

# **PART ONE**

## **BIBLE LESSONS**

### **A. OLD TESTAMENT**

KING DAVID, who was the founder of the Imperial Israel, and his son Solomon were Unitarian Monarchists. However, after their reign, the nation was divided into two as Judah and Israel. Two tribes of the children of Israel lived in Judah and ten tribes in Israel. Prophet Ahijah had foretold of this earlier (1 Kings 11:26-32). The capital of Judah was Jerusalem and that of Israel, Samaria. These two nations were at enmity with one another. Therefore, they were slaves to neighbouring countries like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. These historical events are what we are going to learn in this class.

#### **1. KING JEROBOAM** **1 Kings 11:26-12:32; 13:1-10; 14:1-20**

WHEN Israel's wise King Solomon started to rule forgetting God, then God chose Jeroboam who was a young officer in the royal courts and an able person, as the King of Israel. Jeroboam had been informed by Prophet Ahijah that he would be crowned as king over ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. When Solomon who had reigned for forty years had deceased, as per succession, his son Rehoboam became king. Under the leadership of Jeroboam who was an official of the royal courts and who had received God's commission, went to the king's court with the councillors of Israel with the request to decrease the hard labour and heavy yoke that King Solomon had forced upon the people of Israel. However, Rehoboam rejected the advice of the senior ministers who served during the time of his father Solomon and instead accepted the advice of the youngsters with him and only harassed the people more. Following this, except for the people of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the rest of the ten tribes joined together, and made Jeroboam king.

There is a tradition among the Israelites of going to Jerusalem to worship. Fearing that when the people belonging to the ten tribes of Israel go to Jerusalem to worship, they might get in touch with the people there and become friendly with them and his kingly position would be shaken, Jeroboam set up two calves out of gold in Bethel and Dan for the people to worship. God was displeased by this act which was against His command. From that day onwards Jeroboam's son became an invalid.

While Jeroboam was standing near the altar to make an incense offering at the festival organised for the altar erected in Bethel, a man of God came there according to the instruction of God. He said to the altar, "Altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: 'A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you'. This is the sign the LORD has declared: The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out."

When Jeroboam heard the words pronounced against the altar, he stretched out his hand and said, "Seize him." Immediately his stretched out arm shrivelled up that he could not fold it back. The altar also split apart and its ashes poured out just as the sign that was given by the man of God by the word of the LORD. Then King Jeroboam realised the command of the Lord. So he asked the man of God to pray for mercy to the Lord and to "Intercede with the LORD your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored." The man of God prayed and the king's hand was restored to its normal self. So Jeroboam invited the man of God who had restored his hand, to the palace to give him a fine reward. For that the man of God answered the king, "Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the

word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came'." Thus he took another road and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel.

Jeroboam sent his wife to Shiloh to see prophet Ahijah who had given Jeroboam God's word that he would become the king of Israel, and to inform the prophet about the setbacks, he Jeroboam was experiencing, and also to enquire about what would happen to his invalid son. He sent her in disguise so that she would not be recognised as the king's wife. Prophet Ahijah was blind due to old age. However, God had instructed Ahijah, in advance, about what to tell her. As soon as he heard the footsteps of the queen at the door, he said, "Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why are you pretending to be someone else? I have been asked to give you some harsh news. The God of Israel raised Jeroboam up from among the people and appointed him ruler over Israel. He tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it you. But you have not been like His servant David, who kept His commands and followed Him with all his heart, doing only what was right in His eyes. You have done more evil. You have made for yourself other gods and idols. Because of this, disaster has come upon the house of Jeroboam. So, you can get up and go back home. When you set foot in your city, your son will die." And everything happened just as Ahijah had said.

## 2. Man of God Violated God's Command

### 1 Kings 13:11-32

IN THE last lesson we learned about the man of God who came to Jeroboam. We saw that, obeying the command of God, the man of God returned not the way he came but on a different route, even rejecting the gifts and food that Jeroboam offered.

Among the people who had gathered at the festival for the altar in Bethel, there were the sons of an old prophet who lived in that city. They informed their father how at the festival King Jeroboam made the incense offering and his hand shrivelled; and how a man of God prayed and restored the king's hand. At once, that prophet enquired about the direction in which this man of God went and immediately mounted his donkey and went to see the man of God. The prophet saw the man of God whom he was searching for sitting under an oak tree all tired and exhausted. He went to the man and asked him, "Are you the man of God who healed the hand of the king?" **(The dialogue in the Bible is not so. It says, "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?")**. When the man of God answered yes, the prophet invited him to his own house for a meal and to rest. The man of God replied that according to God's command, "I cannot go with you, nor can I eat bread or drink water with you in this place." For that the old prophet said, "I too am a servant of God like you. An angel of the Lord told me to fetch you back to my house so that you may eat bread and drink water." Not realising that the old prophet was lying to him, the man of God returned with him and ate and drank in his house. While they were sitting for the meal, the word of the LORD came to the old prophet who was the owner of the house about the man of God. He said to the man of God who had come from Judah, "This is what the LORD says: 'Because you have defied the word of the LORD and have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you, and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink, your body will not be buried in the tomb of your ancestors.'" Before long the man of God got on a donkey and left.

As the man of God was going back, a lion came against him and attacked him and killed him. His body lay on the road, and the lion and the donkey on which he rode stood beside it. The lion neither ate the body of the man of God, nor did it attack the donkey. Passersby who saw this were amazed and went and told the old prophet about this. He was grieved and said, "It is the man of God who defied the word of the LORD. The LORD has given him over to the lion just as the word of the LORD had warned him." He immediately went to where the body lay on the road. The donkey and the lion were still standing there beside the body. The prophet picked up the body of the man of God, laid it on the donkey, and brought it back to his own city and buried the body in his own tomb. He regretted for the tragedy that had occurred because of the lie he had said, and mourned for him. Then the old prophet told his sons, that when he died he was to be buried where the man of God was buried in the same tomb.

### **3. Elijah and King Ahab**

#### **1 Kings 16:29-17:1; 18:1-46**

THE meaning of the word Elijah is 'Jehovah (The LORD) is my God'. He was born in the village of Tishbe in the region of Gilead. King Ahab was the ruler of Israel during the time of Elijah. Ahab increased the wrath of God on him by doing things that displeased God more than all the people before him did. Moreover, he married the daughter of a foreigner, Jezebel the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon. Besides, he worshipped and served the idols of her god Baal. Elijah, who was annoyed by this, told Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." For three years it did not rain and there was severe famine in the land.

Ahab wanted to save the horses and mules so that the animals would not perish. So he summoned Obadiah who was the palace administrator, to go through all the land and check all the springs and streams if there was any grass growing there. They divided the stretch of the country into two between them in order to go and check. Ahab went alone in one direction and Obadiah alone in another direction. Obadiah was a devout believer of the LORD. When Jezebel was killing the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water and saved them.

One day Elijah got the word of the LORD. He said, "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." So Elijah went to present himself before Ahab. While Obadiah was going through the country, he saw Elijah coming towards him and bowed down before him. Elijah told him to go and inform his king that he had seen Elijah. Obadiah replied in anguish, "What have I done wrong, that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? There is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here'. I don't know where the Spirit of the LORD may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me." For that Elijah replied, "As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today."

So Obadiah went and told Ahab everything and Ahab went to meet Elijah and asked him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah replied, "I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals.

That is a prophet and that is prophecy. A prophet is one who stands as the representative of God, and fearlessly proclaims the truths that are not pleasing to the listeners. Even when the listener is a king, the prophet is undaunted.

When one analyses the scenarios existing in the present day churches and political fields, it can be understood that it is the lack of such people who standing close to God meditate on and know the will of God and proclaim it without fear, that makes the church and nation orphans today.

## 4. The Sacrifice at Carmel

### 1 Kings 18:19-46

THE wickedness of Ahab and his wife Jezebel was so great that there was no rain or dew in the land for three years. In three years the famine had become severe. Then, the LORD said to Elijah that He, the LORD, was going to give rain to the land and therefore, he, Elijah should go and meet Ahab. Accordingly, when he saw Ahab face to face, Elijah, challenged the prophets of Baal. Standing in the presence of the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal in Israel and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who were under the protection of Jezebel, and all the people, Elijah said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God." When Elijah had said this, the people said, "What you say is good." So, the prophets of Baal were called to make the sacrifice.

The prophets of Baal built up the sacrificial altar and cut up the bull and laid it on the wood and cried out loud, "Baal, answer us," and danced around the sacrificial altar. Even after calling out from morning till noon, there was no sound or answer. Elijah taunted them. Then, they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. There was no response. So Elijah called them and said that he would make the sacrifice then.

Elijah took 12 stones, one for each tribe, and repaired the altar of the LORD which lay in ruins. He cut a trench around the sacrificial altar and arranged the wood on it, and laid the cut up bull on the wood. Then he poured four large jars of water on the wood and the sacrificial altar. This way he wet the place three times. The water flowed down around the altar and even filled the trench. When it was time for the Evening Sacrifice (Traditionally, a lamb was offered in the morning and evening sacrifice as daily offerings), Prophet Elijah lifted his hands to the heavens and cried out in prayer, "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Immediately, the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. All the people who saw this fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" When the prophets of Baal saw that all the people believed in the true LORD, they tried to escape from there. Then Elijah commanded the people, to seize the prophets of Baal and not let anyone get away. They caught them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and they were all killed there.

Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain," and sent the king to his tent. Elijah climbed onto the top of Mount Carmel and began to pray arduously. He told his servant to look toward the sea. He went and looked, and said there were no signs of rain. Elijah asked him to go and look again. The servant did not find any sign. When he looked the seventh time he saw a cloud as small as a man's hand rising from the sea and informed that to Elijah. Immediately, Elijah told Ahab to hitch up his chariot and go to the palace as heavy rain was coming. Within no time, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, and heavy rain started to pour. The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, Elijah ran ahead of Ahab all the way to his palace.

In the Holy Qurbana, in order to offer the sacrifice, the bread and wine that are arranged by the respected priest on the sacrificial altar, which is the *Thronos*, should become the Body and Blood of the LORD. Symbolising Elijah calling to God on Mount Carmel, the respected priest after blessing and sanctifying the bread and wine and keeping it on the altar, reminiscent of the prayer of Elijah, with a broken heart invokes the Holy Spirit which is fire, in the prayer, '*Anin Moriyah*'.

## 5. Naboth's Vineyard

**1 Kings 21:1-29; 22:24-40;  
2 Kings 9:29-37**

ADJACENT to the palace of Ahab, the king of Samaria, Naboth, an Israelite had a vineyard. Ahab desperately wanted to make a vegetable garden in this vineyard. So Naboth was summoned and the king's desire was expressed. The king had said that he would pay a good price for the vineyard or give another vineyard in its place. Naboth told the king clearly that he could not comply to the king's wish and give the vineyard because the Law forbid him to give away that vineyard which he got as his inheritance, and also perhaps out of grief in seeing a vineyard well-laden with grapes being razed to a vegetable garden.

Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, was a wicked lady. This lady who strayed away from the Laws of Jehovah God and was the personification of arrogance and who had become victim to God's wrath, repeatedly led her husband to wickedness by encouraging wicked ways forgetting the true God.

Naboth's reaction upset King Ahab. He lay on his bed refusing to eat or drink. When Jezebel enquired why the king's face was sullen, scorned at the king. Then she employed a contemptuous and heinous manner to get hold of this vineyard.

