectual conviction, so strong that it will win consent for the drastic step which he now deems essential, and overdue; he is plainly aware of the tenseness of atmosphere in the epistle is witnessed, that this attempt of his is a unique opportunity and it is his one and only means of ensuring that that step is taken, and that upon the success or failure of this one vital communication, depends the whole fate of his Jewish readers as Christians. Either as a result, they will go on to perfection, or they will instead draw back, and that to perdition!'

I think in those words, you see, brother Barling so splendidly captures the very passion

of this letter written to the Jerusalem ecclesia, at a time of great danger for that ecclesia, because you see, with the rising spirit of the circumcision party, the great danger was that they would go back to the Law, back to Judaism. You see, I think that's one of the great themes of the epistle to the Hebrews, actually, perhaps it's not mentioned in most of the study notes, you know, we look at the key themes to the book of Hebrews, but I think this is an important one, in fact, we might just take a moment or two, to quickly go through these, just so that you can see this idea. I think that the great golden thread, if you like, of the epistle is a series of warnings from the writer to the Jerusalem ecclesia that **they ought not to go back into the fullness of the Law**.

Now just look at these! We're not going to expound these passages we're just going to read them, so they you can see the spirit of them!

Hebrews 2 verses 1 to 4, 'Therefore, says the apostle, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles' (can you see the spirit of those words?) if we neglect so great salvation; don't let it slip, says the apostle.

Hebrews 3 verses 12 to 14, 'Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called TODAY; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end' (can you see the appeal of the writer? don't go back, hold what you began with in the ecclesia), he says.

Hebrews 6 verses 4 to 8, 'For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, And have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the age to come, if they shall fall away to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned'. (It's impossible to renew them, he says, if they fall away).

Hebrews 10 verses 26 to 31, 'For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted **the blood of the covenant**, wherewith he

was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know Him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto Me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The LORD shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'.

Hebrews 10 verses 38 and 39, 'Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe, says the apostle, to the saving of the soul'. (don't go back to the tradition of the Law, cries Paul, go on to the saving of faith)

Hebrews 11 verses 13 to 16, 'These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from when they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for He hath prepared for them a city'. (they might have had opportunity to have returned, but they didn't, says the apostle, not the patriarchs, they looked for something better, says Paul).

Hebrews 12 verses 12 to 15, 'Wherefore, lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled'.

Hebrews 12 verses 25 to 26, 'See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now He hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven'.

Hebrews 13 verse 9 to 13, 'Be not carried away with diverse and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach'. (do you see the emphasis of that verse 11 'without the camp', verse 12, 'without the gate', verse 13, 'without the camp', and you see, what the apostle Paul is pleading to the Jerusalem ecclesia is, you won't find Christ in the temple, you won't find Christ in Jerusalem, you won't find Christ in the Law, He's outside the city! and if you want to be with Him says the apostle, then you've got to go outside everything that's associated with the Law. Not only that, b&s, not only must they

symbolically leave Jerusalem, but I'm sure the apostle was warning them, that the day was shortly coming when they would truly have to leave the city itself and walk away. Walk away to freedom, walk away from the Law forever! and find Christ. Oh, this is a brilliant appeal, b&s, it's the passionate reasoning of a man who knew all about the Law and who knew the failures of the Law and the weakness of the Law; and I think, you see now, b&s, we perhaps now understand why Paul never got to speak to the circumcision party when he came in AD.58, because I think God took him out of Jerusalem and said, 'No, Paul, not now, I don't want you to speak to the circumcision party, I want you to write to the circumcision party; because as a result of that, we have the finest exposition of the Law that cannot save, but that points forward to Christ, than can ever be found in the scriptures of truth, because Paul had to write that letter, he couldn't speak to them.

It's a marvellous epistle! and I hope with those words of background, the colour of the appeal to the Jerusalem ecclesia, that that might help for all of us, to make this particular letter come alive, with a special power that maybe we haven't seen before!

Now here's the question, b&s, every letter that the apostle Paul ever wrote was drawn forth, you see, by circumstance, a need, a special reason, now why was it that the apostle in Roman in AD.62 and 63 felt the need to right this letter to the Jerusalem ecclesia? Well, I'm going to tell you what I think happened, you see, and that's this, that in AD.62 a circumstance took place in the nation, and in particular, took place in Jerusalem. That circumstance was this, that Festus who was the Roman governor died; and there was going to be a new man appointed. Rome made the appointment and the new man's name was Albinus and he was going to be the procurator of Judea in place of Festus. But he hadn't got to Jerusalem as yet; and in the meantime, the high priest who was in Jerusalem at the time, took advantage of the fact, that for 3 months there was a power vacuum in Jerusalem. There was no Roman governor for 3 months in AD.62. Paul is in Rome, there is a changeover of Roman governor in Jerusalem and in Judea and in that particular 3 months, Ananus (which was the name of the high priest) persuaded the Sanhedrin that they ought to take James. You see, he was seen as the leader of the ecclesia, and the high priest was already frustrated that they had not been able to capture and kill Paul, and so now they vent their frustration on the ecclesia by taking James. You would never believe who this man was, b&s, the high priest, his name was Ananus also known as Hanun the younger, do you know who he really was? he was the last of the sons of Ananus who held the high priesthood. Ananus had 5 sons who followed him into the high priesthood, this is the last of them; they got Christ, and now they've got his brother. One family, the house of Ananus, and that house and the priesthood, murderous men as they were, reached down for 30 years now after the death of the Lord, and they reached out and took James.

