

HEROES OF FAITH
IN CHURCH HISTORY

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The *BOOK*
of VICTORS

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Introduction



Imagine a mountain. It is not very massive, but it's rocky with some patches of grass and small shrubs growing sparingly. This mountain is in Israel, a region where Jesus taught and performed miracles. Do you see it yet? Good.

On the summit of this mountain you'll find a group of people. Only one of them is speaking and the rest are listening. Some of them nod their heads from disbelief. Others are listening attentively. Let's come closer to them and find out what this is all about.

"I have all authority in heaven and on earth," says a man. "Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always until the end of time."

The listeners are from all over. They did not understand the message clearly. They ask some questions. What type of questions? We can't hear clearly. We need to get closer. The one who spoke out earlier is about to speak again:

"It's not for you to know the time and dates decided by our Father. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and up to the ends of this earth. Deliver my Gospel to them. The one who will believe and accepts it by becoming baptized will be saved. The one who will not believe will be

damned. You will be accompanied by signs and miracles just as I was."

After these words, something extraordinary began to happen. The feet of the speaker separated from the earth. He is ascending. As He ascends up to heaven, his listeners are standing stunned. Their mouths are wide open, and they do look pretty silly. We too are looking up to the sky until a cloud covers up the ascending being.

Do you know what you witnessed a moment ago?

The Ascension of Jesus.

Some believed that everything came to an end at that moment. Jesus ascended up to heaven, and we can only wait until we join Him. But Jesus said, "Go, Prophesy! Make disciples of God throughout all nations. Be my witnesses in distant nations!"

Almost two thousand years have passed since Jesus spoke these words. During this time many people lived who took His words to heart. These people allowed God to lead their life. They lived through amazing adventures with God and performed unusual deeds. Some proclaimed the Gospel in faraway lands. Others stood up courageously to rulers in the name of the truth. Some even broke away from captivity. Even though, they committed some sins and were not always obedient to God, they still deserve to be called victors. I'll try my best to tell you all about them.

From Israel to Europe



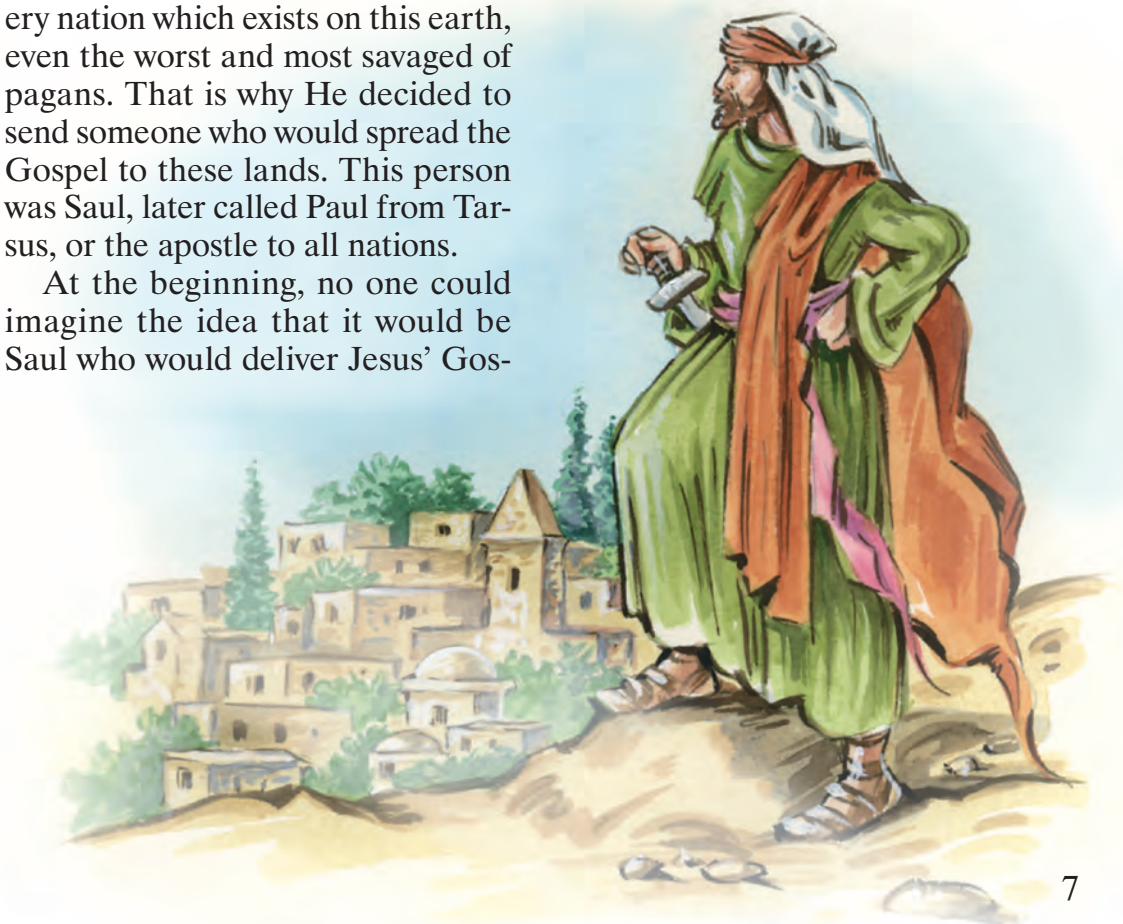
he nation of Israel was chosen by God so it would spread the Good News of salvation. At the beginning, the Gospel was preached almost exclusively to the Jews. The other nations all around them were worshipping their pagan gods without any knowledge that the Creator had sent down his Son to give them eternal life. The good news had not reached them.