She secretly sent letters with the king's seal to all the nobles and elders who lived in the city where Naboth lived. The royal edict was that everybody should gather together for a fast and seat Naboth in a prominent place in their midst and charge him with blasphemy and get two scoundrels to give false witness against him and punish him. The Law stipulates that if blasphemy was proven, then the punishment was stoning to death. The elders obeyed the king's order and took Naboth outside the city and stoned him to death. When Jezebel came to know that Naboth had died, told the king, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." Ahab got up and went and took possession of the vineyard.

The Lord was displeased by this detestable deed. God sent Prophet Elijah to ask about this conduct and give a fitting punishment. When Ahab saw Elijah he said, "So you have found me, my enemy!" Elijah responded, "I have found you. This is what the LORD says: 'because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, in the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood. 'And as for your wife Jezebel who provoked you to do this despicable crime, dogs will devour her by the wall of Jezreel.'

Even today, God pronounces sentences against the unrighteous, those who shed blood and the exploiters. However, are those who are supposed to declare these pronouncements of God forgetting their ethical responsibilities and sleeping under the shady trees? Our generation longs for prophets with a spiritual zeal like Elijah.

Later Judah and Israel together went to war with Aram. In this war, Ahab the king of Israel bled to death when an arrow pierced him. His body was brought to Samaria and buried there. When the chariot that brought his body was washed in a pond in Samaria, as God had proclaimed, dogs came and licked it.

When Jezebel heard that Jehu, who was anointed as the king of Israel, was coming, she made up her eyes, combed her hair and looked out of the window. When Jehu saw Jezebel at the window, he called out, "Who is on my side? Who?" Then two or three eunuchs looked out the window. "Throw her down," he commanded and they did so. Her blood was splattered on the walls and the horses. And the dogs ate her up except her skull, her feet and

her hands. Her body became like dung in the land of Israel so much so that that no one could say, 'This is Jezebel'. Thus the proclamation of the Lord through Elijah was fulfilled.



## 6. King Ahaziah

### 2 Kings 1:1-18

WHEN Ahab the king of Israel died, his son Ahaziah became king just as Prophet Elijah had prophesied. He was an idol worshipper. One day he fell through the lattice of his upper room badly injuring himself and became bed-ridden. So he sent messengers, to go and consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, to find out if he would recover from this injury. At that time, as the messenger of God had commanded, Elijah went and met these messengers of the king and sent them back telling them to go and tell the king, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?" Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'"

Seeing the messengers returning so fast without carrying out the royal command, the king anxiously asked of what had occurred. The messengers explained clearly to the king all that Elijah had told them. Then the king asked them, "What kind of man (**Malayalam Bible has it as what dress**) was it who came to meet you and told you this?" They replied that he wore a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist. The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite."

The king then sent a captain with a company of fifty men to Elijah in order to catch hold of him. Elijah was sitting on the top of a hill. The captain said to Elijah, "Man of God, the king commands you to come down!" Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Immediately fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. Angry over this, the King sent another captain and fifty men to Elijah. This captain also asked Elijah to come down from the hill and he and his men also were consumed by fire from heaven.

The king sent for the third time a captain and fifty men to Elijah. But this captain of the fifty men fell on his knees before Elijah and begged, "Man of God, please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!"

God who heard this plea sent His angel to Elijah and instructed him, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king. Elijah told the king exactly what God had told him and he had told the messengers. So King Ahaziah died, according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken.

## **7. Elisha Being Chosen**

### **1 Kings 19:1-21**

WHEN the sacrifice that Elijah was consumed by fire that came down from heaven, all the people believed in Jehovah God and killed. When Jezebel learned about it she send a messenger to Elijah with the message, "If by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of the prophets of Baal, may the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely." When Elijah heard this he got so scared he ran from there up to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God and hid in a cave there.

God spoke to him there and asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" When he heard this voice he stood and replied to God. "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." It was because they were seeking to endanger his life that he came running from there and pleaded to God like this.

God accepted Elijah's plea and asked him to go back giving him instructions to anoint Elisha as prophet. Accordingly, Elijah returned and found Elisha. He was ploughing the fields with oxen. Elijah threw his cloak on Elisha. Elisha left his oxen and went with Elijah. Elisha asked permission to go and kiss his parents good bye and then join him and Elijah granted Elisha his request. Then Elisha went to his team of oxen, killed them, and cooked the meat, using the yoke as fuel for the fire. He gave the meat to the people, and they ate it. Then he went and followed Elijah as his helper.

## 11. Miracles of Elisha – 3

### 2 Kings 4:38-44 & 6:1-23

ONCE when there was famine in the land, Elisha went to Gilgal. While there, he asked one of the servants to cook some stew in a large pot for his disciples, the company of prophets, so that they may eat. One of them went out into the fields to gather some herbs. He found a wild vine and plucked as much of its gourds (kind of vegetable) as he could hold in his garment and cut them up and put it in the stew not knowing what it was. The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, "Man of God, there is death in the pot!" Elisha asked them to bring some flour. He mixed it into the pot and asked them to serve it. Elisha miraculously removed the poisonous element in the pot. ***(Note: In this portion for the word 'stew' the Malayalam translation says 'Payasam'. Therefore, the writer of the text comments that in those days it seems they used greens to make payasam. It is not payasam but stew that was made and herbs are used in stew. It is a translation mistake. The writer also goes on to describe the plant as 'choora' and the poisonous one as 'pae choora'. All this is given in the Malayalam Bible, but not in the English Bible. In none of the versions.)***

BEFORE the famine was over, one day a man brought 20 loaves of barley bread and some corn and gave it to Elisha. Prophet Elisha said to his servant to give it to all the people to eat. His servant asked him, "How can I serve it to even a 100 people?" For that Elisha replied, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" So the servant served it to the people, and just as the word of the Lord said, they ate and there was some left over.

THE place where Elisha used to meet with the group of prophets who were with him, was a very small one. So they told Elisha about it and asked him permission to build another place for them to stay. And they went with Elisha to near River Jordan, in order to cut trees for it. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe-head fell into the water. Because he had borrowed that axe and because it was impossible to retrieve something from the River Jordan, he went and cried to Prophet Elisha. The prophet asked him where it had fallen and the disciple showed him the place. Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron axe-head float. "Lift it out," said Elisha. Then the man reached out his hand and took it. And so the disciple got his axe-head back.

WE HAVE learnt in earlier lessons that the King of Israel and the people of Israel who had become idol worshippers had suffered a lot of hardships. Then, when they began to trust in the true Lord, they got deliverance from the King of Aram. Thus, while the land of Samaria enjoyed their independence, the King of Aram tried many times to re-capture Samaria. And every time they failed. And there was a reason for it. Elisha, the man of God, would prophecy where the enemy was setting up camp, and accordingly the Israelite army would set up camp there and defeat the Arameans. This made the King of Aram really upset. He doubted whether one of his army chiefs was leaking war secrets to the King of Israel. One of the commanders explained to the King of Aram, that matters were not as he considered, instead, Elisha the prophet in Israel through his divine power, could know what was even spoken in the bedroom of the King of Aram and inform the King of Israel about it. So the King of Aram commanded to capture Elisha immediately and take him to the king.

Elisha was living on the side of a big hill that was part of a city called Dothan which was a little away from Samaria. One morning, when Elisha's servant got up and went out, an army with mighty horses and chariots had surrounded the city. Frightened, he ran to his master and informed him the situation. The prophet comforted him saying that there was a greater army than that with them and therefore, there was no need to be afraid. Then Elisha lifted his arms heavenwards and prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see Your

army.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

When the enemy came to catch Elisha, he prayed, “Strike this army with blindness.” Then they all became blind in such a way that they seemed to have lost their sense of direction. Elisha told them that this was not the way and that he would lead them to the person they were searching for and walked them into the city of Samaria. Then when Elisha prayed their blindness was removed. When they realised that they were in the midst of their enemy, they were baffled. When the King of Israel readied to kill them all, Prophet Elisha forbade it. He asked the king to give them food and water and reminded him that the wish of God and the most decent thing to do is to give them food and drink and send them back to their master. Thus a big feast was prepared for the Aramean army and they were sent back satisfied. They praised the hospitality of the King of Israel and the magnanimity of Prophet Elisha. Thereafter, for many years the two countries lived in peace with one another.

## **Miracles performed by Elisha – 1**

### **2 Kings 2:19-3:27**

WHEN the people of Jericho learned that Elisha, filled with the spirit of Elijah, was living in that city they all gathered near him. They told the prophet that though the city of Jericho was a fine city, the water there was bad and caused miscarriages. Elisha told them to bring a new bowl and put some salt in it. When they brought that, Elisha took it to the spring and put the salt into it and said, "This is what the LORD says: 'I make this water pure, and it will not cause any more deaths or miscarriages.'" Just as Elisha said, the water became potable.

After this miracle deed, Elisha went to Bethel. In an earlier class we have studied how on his way to Bethel, some young boys made fun of him and they were all killed.

During that time, the king of Moab revolted against the king of Israel. So, the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom joined together and went to war against Moab. After marching for seven days, they ran out of water, and there was none left for the army or the animals. The king of Israel asked, "Has the LORD called us three kings together only to deliver us into the hands of Moab?" The king of Judah asked, "Is there no prophet of the LORD here, through whom we may inquire of the LORD?" An officer of the king of Israel informed the king that Elisha was there. Thus, the three kings together went to Elisha.

Referring to Ahab and Jezebel who lived forgetting Jehovah, the true God of Israel, Elisha told the king of Israel who was with them, "Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother." The king of Israel answered apologetically, "It is the LORD who has put us three kings and our army at the mercy of the king of Moab." Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not pay any attention to you. But now bring me a harpist." While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came on Elisha and he said, "This is what the LORD says: 'Dig ditches all over this dry stream bed. You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink;' he will also deliver Moab into your hands." By next morning the land was filled with water and the men quenched their thirst to their satisfaction.

When the Moabites learned that three kings had set out for war against them, they armed and stationed themselves by the border. The next morning, as the sun was shining on the water, to the Moabites across the way, the water looked red - like blood, and they thought it was blood. The Moabites presumed that the three kings had fought among themselves and killed one another. So they decided to go and loot the camp. But when the Moabites reached the camp, the Israelites attacked them and drove them back. The Israelites kept up the pursuit slaughtering the Moabites and just as Elisha had prophesied, they destroyed the cities of Moab.

## **Miracles performed by Elisha – 2**

### **2 Kings 4:1-37**

ONE of Elisha's disciples among his company of prophets had died. That family was in dire poverty with no means for daily sustenance. The lenders oppressed them and even tried to take the two sons as slaves. Then that widow presented her sorrow to Elisha. This disciple who had died revered Jehovah. It was necessary to save her family. So Elisha asked, "What do you have in your house?" She replied, "Nothing at all, except a small jar of olive oil," Elisha said to her, "Go around and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Get as many as you can. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." The widow did as she was told and she sold the oil and repaid the debts and she and her sons made a living with the remaining oil.

In a place called Shunem there lived a rich couple. They were always eager to provide meals for Elisha whenever he went that way. Knowing that Elisha was a holy man, they built a room for him on the upper level of their house. Later when Elisha passed by that way, he stayed in that upper room.

He discussed with his servant Gehazi what he could do for this Shunamite family who had prepared a special upper room and served him meals. Gehazi pointed out that they were living among their own people but lacked one thing – they did not have a son. Elisha called the lady and told her that about the same time next year she would hold a son in her arms. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Please, sir, don't lie to me. You are a man of God!" The lady became pregnant and at the time that Elisha had said, she gave birth to a son.