At a time, b&s, when the ecclesia so desperately needed him, James was taken. In the book of Eusebius he gives an account of his death, he quotes from another historian called Hegesippus, whose writings now are no longer extant, but are preserved in measure in the writings of Eusebius, and it records the story of the death of James in

this way:

'The Pharisees said to one another, let us go up and cast Him down, that they may dread to believe in Him,(that is Christ); and they cried out, Oh, oh Justus (James) himself is deceived. Going up therefore, they cast down the Just man saying to one another, 'let us stone James the Just, and they began to stone him, and as he did not die immediately when cast down, but turning round he knelt down and said, 'I entreat Thee, O LORD God and Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. Thus were they stoning him when one of the priests of the sons of Rechab, the son of the Rechabites, spoken of by Jeremiah the prophet cried out, 'Cease, what are you doing? Justus is praying for you!' and one of them, a fuller, beat out the brains of Justus with the club that he used to beat out clothes. Thus he suffered martyrdom and they buried him on the spot where his tombstone is still remaining, by the temple. He became a faithful witness both to the Jews and Greeks that Jesus is the Christ, and immediately after this, Vespasian invaded and took Judea'.

You know, b&s, Hegesippus wasn't right on that! Vespasian didn't invade for another few years, but I believe that what Hegesippus meant was, that when the judgments of AD.70 finally fell upon a guilty nation, that they were in measure not just because of the death of Christ, but also because of the death of James the Lord's brother. If you come to James 5, you know we have one of these strange statements here that James had no thought of these words ever applying to himself, he was thinking of the Lord when he wrote these words, but it turned out all the same, you see. James 5 verse 5, and writing to the rich Jews of his day he says, 'Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed (and as the Greek should be) the just One (singular); and He doth not resist you'. Although James had in mind his own brother, b&s, it turned out that he, the just one also, lost his life at the hands of the Jews. Another just man perished without resistance, and b&s, at a time when the ecclesia could ill afford his death.

Now come to Acts 28, now this was AD.62 you see, and in Acts 28 we're told that at the very time that James died, Paul was in Rome and he was as the 30th verse tells us, 'Paul was two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God'. **He received all that came in unto him**, and I think that one day there came a knock at the door, and a message arrived for Paul that said that they've killed James! **James is dead!** and Paul who knew this ecclesia so well, understood that with the death of this man, that this ecclesia was in trouble! This is the man that wrote epistles that said, 'My brethren, these things ought not to be', he was **the father figure** of the Jerusalem ecclesia; where would they turn now, the last pillar of good sense of compassion, of fairness, of justice, of care, of temperance, he was gone! You see, I think Paul knew that if ever, if ever the Jerusalem ecclesia was in deadly peril of succumbing to the spirit of the circumcision party and of going back to the Law, it was right here, and right now, consequent upon the death of James. I think

Paul wrote his letter at that time, from prison back to Jerusalem.

Now come and have a look at Hebrews 13, I think it was the death of James that drew forth this letter and all the brilliance of the apostle Paul, was marshalled for one final appeal to the circumcision party. But in the middle of that letter he says this, verse 7, 'Remember them which have the rule over you', but you see, in the Greek, b&s, that phrase is in the past tense, it should be rendered, 'Remember **your former leaders**'; the NASB says, '**remember those who lead you, who spoke the Word of God to you, and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith**'; and whoever Paul is writing about it's someone who was a ruler of the Jerusalem ecclesia, who's now dead! You remember them, says the apostle and don't forget their faith. Now why would Paul say that? You see, I think this was his salute to James, this is Paul saying, 'Shalom, James, farewell brother! Let your work not be in vain!' and he writes a final passionate appeal to an ecclesia, who had rested on this man for 30 years, and asks them from the bottom of his heart, that they might follow the faith of that one who had been their former leader. I think that's the background to the letter to the Hebrews.

Well, b&s, a passionate appeal it is! Did they listen? Did this finally convince them? Were they changed? did they change in time? did Paul finally break their hearts? Well, we need to know, don't we? b&s, and God willing we shall in our next study.