God loves not only the Jews but every nation which exists on this earth, even the worst and most savaged of pagans. That is why He decided to send someone who would spread the Gospel to these lands. This person was Saul, later called Paul from Tarsus, or the apostle to all nations.

At the beginning, no one could imagine the idea that it would be Saul who would deliver Jesus' Gos-

pel to the pagans. He was a Jew, a devout follower of Judaism and an enemy to Jesus' Jewish disciples. He belonged to a religious group known as the Pharisees. They studied the law of Moses and followed his teachings. They did not believe in the Gospel, after all.

One day, a Jewish follower named Stephen stood up in front of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders.



“Jesus is the Messiah,” he said. “Believe in Him and you will be saved.”

I need to clarify that the name Jesus, in the Jewish language is pronounced “Y’shuah.” The word “Messiah” symbolizes someone who has been anointed by God. Jesus the Messiah is Jesus Christ, the one anointed by God.

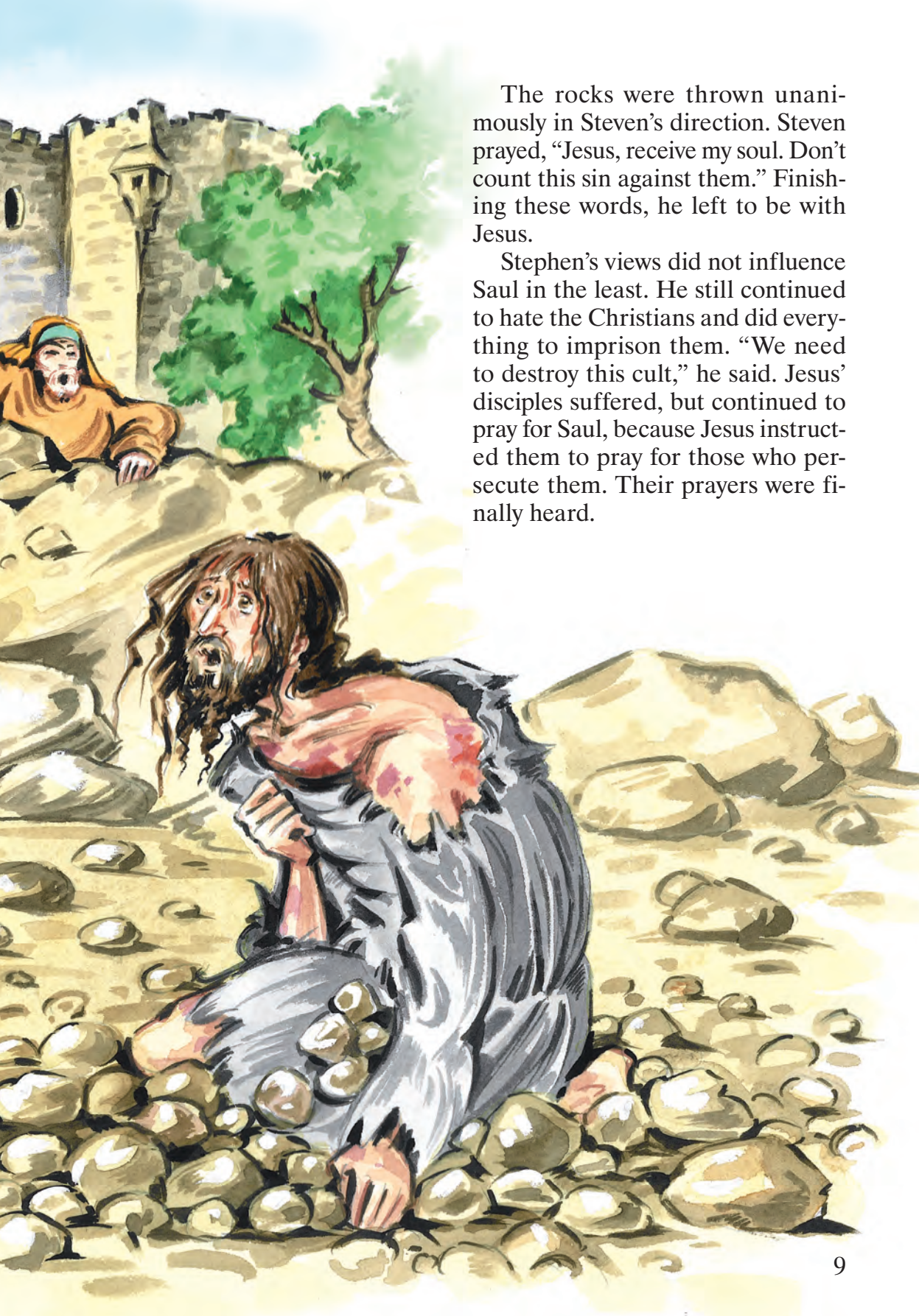
Stephen preached Jesus’ faith to his Jewish brothers. They did not want to accept the message he was preaching. They plugged their ears and began to shout so they would not be able to hear the truth.

“Quickly, let’s find a judge at whose feet the witnesses will lay down their robes, and kill Steven,” cried excitedly. Who will be the judge? Who?

They all looked at Saul. He was still young, but everyone knew him as a fierce enemy of Jesus’ disciples. He’s a good judge who wouldn’t object to taking Stephen’s life. All together, they placed their robes at his feet. They had picked up the rocks.

“Do you object to stoning this false prophet?” they asked Saul. “I agree. There is not a shadow in my mind that he does deserve this fate,” answered Saul.





The rocks were thrown unanimously in Steven's direction. Steven prayed, "Jesus, receive my soul. Don't count this sin against them." Finishing these words, he left to be with Jesus.