The boy grew up and one day he went out to his father in the fields and was standing with him when he felt sick and called out, "My head! My head!" He was immediately taken to his mother and she put him on her lap. By noon the boy died. She went and laid him on the bed on which Elisha lay and shut the door. Then she went to see Prophet Elisha on Mt. Carmel. There she fell down at Elisha's feet and cried holding to it. Gehazi came over to push her away, but Elisha said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me, let her slowly say what the matter is." Then the Shunammite lady said to Elisha, "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'" Elisha turned to Gehazi and said, "Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Lay my staff on the boy's face." But the child's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So he got up and went with her. Gehazi ran on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. Elisha then went alone into the room and shut the door and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. Elisha called the boy's mother and gave him to her. She fell at his feet and bowed to the ground.

## 11. Miracles of Elisha – 3

### 2 Kings 4:38-44 & 6:1-23

ONCE when there was famine in the land, Elisha went to Gilgal. While there, he asked one of the servants to cook some stew in a large pot for his disciples, the company of prophets, so that they may eat. One of them went out into the fields to gather some herbs. He found a wild vine and plucked as much of its gourds (kind of vegetable) as he could hold in his garment and cut them up and put it in the stew not knowing what it was. The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, "Man of God, there is death in the pot!" Elisha asked them to bring some flour. He mixed it into the pot and asked them to serve it. Elisha miraculously removed the poisonous element in the pot. ***(Note: In this portion for the word 'stew' the Malayalam translation says 'Payasam'. Therefore, the writer of the text comments that in those days it seems they used greens to make payasam. It is not payasam but stew that was made and herbs are used in stew. It is a translation mistake. The writer also goes on to describe the plant as 'choora' and the poisonous one as 'pae choora'. All this is given in the Malayalam Bible, but not in the English Bible. In none of the versions.)***

BEFORE the famine was over, one day a man brought 20 loaves of barley bread and some corn and gave it to Elisha. Prophet Elisha said to his servant to give it to all the people to eat. His servant asked him, "How can I serve it to even a 100 people?" For that Elisha replied, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" So the servant served it to the people, and just as the word of the Lord said, they ate and there was some left over.

THE place where Elisha used to meet with the group of prophets who were with him, was a very small one. So they told Elisha about it and asked him permission to build another place for them to stay. And they went with Elisha to near River Jordan, in order to cut trees for it. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe-head fell into the water. Because he had borrowed that axe and because it was impossible to retrieve something from the River Jordan, he went and cried to Prophet Elisha. The prophet asked him where it had fallen and the disciple showed him the place. Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron axe-head float. "Lift it out," said Elisha. Then the man reached out his hand and took it. And so the disciple got his axe-head back.

WE HAVE learnt in earlier lessons that the King of Israel and the people of Israel who had become idol worshippers had suffered a lot of hardships. Then, when they began to trust in the true Lord, they got deliverance from the King of Aram. Thus, while the land of Samaria enjoyed their independence, the King of Aram tried many times to re-capture Samaria. And every time they failed. And there was a reason for it. Elisha, the man of God, would prophecy where the enemy was setting up camp, and accordingly the Israelite army would set up camp there and defeat the Arameans. This made the King of Aram really upset. He doubted whether one of his army chiefs was leaking war secrets to the King of Israel. One of the commanders explained to the King of Aram, that matters were not as he considered, instead, Elisha the prophet in Israel through his divine power, could know what was even spoken in the bedroom of the King of Aram and inform the King of Israel about it. So the King of Aram commanded to capture Elisha immediately and take him to the king.

Elisha was living on the side of a big hill that was part of a city called Dothan which was a little away from Samaria. One morning, when Elisha's servant got up and went out, an army with mighty horses and chariots had surrounded the city. Frightened, he ran to his master and informed him the situation. The prophet comforted him saying that there was a greater army than that with them and therefore, there was no need to be afraid. Then Elisha lifted his arms heavenwards and prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see Your

army.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

When the enemy came to catch Elisha, he prayed, “Strike this army with blindness.” Then they all became blind in such a way that they seemed to have lost their sense of direction. Elisha told them that this was not the way and that he would lead them to the person they were searching for and walked them into the city of Samaria. Then when Elisha prayed their blindness was removed. When they realised that they were in the midst of their enemy, they were baffled. When the King of Israel readied to kill them all, Prophet Elisha forbade it. He asked the king to give them food and water and reminded him that the wish of God and the most decent thing to do is to give them food and drink and send them back to their master. Thus a big feast was prepared for the Aramean army and they were sent back satisfied. They praised the hospitality of the King of Israel and the magnanimity of Prophet Elisha. Thereafter, for many years the two countries lived in peace with one another.



## **12. Miracles of Elisha – 4**

### **2 Kings 5:1-27**

NAAMAN was the commander-in-chief of the Aram king's army. He was a clever and valiant person. His strategic moves in the war field gained victories for Aram. Therefore, the king acknowledged him as a great person and made him the chief among his councillors. However, as he was a leper he was mentally depressed.

In a war against the Israelites, many people were brought as slaves to the land of Aram. One young girl among them was made to work as a hand-maiden for Naaman's wife. This young girl who was loyal to her master, informed them that there was a person in her land who could pray and heal her master's leprosy and if he went there his leprosy would certainly be cured. Naaman told the Aram king about this information he had received. So the King of Aram sent a letter to the King of Israel and enough gold and silver as gifts and other things and Naaman set out for Israel with all this.

When the King of Israel read the letter he tore his clothes in dismay and exclaimed, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me and start a war!" When Elisha heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent a messenger to the king saying: "Send the man come to me so that he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman went with all his retinue and when he reached Elisha's house he was told by a messenger to go and wash himself in the Jordan River, seven times and he would be cleansed. Naaman thought that Elisha would come out and touch his body and cry out to God and pray and cure his disease. Naaman was furious that he was told to go and wash in River Jordan, which according to him, would be of no use and so decided to return. But his servants advised him, "If the prophet had told you to do something greater, you would have done it. So why don't you just wash yourself, as he said, and be cured?" Since they had come all the way till there, they urged him to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times just as the prophet had said. When Naaman went and dipped himself seven times and rose up, his leprosy was cured and he was cleansed. Then he came before the man of God and begged forgiveness. He also swore that he would not worship anyone else than Jehovah God. Naaman gave Elisha all the gold and silver and other gifts he had brought. Elisha replied, "As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing," and sent him away happily.

Now Gehazi who was materialistic and money-minded couldn't bear returning such expensive gifts not accepting even one. Some time after Naaman and his camp were on their way back, Gehazi went running after them. He said to Naaman, "My master has requested to send a talent of silver and two sets of clothing in order to gift it to some guests who had come unexpectedly." Naaman gave it to him gladly and Gehazi went and hid it in his house.

When Gehazi returned Elisha asked him where he had been. Fearlessly Gehazi replied that he hadn't been anywhere. Elisha said, "My spirit was with you from the time you left this place. Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever because of your greed." Immediately he was afflicted with leprosy and he went away from Elisha's presence.

### **13. Miracles of Elisha – 5**

#### **2 Kings 6:24 – 7:20**

FOLLOWING the healing of Naaman, peace and harmony prevailed between the two countries of Samaria and Aram. After a long time, one day, the Aramean army gathered together and surrounded the city of Samaria. This unexpected siege led the land of Samaria to a great famine. The price of all essential things rose heavily. People who were weary with hunger were forced to kill humans and cook and eat them up.

One day, a woman went and told her woe to the King of Israel. This was the complaint she brought before the king. She and her friend had made an agreement that first, she would kill her own son and cook him and the two of them would eat him and then, the friend's son would be killed and they would eat him up. And so, on the first day they ate her son. Next day, when she asked her friend for her son, the friend broke her word and hid her son. When the king heard these words, he tore his robe and wore sack cloth. The king then first sent a royal official to Elisha to ask him why they should wait for the Lord any longer and also to kill him. Then the king also went after the messenger.

Elisha who foresaw the arrival of the royal messenger and the king after him, told the elders who were with him to shut the door and not let the messenger or the king in. When the messenger reached there, Elisha said, "Is not the sound of his master's footsteps behind him?" When the king reached there, Elisha said, "Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the LORD says: About this time tomorrow, a seah (about 5.5 kilos) of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria." But this declaration of God was not convincing enough for the king's messenger. He said, "Look, even if the LORD should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" Elisha said to him, "You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it!"

Now, there were four lepers at the gates of the city of Samaria. These four who were tired with hunger were thinking of what to do. Since it was famine inside the city, they wouldn't get anything from there to eat. Then they would die of hunger. If they lay at the gates also, they would die. So they decided to go to the Aramean camp. If The Arameans left them alive, then they could live, or else, if the Arameans killed them, then they would die there. So when it was dusk, they went to the Aramean camp.

When these four lepers reached the Aramean camp, they didn't see anyone there. It seemed the army had left in a hurry. They saw all the garments and other things which the army had thrown on the road as they fled. The horses and the donkeys were just as they were tied. Even the tents were left as it was. What had happened was that the Aramean army ran for their lives when the Lord made them hear the sound of horses of fire and chariots like what Elisha showed to his servant when the Aramean army had come to capture him, and Elisha said, "we have a greater army than this."

The lepers went inside the tents and ate and drank as much as they wanted. Then they took all the silver and gold and garments from there and went and hid it. Then they felt that what they were doing wasn't right and that they should inform the king before dawn. So they ran to the city gates and informed the watchman there. When the king heard this he assumed that the Arameans had gone out of the camp and were hiding in the fields and that it was a war ploy by them to catch the hungry Samaritans alive when they go to the camp in search of food. Anyway, to clear the doubt, he sent two horse driven chariots and men to the camp. They returned and informed the king that what the lepers said was true.

All the people went out to the Aramean camp and looted it. The next day, just as the Lord had proclaimed, a seah of the finest flour was sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley was sold for a shekel. Now the king had put the officer who didn't believe Elisha's words, in charge of the city gate. The hungry people who ran to get as much wheat flour and barley became uncontrolled mob, and in this stampede, the royal officer fell down and he was stamped to death by the people. Just as Elisha had said, the messenger who did not believe the word of God, was able to see this occurrence but was unable to have a part of it.

## **14. Miracles of Elisha – 6**

### **2 Kings 8:1-15; 9:1-16**

IN AN earlier lesson we learned about Elisha restoring to life, the son of a wealthy couple from a place called Shunem. In order to save them from the famine that was to come in Israel, Elisha had sent this family to live in another country. They went to the land of the Philistines and lived there for seven years. When they returned to their own country after the famine, they found that they had lost their house and properties. When the lady of Shunem went to complain to the king about this, the king was talking Elisha's servant and asking him about the great things Elisha had done. It was while he was narrating the incident of raising a dead boy to life, that this woman reached the king's presence to register her complaint. When Elisha's servant introduced her to the king, the king asked her for a full detail of the incident. She showed the king her son whom Elisha had restored to life. The king entrusted an official to restore all the land and house she had lost. They also got all the income from the land for the days they were not there - from the day they left till that day.

WHEN the King of Aram was sick, Elisha went by that way. On learning that the man of God had come, the king sent a person to Elisha, with lots of expensive gifts, to enquire whether, he would recover from his illness. The person told Elisha that he had been sent by the king to find out whether the king would get well, and Elisha replied, "The Lord has revealed that he certainly will recover, but he certainly will die."

The messenger returned to the king and told him that he would recover. The next day this messenger took a thick cloth, soaked it in water and spread it over the king's face. And just as the Lord had declared the king died instantly.