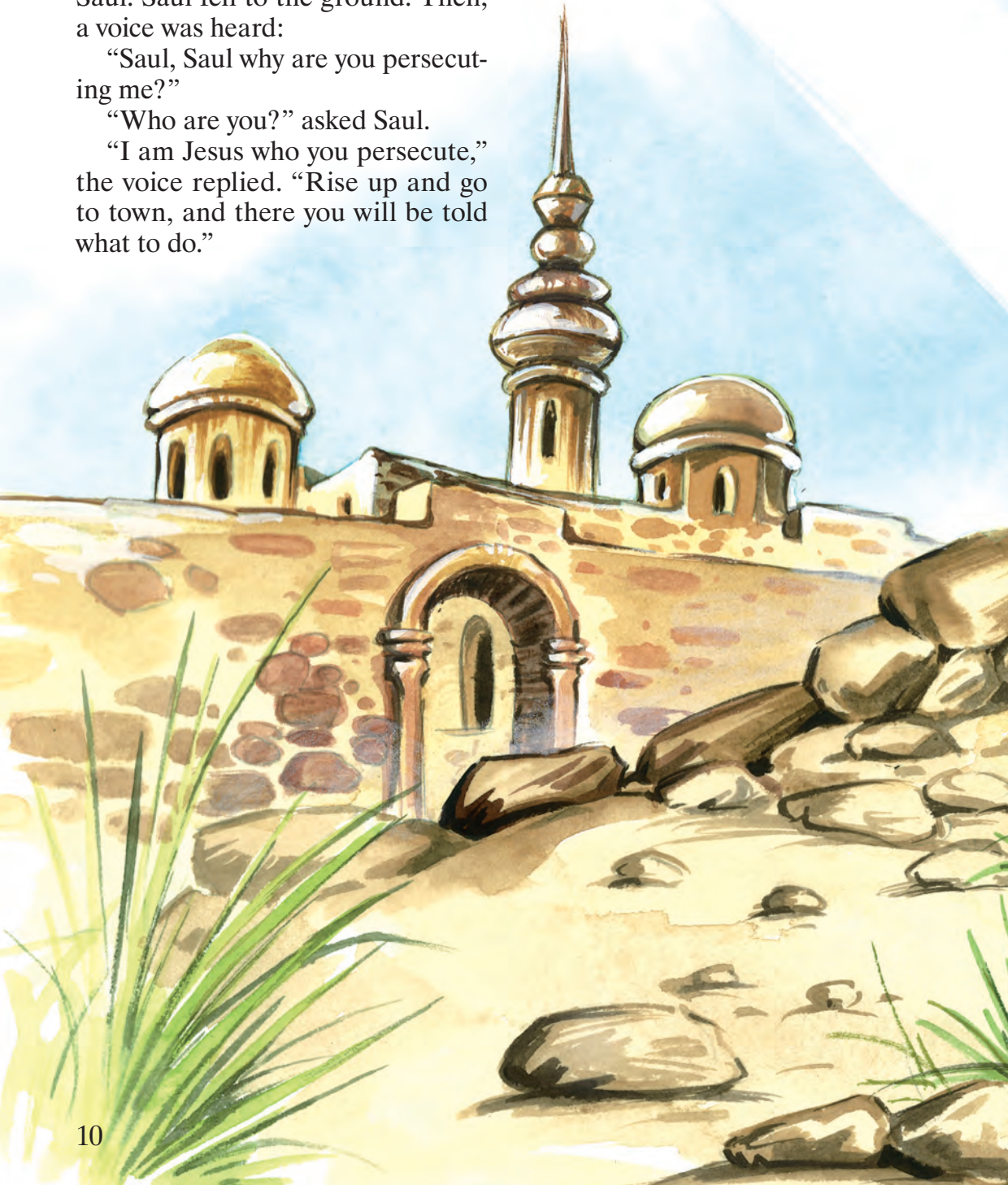
Stephen's views did not influence Saul in the least. He still continued to hate the Christians and did everything to imprison them. "We need to destroy this cult," he said. Jesus' disciples suffered, but continued to pray for Saul, because Jesus instructed them to pray for those who persecute them. Their prayers were finally heard.

One day, Saul and two soldiers were on their way to Damascus where Saul intended to subdue the Christians. Suddenly, a great, bright light flashed from the sky blinding Saul. Saul fell to the ground. Then, a voice was heard:

“Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you?” asked Saul.

“I am Jesus who you persecute,” the voice replied. “Rise up and go to town, and there you will be told what to do.”





When Saul opened his eyes, he realized he could not see. He lost his sight. The soldiers escorted him to town where he remained for some time.