ELISHA got the command from God to anoint a person as king in place of the king who was wounded in a battle with the Arameans. At the instruction of Elisha one of his disciples tucked his cloak into his built, took a flask of olive oil and ran to Ramoth in Gilead. There he found the army officers sitting together and among them he found Jehu, son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi. He told Jehu that he had something to say to him and took him into an inner room and closed the door and poured the oil on Jehu's head. Then he declared, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anoint you king over the LORD's people Israel.' It was at this time of anointing that Jehu was entrusted to carry out the Lord's proclamation through Elijah about Ahab's wife Jezebel. He also told Jehu about the Lord's declaration that all the male descendants, both free and slave, of the house of Ahab who had greatly angered the Lord by his wicked and cruel acts, should be finished off.

When Jehu opened the door and returned to his friends, they asked him why the disciple of the prophet had come. Jehu replied, "You know the man and the things he said to me." For that they replied, "That's not true!" and forced him saying, "Tell us." Jehu answered, "According to the command of God, I have been anointed King of Israel." Immediately, they took their cloaks and spread them under him on the ground. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, "Jehu is king!" Then he got into his chariot and rode to Israel and conquered the palace and executed all that the Lord had commanded.

## **15. Elisha's Demise**

### **2 Kings 13:14-21**

WHEN Elisha was lying critically ill on his death bed, the King of Israel went to see him. The death of the prophet who saved the people of Israel by giving them timely proclamations of God, was unbearable to them. The King of Israel stood crying, "My father! My father! "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"

It was necessary to embolden the king so that the Israelites would not feel orphaned after Elisha's death. So Elisha asked the king to take the bow and arrow. Then he asked him to open the east window of the room he was lying in, and to shoot the arrows through the window. The king did as he was told. Elisha said that it was God's arrow of victory, that he would win the war against the Arameans and would completely destroy them. Then Elisha told the king to shoot the arrows into the ground. The king did as he was told and stuck the ground three times consecutively and then stopped. Then Elisha asked, "Why did you stop striking after three times? You should have struck the ground five or six times. You have five to six wars against the Arameans. Then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times as you have shot only three arrows." Soon after Elisha had finished saying this, he died and he was buried.

The Moabites attacked the Israelites even before a year had passed since Elisha's demise. Many people lost their life in this attack. While some people were trying to bury one of them, they saw the Moabite army. Fearing for their lives, they threw the body in a ditch and fled. This ditch was the tomb where Elisha was buried. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet. The entire life-time of Elisha was an eventful one filled with many miracles that took place according to the command of God. The Holy Bible gives us the evidence that a person got back his life by touching the bones of such a prophet. It is based on this incident that our fathers taught us that, intercessory prayers to the saints and their holy remains are sources of blessings.

Just as Elisha had prophesied, the Arameans waged war on Israel many times and harassed them and conquered many cities at times. Because of the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He was not willing to destroy them. Neither did he remove them from the community. He felt mercy and sympathy towards them and cared for them. Therefore, according to the proclamation God made through Elisha, Israel won three wars against them and took back the cities they had lost.

## **B. NEW TESTAMENT**

### **1. Resurrection**

**Matthew 27:62-66; 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:3-6; John 20: 1-10**

JESUS CHRIST who was hung on three nails, gave up his spirit at the ninth hour. Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. When they were sure that Jesus had died, they released his body. Joseph buried Jesus' body according to the Jewish customs. Though the Jews had succeeded in crucifying Jesus, they were not prepared to sit quiet. They knew very well of his super-human powers. Some among those who stood by as spectators near Lazar's tomb were witnesses to the dead man breaking the tomb and rising from the dead. Judas had also heard what Jesus told the disciples while going from Bethany to Jerusalem. "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:18-19) Then they remembered many of the things he had said like this, about his resurrection. They also believed that he is the son of God and knew that whatever he had said would come to pass.

They became more afraid now that Jesus was dead than when he was alive. So they requested Pontius Pilate to give proper security to his tomb and seal it at least until the third day. Pilate answered, "Take a guard and go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

All this while, the women who loved him were sitting a little afar and crying. They were Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdelene and Mary the mother of James and Joses. The Bible portions show that other women were also present there. (Matthew 27:55-56) {It does not show that any of the disciples were there.} Their Master had died. All their hopes had sunken. But their love just increased a ten times. Since the next day was the Sabbath Day, they noted where Jesus was entombed and returned to their places.

Sabbath starts from Friday evening 6 o'clock. The burial would have finished before that. As according to the Jewish tradition, they made a scented lotion from 100 pounds of myrrh and mixed it with a kind of sandal wood and smeared it on Jesus' body and buried him in the tomb. All those who loved him did not get a chance to smear the scented lotion on him on that day itself. And it was not allowed on a Sabbath. Therefore, on the first day of the week, early in the morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdelene and Mary mother of James went to the tomb of Jesus to put the scented lotion on his body. Suddenly there was an earthquake and the angel of the Lord came down from heaven. He rolled the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards became so frightened that they trembled and stood like dead men.

The tomb could not hold the resurrected Christ though it was sealed and guarded by guardsmen. The body of Jesus did not decompose like that of human beings. In order to reveal to the world that the Lord who was born as man is indeed the only son of God, He rose from his grave victorious over death, sin and all evil. With death, all is over for all great people who have been born on this earth. However, with the death of Jesus Christ, one chapter ended and with His resurrection another chapter started.

The angel told the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him'." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Some of the guards went into the city and reported all that had happened to the chief priests. All of them conspired and bribed the guards to say that while they were asleep at night, the disciples came and stole his body. The Jews still keep this fact as a confidential matter.

## **2. To Mary Magdalene and Two Disciples**

**Mark 16: 1-11; John 20:1-18; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:13-35**

JUST as the angel at the tomb of Jesus had directed her, Mary Magdalene informed the disciples the matter. Then, Simon Peter and John ran to the place. As John was younger to Peter, he ran faster and reached the tomb before Peter did. When he bent down and looked in, he saw the strips of cloth in which Jesus was wrapped. But he did go inside the tomb. Peter entered into the tomb and saw the strips of cloth lying there and the piece of cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was rolled and kept separately in another place. Then John also entered in and believed that Jesus Christ had resurrected and went back.

Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb and stood crying outside it. As she was crying, she looked inside the tomb and saw two angels dressed in white sitting there. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have kept him." After saying this, when she turned around, she found another person standing there. Because it was still dark and her eyes were filled with tears as she had been crying, she couldn't recognise the person. It was the Lord. The Lord asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Whom are you looking for?" She thought that he was the gardener. So she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Then, the Lord called her, "Mary." She immediately recognised that familiar voice and said, "Rabboni." The meaning of the word 'Rabboni' is 'my teacher' or 'my master', or 'my beloved teacher'. She tried to touch him, but Jesus said, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Then, the Lord assigned her to go and tell the news to the apostles.

The Lord then appeared to the other ladies who were on their way, as the angels at the tomb had instructed, to inform the disciples the news that Jesus had resurrected. They fell at His feet and worshipped Him. Jesus entrusted them also to go and inform the disciples.

On the same day, in the afternoon, the Lord appeared a third time after He had resurrected, to two disciples who were on their way to Emmaus from Jerusalem. They had to walk seven miles. As they were going, with a heavy heart, they were discussing all that had happened two days ago. And Jesus himself began walking along with them. But their eyes were kept from recognising Him. Jesus asked them what they were arguing about. They were surprised that this one person alone was unaware of that which was the topic of discussion for everyone. Then, one of the men named Cleopas said, "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

On hearing this Jesus said, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Then, he explained to them all that had been written about him in the Scriptures, beginning from Moses including all the prophets. They just silently listened to everything He said, but dared not to ask who it was that was speaking to them.

If Jesus Christ had revealed himself to them right at the beginning itself, they would have been contented. They would have been thrilled and over-joyed. But had He done so, because of their ecstasy, they would not have had the spiritual balance to comprehend what Christ's earthly mission was, even if it was explained to them. As it was, they seemed to suspect the things that the two women who had seen the reality and believed had said; and it was necessary to convince and affirm their faith in the Old Testament prophecies and its fulfilment.



The sun had set and darkness was slowly setting in. When they neared the village they were going to, Jesus moved on as if he was proceeding further. When they urged him strongly and said, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over," He went into their house with them.

When he sat with them for a meal, he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. At once, their eyes opened and they recognised Him. But He disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Then they got up immediately and went back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples about all that had happened.

### **3. To the Disciples**

**Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:33-50; John 20:19-29**

THE TWO people who came running from Emmaus with the news that our Saviour had risen, met the other disciples, and explained to them all that had occurred on the way, and that they did not recognise Him until He had broken the bread and given it to them. The disciples were all sitting in one house behind closed doors out of fear of the other Jews. While they were talking, Jesus appeared in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." They were startled with frightened. They thought they were seeing a ghost. He asked them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Then He showed them his hands and side. He said to them, "Touch Me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." While they stood in joy and amazement, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and honeycomb; and He took it and ate it in front of them.

After this, He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. And He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." After saying this He disappeared.

Now when Jesus had appeared to the disciples who were sitting behind closed doors, one of the disciples, Thomas also known as Didymus was not with them. When the other disciples told Thomas that the risen Christ had appeared to them just as He had appeared to Mary Magdalene and to other women, Thomas refused to believe them. He told them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, when the disciples were all gathered together inside a house, Thomas also was with them. While the door was closed, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said, "Peace with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." All his doubts and faithlessness were removed and Thomas cried out, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." This Thomas is the Apostle of India.

Death distresses all. But Jesus defeated death, hell and darkness. He resurrected. Through Jesus Christ we got a hope that death is not the end of life, and that by His resurrection it is possible to get a new life in the Kingdom of God. All of us who have to succumb to physical death on the last day will be taken up and fully experience the joy of the Kingdom of God.

## **At the shores of Tiberius Sea**

### **John 21:1-23**

JESUS CHRIST was in this world for forty days after His resurrection. He ascended into Heaven only after that. During that time, He appeared to the disciples and His followers on different occasions. At all these times, He gave them instructions necessary to continue His work. He asked them to preach about salvation and to teach the new commandments. Jesus gave them authority to baptise those who believed and to forgive sins and not to pardon sins.

The disciples were witnesses to the death and resurrection of their beloved Lord who loved and cared for them and gave a purpose and meaning for life through His divine teachings. But when the days waiting for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit grew dreary, they went back to their old jobs. They lowered their boat onto the Sea of Tiberius and caught no fish even after toiling the whole night through. Totally disappointed, they tried to get their boat ashore, and Jesus appeared there. Because those whom He had entrusted to complete His work had become hesitant, losing their sense of responsibility and went seeking their old jobs, it was necessary to strengthen their faith. Therefore, according to the will of God, their toil was in vain. Jesus appeared to His disciples one last time before His ascension to heaven, one day at sunrise, by the shore of Tiberius Sea with the idea of emboldening them who were seeped in disappointment before they went looking for other ways for a livelihood.

When they saw Jesus by the shore, they thought that He was just someone. When He asked them, "Children, is there anything to eat?" they answered Him, "No." So Jesus said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Then they cast their net as they were told, and they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. Then they remembered how once before this, they had gone to fish in Lake Gennesaret. On that occasion, they had worked all night and not caught any fish, but when they lowered their nets according to Jesus' instructions they hauled in a lot of fish. When they collected such a heavy haul this time, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, told Peter that it was the Lord. When Peter realised that it was the Lord, he covered himself with his outer garment and jumped into the sea. He swam 200 yards and reached where Jesus was. The other disciples dragged the nets, heavy with fish, and reached the shore. When they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you caught just now." Mr. Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land which was full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

After they all had finished their meal, Jesus asked Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Jesus asked Peter again, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" To that Peter replied as before, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

Jesus asked Peter the same question, a third time. When Jesus asked him the same question a third time over, Peter was grieved and he replied, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." And Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

An interpreter of the Scriptures, St. Bar Sleeba, has recorded that because Peter denied knowing the arrested Jesus, Peter lost his place in the disciples group. In our Monday evening worship, we recite Peter's lament, "Because I lost the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, heaven and earth moan grieve over me." The Church interprets that in order to bring back Peter to the way of discipleship, which he had lost, Peter was made to respond three times in such a manner.

This incident proves that though Peter had declared “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God,” – a faith as strong as a rock (the Lord built the Church on this rock of faith) - man is always weak, and it is the grace of the Lord that strengthens us in different situations.

Then Jesus continued to tell Peter “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

Peter’s death as a martyr is indicated in this last statement to Peter.

## **5. Ascension into Heaven**

**Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:19-20;**

**Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-11**

AFTER appearing to the disciples by the Tiberius Sea shore and strengthening Peter, Jesus asked them to gather at the hill near Galilee. When they saw Him there, they worshipped Him. Then Jesus went up to them and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." After saying this, He disappeared.

On the fortieth day after the Lord had resurrected, on the Thursday, while all the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem for a meal, Jesus appeared to them again. He told them, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Then He led them up to Bethany. Mount of Olives is near Bethany. Jesus chose this mount for His ascension. This Mount of Olives is situated slightly more than half-a-mile from Jerusalem on the east side.

When Jesus preached the gospel He had given a hint to His disciples about His ascension. "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." These promises were given not just for the disciples, but for all people who dwell in this world until the second coming of Jesus.

In the forty days after the resurrection, He led the disciples by hand in an amazing way and brought them to a new experience. He spoke to them giving them courage and ensuring them. Without raising even the slightest doubt, He confirmed in them the reality of resurrection through the different incidences that occurred and experiences thereof, when He kept appearing to them time after time. Even though Jesus was invisible to them, the disciples were able to believe that He is alive and that He was with them spiritually and was inwardly joined with them. They understood the truth that the presence of the resurrected Christ is always in the world and is able to appear at any place, any time.

When the disciples reached Bethany, they asked Jesus a doubt they had. "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" For that Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." He counselled them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus led them to the top of Mount Olive and lifted His hands and blessed them. He gave them abundantly all priestly gifts. As He was blessing them, the Son of God ascended into heaven while they were looking. A cloud covered the Lord and he disappeared from sight. The Lord sat in Heaven on the right of the Father. The disciples stood quietly looking up into the sky. Then two angels came to them and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." Because the disciples believed that the Lord will always be with them hereafter, they did not grieve when Jesus ascended into heaven. With great joy they returned to Jerusalem. They prayed with one mind to receive through the Holy Spirit the strength necessary to fulfil the great work that Lord Jesus had entrusted them.

## **6 - Selecting Matthias**

### **Acts 1:15-20**

THE DISCIPLES returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, having being witnesses to Jesus' ascension into heaven and accepting the message from the angels that Jesus would return. The Eleven who reached Jerusalem went up to the upper room in the house of Mark's mother Mary; that is the house and room in which the Passover was prepared. They spent their time praying for the Holy Spirit which their Lord had promised when He ascended. There were 120 people in that group who were praying. Besides The Eleven, there was Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Zebedee's wife Salome and the brothers of Jesus in this group. It is assumed that the Bethany sisters, Martha and Mary would have been in this group.

While they were all gathered in that house, they discussed about selecting someone to apostolic position, in place of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. The Holy Church should be built on the foundation of twelve apostles with Jesus as the corner stone. What David had said by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Psalm 69 had been fulfilled. "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it," (Psalm 69:25).

In Psalm 109 the Holy Spirit through David has written, "May another take his place of leadership." (Psalm 109:8) Therefore, they decided to take someone in the place of Judas.

Peter said that the person who gets selected should have two qualifications: (1) A person who had been with the disciples from the time of the Lord's baptism to His ascension; (2) A witness to the resurrection of the Lord. The group of believers who were gathered there named two people who had these qualifications. It is clear from this that, right from that time, the believers had a participation in selecting people to the priestly order. One among the named was Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. The Bible does not have any record of the life or any other information about these two people. However, tradition has it that there is a belief these two were among the Seventy Two messengers who were sent by Jesus.

In order to know the will of God on whom to select among the two named, they first prayed. This is a prime example of the common prayers in the Church. All the apostles were selected by the Lord. These two were submitted before the Lord, so that He Himself would select the twelfth disciple who should be joined to the Eleven. After prayer, as was the practice in those days, they cast lots. Casting lots was a tradition from the time of Moses itself. There were two lots, Urim and Thummim (perhaps they were stones – Exodus 28:30). In the Old Testament we can see instances when they have been used and the will of God was made known. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down and is leading us in all truth. Therefore, the practice of knowing the will of God by casting lots has been discontinued.

The lot fell on Matthias and he was counted as one among The Twelve. Legends say that he preached the gospel in Ethiopia, was stoned in Cappadocia, and was later killed by crucifixion. Some historians claim that he built a church in Seleucia and preached the gospel there and died a natural death there.

## **7. The Pentecost**

### **Acts 2:1-20**

THE WORD 'Pentecost' means fiftieth. The Pentecost was one of the traditions that was observed during the Old Testament times. After the harvest, when all the grains were gathered in the granary is the festival known as 'Feast of the First Fruits' or 'Harvest Festival' or 'Festival of the Weeks'. This festival is celebrated on the Sunday that comes fifty days after the Passover festival. The Jews celebrated the memorial of receiving the Laws through Moses on Mt. Sinai on this day itself. God had commanded that all Jews should celebrate this festival observing it as a festival of happiness and thanksgiving. All Jewish men obeyed the Law that those who lived within a 20-mile radius of Jerusalem should reach the Temple to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, Feast of the Pentecost and Feast of the Tabernacle or Feast of the Booths. In the Bible it is recorded that people of 15 regions: from Parthia (a region in north eastern Iran) in the east up to the Rome in the west, were there for the festival. Perhaps there were people of other regions and languages too over there for the festival.

In Mark's house, the first church members – 120 people - including the disciples and Holy Virgin Mary got together and prayed of one mind. After the Ascension, on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, that is fiftieth day after the resurrection, on the day that was the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, there was a sudden sound like the blowing of a violent wind that came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated which came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and as the Spirit enabled them, they began to speak in other tongues. Hearing this loud sound, all the people gathered there. They were bewildered because each one heard their own language being spoken by these Galileans. In the recent years, some Christians, in the guise of tongues - speaking in other languages – produce some sounds which people of any language in this world cannot understand and profess that it is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Bible scholars call the Pentecost as the Second Babel. In the first Babel incident, while one language was mixed up to form different languages, so much so that they couldn't understand one another; in the Second Babel incident, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was transformed into a language which people of different languages could understand. Those who did not realise the truth of what was happening there, ridiculed them saying that they were drunk with wine. Some of them, who were amazed and perplexed at all this, asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Peter, who understood the emotions of these people, explained to them what had actually happened there. "We aren't drunk as some of you suspect. The words of Prophet Joel has been fulfilled here. What you see and hear is how our Lord has given to us the promised Holy Spirit after He resurrected and ascended to heaven and sat at the right of God and got from the Father the Holy Spirit for us." A good many in the crowd who heard this asked Peter what they would need to do. Those who accepted his message repented and were baptized; and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

If for the Jews, the Day of Pentecost on the fiftieth day was the Feast of the Harvest, for us, the fiftieth day after Jesus resurrected, is the day of happiness when the Holy Spirit was given to us in order to gain us all to Christ. If for the Jews this day is the day of commemorating receiving the Laws through Moses, today, it is for us the day of commemoration of receiving the Holy Spirit that leads us in truth and justice according to the Lord's new commands.

To spread the gospel of our Lord all over the world and in order to help them face with courage any circumstance, they got three main strengths through the Holy Spirit.

1. Knowledge of languages so that any person from anywhere in the world could understand what they were speaking.
2. Strength and courage to the disciples and to the words of the disciples so that those who hear will repent and be transformed.
3. The ability to perform miracles and signs in the name of the Lord.

In order to nurture the Holy Spirit that we receive through baptism, there should be good deeds in us. Then, the Holy Spirit will comfort us and lead us and fill us with love.

On the Day of Pentecost, during the Holy Qurbana Service, we conduct three 'Services of kneeling'. The three services are in the name of the Trinity. In the first we call upon the Father, in the second, the Son and in the third service, the Holy Spirit. From the Feast of Resurrection to the Feast of Pentecost, we do not kneel down during prayers. 'Kneeling down' begins from the Day of Pentecost. That is why that service got the name, Order of Keeling Down. The rich and blessed *Promeons* and *Sedras* which are the specialities of the Worship Order of the Pentecost Service is the product of the theological studies about the persons of the Holy Trinity, their functionality and characteristics by Cappadocian Fathers, Holy Father Basil and Holy Father Gregory.

The ten days from Ascension to Pentecost we describe as the Days of Waiting. On the those days marriage sacraments are not conducted.

The Holy Spirit is also known in the names Holy Ruach, Comforter, Paraclete etc.



## **8. Peter healed the Lame Man**

**Acts 3:1-20; 5:12-16**

WE OBSERVE the Friday after the Pentecost Day as Golden Friday. On this day we remember the incident where Peter and John healed a lame man.

The Jerusalem Temple wall had nine gates in all. One among them is the tower gate called Beautiful. This is built facing the east, to a height of 50 yards. As this tower was made entirely of copper, it was very beautiful to look at. That is why this gate got its name Beautiful. Many people used to come to the Jerusalem Temple for their time to time prayers. Because of that, beggars used to sit in front of the gate.

One person who used to sit by this gate was a man who was lame right from his birth. Everyday some people used to carry him and seat him there. One day when Peter and John were going to the Temple at the ninth hour (i.e. 3 in the afternoon), this lame man stretched out his hands towards them hoping to get something. His pitiable look made Peter and John stop in their step. And Peter said, "Look at us!" Thinking that he would get something he looked at them attentively. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, Peter helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with Peter and John into the temple, walking and jumping and praising God. All the people were wonder-struck and amazed when they saw this miraculous incident that occurred to the man who used to sit by the Beautiful Gate of the Temple.

The first long verandah that is seen on entering the Temple courts through the Beautiful Gate is Solomon's Colonnade. When the news of, this lame man's healing spread like wild fire, all the people thronged in to see him. He was standing with Peter and John in this colonnade. When the crowd increased Peter began to say, "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? On the contrary, it is by the power of the holy and righteous Jesus Christ. As according to the Scriptures, Jesus Christ died for all of mankind, was buried, resurrected and has ascended into heaven. Today you saw and learned of Him sitting powerfully on the right hand side of God and working. Therefore, repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out." The people who saw these miracles and understood the power of Jesus baptised in the name of Jesus.

In the beginning years of the Church, the disciples had performed many miracles and signs. Just as in the time of the Lord, people of various illnesses thronged in the way and places where Peter preached. Some of them brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Many sick people and those tormented by impure spirits were healed. All these miracles attracted a large number of people to the Church.

## **9. Ananias and Sapphira**

**Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11**

IN THE early Church, Christians used to voluntarily sell their lands and possessions and give the money to the Apostles. As the group of believers were of one heart and one mind, everything was common for them. The Apostles would seek out those who required anything and give them what was needed. So, there was no one in need among them.

A man named Barnabas, meaning 'Son of Encouragement' or 'Son of Exhortation', sold all his possessions and gave the money to the Apostles. This act earned Barnabas greater respect from among all the believers. On seeing this, a man named Ananias desired to get the same kind of recognition and respect by showing that he also had made a sacrifice. So with the knowledge of his wife Sapphira he sold a piece of land. Of the money they got, they kept away one part and placed the rest of it at the feet of the Apostles.

Peter who discerned the deception said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he immediately fell down dead. All those who heard this were fear-stricken. Then some young men wrapped his body in cloth, took it out and buried it.

Nearly after three hours, his wife Sapphira came in unaware of anything that had happened. Peter asked her if they had sold the land for this price. She also said "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." Immediately she fell down dead at his feet. The young men came in and found her dead. So they took her body out and buried it next to her husband's. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

This sort of deception that occurred in the Church pained the disciples more than the persecution they faced from others. Therefore, it was necessary to nip it in the bud itself.

The gravity of the sin increased because of the hypocrisy in acting very devout. It was the praise and flattery of people and his longing for wealth that tempted Ananias to commit this sin. Ananias' action was against the Church and the Holy Spirit. Peter did not convict Ananias of sin. His death became the judgement of God. However, Peter did convict Sapphira. He gave her an opportunity to repent (to confess). If she had confessed the wrong, then she would have been saved. She should have turned her husband away from deception. Instead, she held on to the lie like her husband. So, Peter convicted her of her sin and she died.

When the City of Jericho was captured, Achan broke the command of Jehovah Lord and stole some silver, gold and clothes. When that was proven he was stoned to death as per the laws of that time.

Ananias and Sapphira would have learned from the Scriptures of this incident that occurred in the wilderness journey of the children of Israel. They considered it only as an incident in history and did not give it any more importance. Ananias and Sapphira repeated the same sin as Achan. Just like Achan, they also received the punishment for working against the Holy Spirit.

Today, we also see all these stories only as stories in history. We also commit the same sins that they did. God never accepts deception at any time. This is the attitude of God towards those who are insincere and commit fraud.

## **10. The Church Grows**

### **Acts 6:1-15**

BY THE anointing of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples spoke in different tongues. Some people doubted and said that they had drunk new wine. Peter who heard this said that they had not drunk new wine and made his maiden speech witnessing Saviour Jesus Christ. That day nearly 3000 people believed and were baptised.

When the crippled man was healed at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, Peter gave his second speech from Solomon's Colonnade to the people who thronged in to see the miracle. Of the people who believed that day, the men alone counted to 5000 in number.

Many, many more became believers through his daily work. Among them were Jews who spoke Hebrew language (Hebraic Jews) and Jews who spoke Greek language (Hellenistic Jews). As the numbers in the Church started increasing steadily on a daily basis, the Apostles were unable to attend to all the needs of everyone. There were more Hebraic Jews than Hellenistic Jews among the Church members. That is when the Hellenistic Jews started complaining that their widows were being neglected by the Hebraic Jews in their daily distribution of food.

In reply Peter said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." Although the Apostles had to attend to all the spiritual and secular needs of the Church members, their concentration was on Ministering the Word. They were at it day and night.

In those days there were no national programmes for the welfare of the helpless and destitute. Religious groups took care of such matters. There were arrangements for such things in the Judaist religion. When people believed in Jesus Christ and took baptism, that help ceased. Over here, everyone used to sell their possessions and place it at the feet of the Apostles, and no one saw anything as their own but everything as common. When the number of members increased and the Apostles who had the responsibility of overseeing every matter could not pay attention to the food distribution, murmurings started.

So there arose the need to get assistance in service. Immediately, The Twelve called all the disciples and said, "Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." It is interesting to note the instructions to select the servers. They gathered the Church together, and from among them, selected those who were worthily qualified. The necessary qualifications were specifically said – full of the Spirit and wisdom.

All those who had gathered were pleased with the opinion of Peter and selected seven men who were filled with the Spirit and wisdom. They chose, Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch who was a convert to Judaism and presented these men to the Apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. Here we see the first Ordination Service. It is by Laying on of Hands that ranks and special graces are granted. From among these seven, we see only Stephen and Philip in the later Bible passages.

## **11. The First Martyr**

### **Acts 7:1-60**

AMONG the newly ordained deacons, Stephen was one of the important ones. He was a talented person and a great orator. He worked mainly among the Hellenistic Jews. The foreign Jews saw the local Jews as below status. Stephen who was the leader of this group worked, filled with grace and strength.

Stephen performed many miracles and signs by the steadfast faith he had in Lord Jesus Christ. He preached that salvation is through the way of Jesus Christ and not through the Law and strongly objected to the customs that the Pharisees had added on to the Laws of God.

This caused a big change in the people. The Jews had 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. Some of the Jewish leaders in that believed in Jesus. This transition that was happening among the people affected the survival of the Pharisees. So, many of them started arguing with Stephen. But they were unable to stand against the spirit and wisdom with which Stephen spoke. Therefore, they secretly got some men to their side. They made these men say that they heard him speak blasphemously against Moses and God. They stirred up the people, the leaders and the scribes. They went to Stephen and caught him and took him before the Sanhedrin. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

In the Sanhedrin, the high priest asked Stephen "Are these charges true?" Stephen replied to that in a rather long speech. Stephen's individuality is clearly stamped in this speech. The position given to the Old Testament, criticism against secular religion, importance given to the service of angels, story of leading the Israelites through the wilderness are all discussed in this speech. He said that God sent Jesus like He sent Moses; that if the founder of the Old Israel is Moses, the founder of the New Israel is Jesus and as the Laws and prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus, all those who accept Him will be fulfilling the will of God.

In the Bible portion, from verses 2 to 16 Stephen speaks about the times of the forefathers. Among the Jews it was common to conduct a historical analyses to think how God's hand worked in the past years, right from the time when God called Father Abraham in Mesopotamia complete with all the details till Abraham died and was buried.

The second part of the speech is from verses 17 to 43. This part was in reply to the accusation that he taught against the Law. He spoke likening Jesus to Moses and Joshua because they both went through the experiences that Jesus had. Stephen pointed out that they were people who lived as a foretaste. In verse 37 he speaks of Moses foreseeing Jesus. So then, those who believed in Jesus were honouring Moses. Stephen argued that when the Jews insulted and crucified Jesus they were actually denying Moses and it was the Jews who actually broke the Law. The quote from Isaiah in verse 43 was in response to the allegation that Stephen spoke against the Temple. The meaninglessness of foolish religiosity is what is addressed in this verse.

The third part of the speech starts with verse 44. The Temple for Jehovah God was built according to the model that God showed. They (the Jews) just existed concentrating on the outward traditions of the Laws and the Temple. He said, because the people of Israel forsook the true God and sinned, God's glory was no longer present in Solomon's Temple. To those who had misunderstood that God was living in the Temple because God had agreed to build the Temple, he courageously said that God was in touch with them only before the establishment of the Temple.

From Verse 51 is the conclusion of his speech. Stephen, who was fully aware that he was going to get the same experience that Jesus Christ got, was least bothered about the Jewish leaders who were listening to him and he criticised their withdrawing life. Such people though they were physically circumcised were yet stubborn and not circumcised in the heart and ear and always stood opposing the Holy Spirit. When Stephen explained that Jesus who is the real prophet and mediator between man and God had allowed the difficulties that Joseph suffered because of his brothers' envy and the stress that Moses had to face from his contemporaries, the insinuation that those who were listening to him committed the same mistake, doubled their anger. Then with the same conviction he continued saying that their fundamental problem was that, "you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." Then they didn't allow him to say a word. They were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen looked up to heaven and said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. While Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," they continued stoning him. Stephen fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." After saying this, he fell asleep forever. Some men among the believers went and buried Stephen.

## **12. Simon the Magician**

### **Acts 8:9-24**

THE DEATH of Stephen only aided the growth of the Church. The scattering of the believers because of the persecution and their evangelisation work increased the momentum of the Church's growth. The persecution that followed after the death of Stephen forced the majority of believers, except for the apostles, to leave Jerusalem. Perhaps, it was mostly the Hellenistic Jews who had to suffer the persecution, because Stephen was one among them. The killing of Stephen was with the approval of Saul. It was this Saul who took the lead to go from house to house and catch believers of Christ. It was this Saul who later became Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. Among the people who fearing the persecution had scattered and went to different places was Philip who was one among the seven deacons. He went to the city of Samaria and preached about Jesus Christ there.

Philip also, like the apostles, worked and preached the Word. Many people single-mindedly listened to him because he transformed the people bound by the evil spirit and healed the lame. Thus there was a lot of joy in that town. Many believed in Jesus Christ and Philip baptised them.

There was a magician named Simon in Samaria. He had heard Philip's preaching and believed and was baptised. This Simon is known as the first anti-believer among the Christian believers. He claimed to be a great person and many people believed in his powers. He just took baptism when all the people started taking baptism; not because there was any repentance in him.

Though Philip baptised the believers, he did not have the authority for the service of laying hands on the head and gifting the Holy Spirit on them. This was because he was only a deacon. So Peter and John arrived in Samaria to anoint the believers there and join them to the Church. When they laid their hands on those who had been baptised, they received the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Seeing this, Simon tried to bribe the disciples by offering money. He said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Frightened by what he heard, Simon requested Peter to pray for him so that God would not punish him.

### **13. The Eunuch Converts**

#### **Acts 8:25-40**

IN THE previous lesson we learned about Philip who preached the gospel in Samaria. The incident referred to in this lesson's Bible portion occurred while he was working there. Before studying the Bible portion, it would be good to study about Samaria and Philip's activities there.

In the first lesson we learned how after the death of King Solomon of Israel, Israel was divided and given to two kings. The capitals of Israel and Judea were Samaria and Jerusalem, respectively. The Assyrians and Babylonians were always the enemies of the Jews. Once they attacked the Jews and captured their cities and took them as slaves. The Assyrians came and occupied and settled in Samaria. The remnant Jews in Samaria later married Assyrians and they became a mixed race. When the Jews who were in Babylon were released from their slavery, returned to their land and started the work of rebuilding the walls of the Temple, the Jews in Samaria offered their assistance. As they were considered a mixed race, they were set aside as foreigners and denied permission into the Temple. So, the Samaritans built their own temple atop the Gerizim Hill and began worshipping there.

We understand from the incident of asking the Samaritan woman for water, and from the parable of the Good Samaritan how the Jews dealt with the Samaritans. Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. Philip's duty was to make that practical. In the previous lesson we learned how Philip preached the gospel and worked towards that and baptised many people. It was when the work there was coming to an end that the messenger of God came and instructed Philip to go to the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

The Ethiopian official in charge of all the treasury of the Queen of Ethiopia (Finance Minister) was returning after going to the Temple of Jerusalem. Abyssiniya also known as Ethiopia is a small country in Eastern Africa. Philip was led to that desert road in order to win over this Ethiopian to Jesus Christ so that the gospel would reach Ethiopia.

Perhaps, the Ethiopian was a practising Judaist; or a devotee of God. Or, many foreigners who were fed up with a ritualistic religious culture and injustice used to come to the Jerusalem Temple to worship Jehovah Lord. May be he was one of those. He had a Scripture scroll in his hand. He may have bought it from Jerusalem.

Sitting in the chariot, the Ethiopian was reading from the Book of Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 53. "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." (Isaiah 53:7, 8) Hearing him read this Scripture passage, Philip walked close to the chariot and asked him whether he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian replied that unless someone explained how would one understand. Then the Ethiopian asked Philip to join him in the chariot. Based on this passage, Philip told him about Jesus Christ and His ministry. The Ethiopian was very glad that he was able to hear about God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

When they saw some water on the way, the Ethiopian asked, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So they stopped the chariot and the two of them went down into the water. Philip baptised him. When they got out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away from there. This miracle helped in strengthening the Ethiopian's faith and spreading the gospel of Jesus in Africa.

Till recently, the Kings who ruled Ethiopia were Christians. Besides the Ethiopian Church, they have the Coptic Church and Eastern Churches.

## **14. The Conversion of Saul – I**

### **Acts 9:1-9**

SAUL was one of the people who had an active role in stoning St. Stephen to death. It was this Saul who looked after the cloaks of the people who threw the stones. We have studied in earlier lessons that after the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the Christians who lived in Jerusalem became victims of persecution and they left Jerusalem. It was this very same Saul who led this persecution. The Sanhedrin Council membership which Saul got was in acknowledgement of the keenness that Saul showed in crushing the Christians.

The Sanhedrin Council was the Supreme Court of the Jews. However, its authority was not limited to the King of Judea or the Palestinian regions including Israel. The Jews world over accepted the authority of the Sanhedrin.

Saul got information that some of the Christians among those who were scattered following the persecution led by Saul had reached Damascus and the Christian church was growing there. Using his authority in the Sanhedrin, he got authorisation papers from the High Priest and set out to capture and bring the Christians in Damascus to Jerusalem. Some soldiers who were supposed to guard the Temple were with him.

Damascus at that time was a city under the Roman government and was situated outside Palestine, about 145 miles north east of Jerusalem. This city is situated in the valley of Mt. Hermon in Syria. In those days when there were no transport facilities, people usually took about seven days to travel this distance from Jerusalem. But Saul reached the city gates by the afternoon of the fourth day. He journeyed without paying heed to travel fatigue or the harshness of the afternoon sun because of his zeal to accomplish his goal, and his obsession for his religion.

Suddenly an amazing incident occurred. Unexpectedly, a very bright light shone from heaven. Saul fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice speaking in his mother tongue asking him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When Saul asked who it was, the voice replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Then the voice said, "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." When Saul got up, he had lost his vision. As the voice from heaven and Saul's reply were in Aramaic, the people who were with him heard the sound and saw the light, but understood nothing. They stood stunned. According to Saul's instruction, the soldiers led him by the hand to Damascus city to the house of Judas who lived on Straight Street which was a main road that lay east-west. And Saul stayed there.

Born to a noble family in Tarsus, the capital city of ancient Cilicia, (now in south central Turkey), in the tribe of Benjamin, as the son of a Pharisee, Saul was by birth a Roman citizen. As he had studied at the feet of the great Jewish scholar, Gamaliel, Saul had received profound knowledge about the Laws of Moses. Because of that, he was an absolute theologian, a doctrinal philosopher and a rich visualiser.

Saul who had lost his sight completely, gave up on food and drink and spent three days fully in prayer and fasting. The time Saul spent meditating served as an opportunity for his spiritual renewal. First he examined his own life in the light of the Laws. 'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do.' (Rom. 7:19) He understood two things from this truth. (1) - The Laws instruct what man must do, but it does not give man the strength to do it. (2) - The desire to do that which the Laws forbid is increasing in man. The zeal for the Laws and the challenges in practical life created a conflict in his mind and Saul became restless with no peace of mind. At the same time he saw the peace and calmth in the Christians whom he was persecuting. Saul had noted how the face of Stephen, who was martyred, had shone brightly. Stephen's splendid speech, unwavering faith, patience, prayer for his enemies, courage that did not shake even in the face of persecution, touched Saul's heart as Stephen being an idealist. Saul was disturbed by the thought that if faith in Christ



was an illusion or blasphemy, how was it possible for these people to experience peace even in severe pain and death and pray for their enemies. Saul has testified that Jesus who spoke to him had appeared to him is a truth. The mental anguish that was going on in him and the appearance of Jesus made him take a decision and caused his conversion.

## 15. The Conversion of Saul – II

### Acts 9:10-31

ANANIAS who was consecrated as Bishop of Damascus (Episcopa) by Peter and Andrew together, got a vision from the Lord. There is a traditional belief that he was one of the 72 messengers sent out by Jesus. In a vision, the Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” As far as Ananias was concerned, it was a shocking message. He knew all the cruelty that Saul had unleashed to destroy the believers in Jerusalem. Moreover, he was also aware of the news that Saul was coming to Damascus with the High Priest’s letter of authority to find and bind all the Christians in Damascus and take them to Jerusalem. The Lord told the sceptical Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.”

Then Ananias went to the house of Judas and said to Saul, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Then he placed his hands on Saul’s head and prayed for him. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he got his sight back. Saul got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. There itself he accepted the name Paul meaning ‘small’ or ‘humble’. Then he stayed on with Ananias and learned matters of faith.

The Greek term ‘Apostolos’, means commissioned messenger or envoy or ambassador. When he set out for Damascus, Paul was the ambassador of the Sanhedrin. And his commission was the eradication of the name of Jesus Christ. But his work in Damascus was as the Apostle of Jesus Christ. Ananias met the Christian believers and told them about the change in Paul. They received him gladly. He went to the synagogues of the Jews in Damascus. Paul who was well-schooled in the Scriptures quoted passages from it that referred to Christ. The Christians who heard his sermons praised God. But the Jews were startled. Agitated, they decided to kill Paul. Day and night they stood watch outside the city gates. The Christians who learned about the conspiracy, took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall and saved him.

Paul who was a philosopher, realised that he needed to re-examine his past life in the light of his new experiences. Besides, in order to prepare a plan to reflect about Christ and His death and resurrection, and to get a perfectly clear revelation on the second coming of Jesus who had ascended into heaven, and to receive Jesus Christ’s grace and blessing for it all to happen, he decided that he needed a short period of secluded meditation and so went to Arabia. There is no account in the Acts of The Apostles of Paul’s stay in the desert land of Arabia. However, Paul does refer to this in his epistle to the Galatians (1:17).

Paul knew the fact that it was at Mount Sinai that God gave Moses the vision and the instructions necessary for the children of Israel’s journey. It was at Mount Sinai that God picked up Elijah, who was gripped by fear and became disappointed and depressed, and strengthened him to fulfil his duty for which he had been commissioned. So, Paul made his wilderness stay in Mount Sinai, opine Bible scholars. There is also an opinion that it was in the desert that lies just near Damascus. Moses and Elijah gained strength through their solitary confinement. Paul also realised that John the Baptist and Jesus Christ went to the wilderness and meditated before their public ministry. Thus through the solitary life in Arabia, through communion with God, he gained necessary spiritual strength and power for his ardent work and he returned to Damascus. Ananias and other believers rejoiced at the new Paul’s return. He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ more powerfully. He lived there for nearly three years.

Then Paul went to Jerusalem. His main aim was to meet Apostle Peter and the others and get to know them. But the Christians there who knew his past actions refused to welcome him warmly. Then Barnabas who was from Cyprus and also a relative of Mark went and spoke to the apostles and others about the transformation that came about in Paul and they accepted him gladly. Thus, he who was the destroyer of the Christians became its protector. In Jerusalem also, the Jews conspired to kill him and tried to endanger him. So without visiting the other churches among the Christian Jews, he left Jerusalem with enough escorts for Caesarea. From there, by ship, he returned to his own place, Tarsus.

St. Paul reached the same position as the other apostles because like the other apostles Jesus appeared to Paul. Like the other apostles, Christ himself commissioned Paul. Paul also received the gift of signs and miracles like the other apostles. By the above facts these truths are ascertained.

Paul is the author of thirteen epistles in the New Testament. Three times he journeyed around and preached the gospels in various countries among people of other races. So he is also known as the Apostle of the Gentiles. He suffered a lot of persecution for gospel work and finally died a martyr's death. Paul who was the founder of the church in Rome, is also counted as the Leader of the Disciples and his remembrance on June 29 is celebrated as a Dominical Feast.

# **PART THREE**

## **Faith Truths**

### **HOLY LENT**

Prayer and Fasting are the two sides of the Coin of Lent. Lent existed right from the Old Testament times.

1. So you go to the house of the LORD on a day of Fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the LORD that you wrote as I dictated. - Jeremiah 36:6
2. My knees give way from Fasting; my body is thin and gaunt. – Psalm 109:24
3. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. – Daniel 9:3
4. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ – Isaiah 58:3
5. When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, “We have sinned against the LORD.” - 1 Samuel 7:6
6. The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. – Jonah 3:5

There are many such Bible verses that could be quoted. Let us see if Fasting is given importance in the New Testament.

1. “When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. – Matthew 6:16
2. Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. – Mark 2:19
3. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. – Acts 13:2-3

In both the Lord’s teachings and the works of the Apostles they do talk about Fasting. Then let us see what the aim of these Fasting was, and what can be gained from that.

1. Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. – Exodus 34:28
2. So he (Elijah) got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. – 1 Kings 19:8
3. After Fasting forty days and forty nights, he (Jesus) was hungry. – Matthew 4:2

When we study these words deeply, we see that Moses received God’s blessings, God guided Elijah along the way and that Jesus was able to be victorious over Satan. If Moses who saw God and the prophets who experienced the blessings of God abundantly, and Jesus who is the Son of God, gained victory in spirit only by Fasting, then, how great is the need for us who are formed in sin, bound in sin and die in sin, to fast? However, some people who oppose faith traditions point out some Biblical passages against the Lent traditions of the Syrian Christians. “Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” – Mark 7: 15. Some people strive to establish that in Lent time, saying that some food items should be avoided is meaningless, by crookedly interpreting this command of our Lord. He had said this just to accuse the Pharisees’ preference for outward cleanliness while inwardly they were of unclean hearts.

When the Pharisees asked why Jesus’ disciples were not Fasting when John the Baptist’s disciples were Fasting, our Lord taught about Fasting - “But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.” – Mark 2:20.

Today the bridegroom has left us and gone. He has promised that He will come again. Therefore, it is observing the command of the Lord that till then we should fast.

Although observing Lent is good and is one of the commands of our Lord, there is also a thinking, that Lent could be observed according to each one's convenience as they feel like. Let us see how Lent was observed in the Old Testament times.

1. "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you (Israelites) fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted?' – Zechariah 7:5
2. This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace." – Zechariah 8:19
3. I fast twice a week... - Luke 18:12

From these Bible passages we understand that the Jewish religion observed Fasting in particular months and some particular days. Historian Mosheim says that there is proof, that were fixed Lents in the First Century. Moreover, right from the days of the disciples itself, Wednesday, the fourth day of the week when our Lord informed His disciples about the sufferings He was going to face, and the day that He was handed over, and also the sixth day, Friday, when He was crucified, have been determined as Fasting days. Wednesday has also been set aside in reverence of Holy St. Mary.

A holy man from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, has written, "We have withered and dried up by Fasting. We have become just a skeleton because of the Fasting."

We see in the letters of Cleemis, a pious man of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, "those who eat sumptuous food and lead a life of comfort and joy will fall into Satan's trap more easily than those who take lent and Fasting."

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, they didn't believe that there was anything as strong as Fasting which could destroy the traps of the evil ones and alleviate the anger of God. We see in Page 371 of the book that Mosheim wrote that the people who observed Fasting kept away completely from food and drink.

When Jonah, as per the command of God, preached to the Ninevites about their wickedness, the people and the animals there, without eating or drinking, wore sack cloth, sat in ashes and fasted and cried out and prayed to God. When the people and the animals together fasted, God blessed them. Therefore, we are obliged to carry out Lent according to what God had commanded the children of Israel through Moses, what the Jews and the disciples of John the Baptist continued and what Lord Jesus has commanded. Besides, Wednesday and Friday, the Church has included the following.

#### **1. Three Days Lent**

The Ninevites who heard the preaching of Jonah, repented and turned away from evil ways and fasted and prayed, and the anger of God was moved and they were saved. We observe the Three Day Lent following them.

#### **2. Apostles Lent**

The thirteen days before June 29 when St. Peter and St. Paul, who were the main apostles, were martyred, has been declared as Lent days in order to devoutly celebrate the remembrance of these saints.

#### **3. Shunoyo Lent or Lent of Assumption**

The Church tradition is that as the demise of Holy Mother was as the Mother of God and Perpetual Virgin, her body did not deteriorate and was assumed into heaven. In order to increase devotion to the Spirit of God and for the Holy Mother's prayer to be our fortress and refuge, 15 days from August 1<sup>st</sup>, has been proclaimed as Lent days.

#### **4. Advent Lent or Lent of Nativity or Yeldho Lent**

December 25<sup>th</sup> is observed as the day of the birth of the Saviour of the world. The Church decided to observe Lent from December 1<sup>st</sup> for 25 days in order to be

prepared to celebrate that great day in a worthy manner so that He is born in us and in our family, and become clean and happy homes.

## **5. Great Lent**

From among the Lents, because this Lent is observed for 50 days, this Lent is known as 50 Days Lent or Great Lent. The Fasting that our Lord observed for 40 days; the seven days before He underwent the sufferings; and the three days waiting for the resurrection together we observe Lent for 50 days.

These Lents are known as Canonical Lents. The Canons instruct that all people should observe these Lents in the normal way. However, sick people, elderly, pregnant women, travellers, little children have been given some leniency.

It is particularly stated in the Canons that the *sanyasins* or monks should observe the Lent days and Fastings in a more intense form.

Special separate prayers are used for the Great Lent, Three Day Lent and the Week of Passion. The first two days of the Three Days Lent and in the Great Lent, except for Saturday and Sunday, the normal Holy Qurbana is not celebrated (This is so as to not break the Fasting). Jesus healed on a Sabbath Day a woman who was affected by an evil spirit for 18 years. The intention behind the act was not breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment 'Remember to keep the Sabbath holy'. Jesus was just fulfilling the words that God had proclaimed through Prophet Isaiah and made it practical in its actual meaning. With that Jesus exposed the shallowness in the Jews' observances of traditions.

All the main religions in the world have given importance to observing Lent with Fasting. Medical experts opine that it is good to fast one day in a week. Below are the factors that Syrian Christians should follow while observing Lent.

### **1. Prayerfully observe Lent**

Matthew 26:41 says, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." Lent is a weapon to gain victory over Satan. Prayer which is the main part of Lent will become a fortress around us and help us to be saved from Satan by finding refuge inside the fortress. The Church has stipulated that we should pray seven Liturgy of the Hours (*Yama prarthana*) prayers in a day. Prayer is a time of communion with God. It should be with humility, devoutness and repentance of sin. John 4:24 records Jesus as saying "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." Some people fall on their knees and bow down more times during Lent than on ordinary days. However, on Sundays, Dominical Feasts, the days from Resurrection to Pentecost, the day that one partakes in the Holy Qurbana, we should not fall down on our knees and bow down.

### **2. Lent should be observed with Fasting**

Matthew 18:9 says, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away." In the same way, if our food habits are a hindrance to observing Lent, then it should be regulated. John the Baptist had forsaken all non vegetarian food stuff all his life. "At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips..." says Daniel 10:2-3. A verse from the Bible - 1 Timothy 4:4-5 - "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" is the verse quoted against controlling food during Lent. Without thinking about in which circumstance and towards what purpose St. Paul wrote this, some people object to rejecting rich food during Lent. If all of God's creation is good, then when our ancestors ate the fruit of the tree in the centre of the Garden of Eden, it was counted as sin. Daniel and his friends ate only vegetarian food and drank only water so as not to defile themselves with royal food and drink. - Daniel 1:8-12. And God blessed them. Controlling the organs of

five senses and rejecting food that should be avoided is part of Lent observation. The Canon (Rule) has recorded that Fasting is not having food till sunset, and the person who eats food before noon is not Fasting. The Canon also instructs that those who lead a life of a monk, who have taken a Dayaraya abstinence, should reject non vegetarian food all their life.

### **3. Spiritual Discipline**

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? – Isaiah 58:5. Isaiah criticizes the observation of Lent through just externally making a show of it. Our Lord reproaches the Jews who used to observe such hollow Fasting and Lent.

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” – Mark 14:38. When man is unable to control himself, he gets influenced by fleshly desires. When importance is given to spiritual matters than bodily matters, bodily desires will lessen and the spirit will become enriched and rise up to the presence of God. If we pay attention to the Holy Qurbana, to holy people are given the permission into heaven. The holy body and blood are given to holy people. Ahimelek the priest said to David, “I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.” – 1 Samuel 21:4.

Though Fasting during Lent helps in spiritual discipline, some firm decisions have to be taken for its wholeness. We have complete freedom to do evil. However, if there is a firm decision that it's wrong and will not be done, the spirit will have complete victory over bodily desires. The origin of sin is from the heart. However, those who are ruled by the spirit will be able to forsake sin and all ways that lead to sin.

### **4. Charity**

A true believer's hallmark is his interest in doing charity. According to the command of God, aid was given right from Old Testament times. However, Jesus has exposed the real form of this which was prevalent among the Jews. “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” – Matthew 6:2-4.

Jesus Christ who said to the person who approached Him with the desire of attaining eternal life, to go and sell all his possessions and give it to the poor, does not ask Zacchaeus to give all his wealth to the poor. Jesus allowed him to keep half his wealth. Jesus valued Zacchaeus' change of heart that came about by his repentance and his desire to give charity.

At the judgement during the Second Coming, Lord Messiah will say to us: “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.” – Matthew 25:42-43. So as not to hear these words of admonish, we should have the heart to give charity during the observance of Lent.

### **5. Confession**

Lord Jesus had commanded and authorised the disciples with the Sacrament called Confession, to absolve the sins we have committed after the Holy Baptism. Sin severs man from God. Adam, our first father, committed sin. God sent out Adam and Eve who were in His protection. To completely destroy a sinful people

from this world, He caused a flood. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was because of the wickedness of the people there. When the sinless Lord Jesus took upon the sins of the whole world, God the Father forsook him. He made the world dark so that the world would not see His face.

Sin separates us from God. He said to the sinners at the time of judgement, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." – Matthew 25:41. Not only mankind, even to the messengers of God this will be done. "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment." - 2 Peter 2:4. Therefore, when observing Lent, with an open heart and confess before the priest; confess the sins with sincere repentance and forsake it, and make a firm resolution will not repeat it.

---

### **THE HOLY CROSS**

BEFORE crucifying our Lord on the Cross, this Cross was one of the most despicable murder weapons. From the day He died on the cross carrying the sins of the world, it became the most honoured, devoted and revered object for His people.

We have learned in an earlier class, how mystically, Queen Helen, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, found the Cross on which our Lord was hanged. The Holy Fathers have written in the Prayer Books that when this Cross was brought to the Royal Court, the Emperor bowed his head down in reverence. There are people who see this as idol worship. 'Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.' - 2 Samuel 6:14-15. Those who see bowing before the Cross as idol worship, yet do not see this dance which was performed before the Ark of the Tabernacle as idol worship, see it that way because they see the Cross as just a wooden Cross. The bowing should be with the awareness that the all of mankind was saved by this Cross and on it hangs our Lord Jesus as sacrifice for us. David did not dance before the Ark of the Tabernacle seeing Jehovah sitting inside it. It was by the faith that it was the Ark in which Jehovah dwells and that Jehovah is seated in it.

The Church Fathers teach that when Jacob blessed Joseph's sons, he placed his one hand over his other hand in the form of a cross, and this was done foreseeing the Cross of Christ. We experience the salvation of mankind, redemption from sin, and the defeat of Satan through the Cross. When giving blessings and receiving blessings and wherever we see a Cross that was placed by a true believer, when we hear the word 'Cross' and when we say the name of the Trinity, we draw the sign of the Cross. We remember the sufferings of our Lord through drawing this sign of the Cross. We are able to find refuge inside the fortress of the Sign of the Cross in order to be saved from evil torments and temptations.

Cross has the meaning 'sufferings'. This drawing the sign of the Cross also includes the statement that he or she is a Christian who obeys Jesus' command to follow Him bearing no matter whatever kind of hardship.

---

### **SALVATION AND PUNISHMENT**

AT THE time of judgement, those on the left will go to eternal punishment and those on the right to eternal life (Matthew 25:46). A doubt can arise from this Bible portion. The punishment is the same no matter how big the sin is, or how small the sin is. It is eternal punishment for all. Likewise, no matter how much good one does, the reward is the same – eternal life. So then, isn't it better to get punished for having done great sins than to get punished for having committed a small sin? In the same way, even if one does a good deed once in a lifetime, that person gets eternal life. From the Bible verses given below we understand that this rationalising is incorrect.



1. "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." – Matthew 8:10
2. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" – Matthew 14:31
3. "Woman, you have great faith!" – Matthew 15:28

Variations in the levels of faith, is what we see in these verses. Likewise, we can see different levels in the punishment also.

1. "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged." Matthew 7:2
2. "The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows." – Luke 12:47-48
3. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. 1 Corinthians 15:41-42

It is evident from these passages that whether it is salvation or punishment, we will receive according to our deeds.

Lying on the Cross, Jesus promised the criminal on the right, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." – Luke 23:43. That criminal who did wicked things till the end of his life, repented at the last moment. He confessed on his own that he was a criminal. Therefore, he was made worthy of Paradise without taking into account his old sins. That is, by attaining holiness through sincere repentance and confession of sins and growing in holiness, the old sins are not counted.

Some people may have a doubt here – that one can do wicked deeds till the end and shall repent at the last moment. Man cannot predict when the end time is. Besides, Prophet Ezekiel says how our sins will be counted - "But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the Sovereign LORD. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die." – Ezekiel 18:21-24. The mercy of God is that no matter how many sins one may have committed, when that person repents, it will be forgiven to that person without remembering the past sins, and the justice of God is that He punishes the one who no matter how many good deeds that person may have done but slides into evil breaking the commands of God, is evident in this passage.

Salvation is a gift from God. For the redemption of the head of mankind who committed sin in Eden, the loving Father foresaw the means of salvation (because He is fully love) as He is interested in saving creation. Thus, the Church prays with faith and hope for the dead, who continue to be a member in the Church as part of an invisible group even if they have left their body. Seeing the faith of the other's, the paralysed man was healed, and seeing the faith of the Canaanite woman her daughter was healed. Seeing the tears of Mary and Martha, Lazar was resurrected and seeing the widow's tears, her son was resurrected. The Son of God who did all this, as an answer to our tearful prayers, will be merciful to our dearly beloved who are departed, because it can be believed based on what is seen in the Bible. Therefore, in the hope that everyone is within the limits of the Salvation plan, we pray with hope both for the living and the dead.