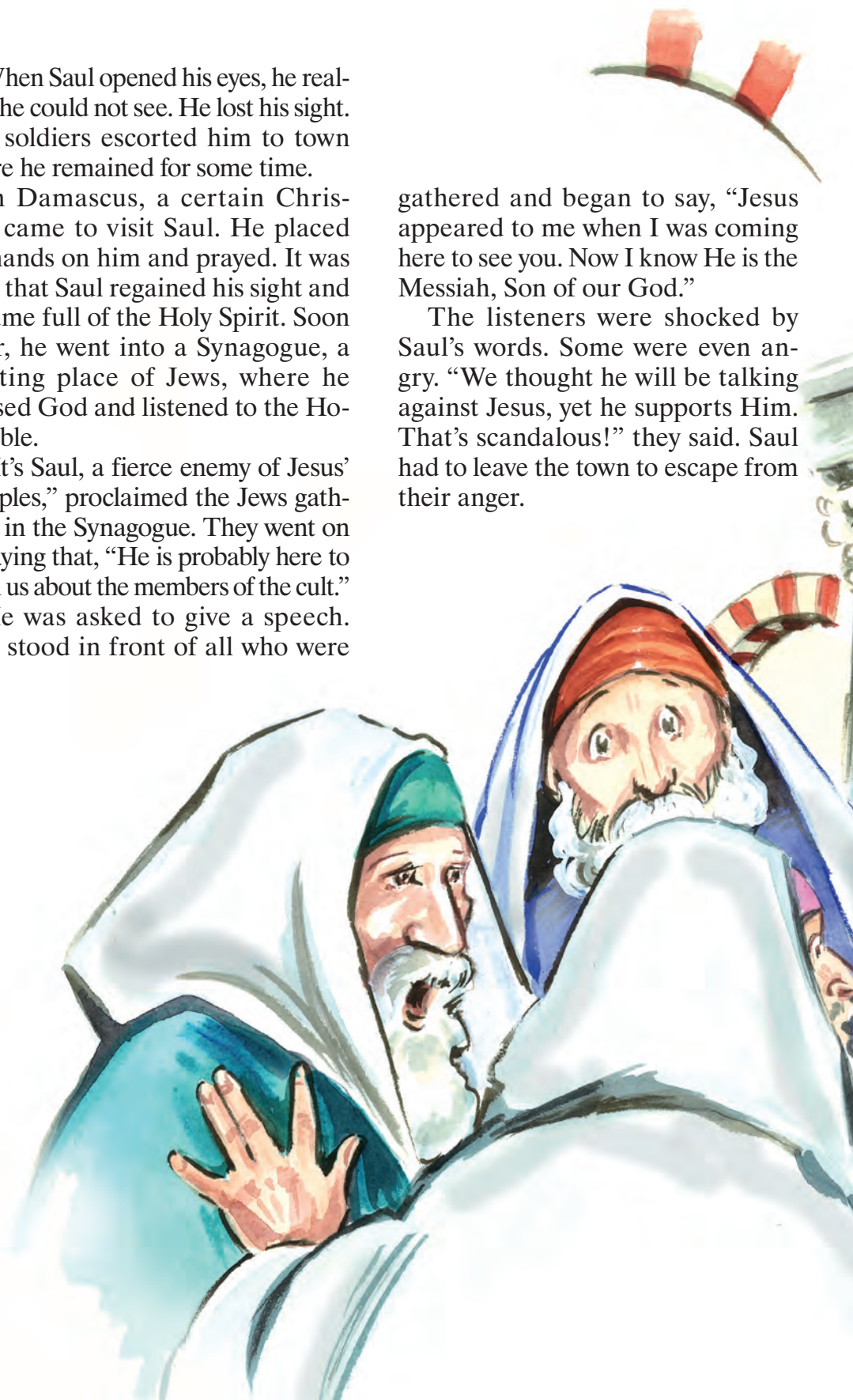
In Damascus, a certain Christian came to visit Saul. He placed his hands on him and prayed. It was then that Saul regained his sight and became full of the Holy Spirit. Soon after, he went into a Synagogue, a meeting place of Jews, where he praised God and listened to the Holy Bible.

“It’s Saul, a fierce enemy of Jesus’ disciples,” proclaimed the Jews gathered in the Synagogue. They went on by saying that, “He is probably here to warn us about the members of the cult.”

He was asked to give a speech. Saul stood in front of all who were

gathered and began to say, “Jesus appeared to me when I was coming here to see you. Now I know He is the Messiah, Son of our God.”

The listeners were shocked by Saul’s words. Some were even angry. “We thought he will be talking against Jesus, yet he supports Him. That’s scandalous!” they said. Saul had to leave the town to escape from their anger.





After Damascus, Saul headed first to Jerusalem and then to Tarsus. He remained there for a while, until he was discovered by one of Jesus' disciples named Barnabas.

"Come with me," said Barnabas to Saul. "In the town of Antioch a lot of people turned to God. You'll be needed there."

They left and both took up residence in Antioch, serving the local church. During the stay, Saul began to dream of expeditions/travels to far away countries. He wanted to spread the good news about Jesus not only to his nation but to others who have not heard about the salvation. One day, God himself spoke out to the leaders of the Church of Antioch.

"Let go of Barnabas and Saul for the mission I have appointed them," said God. The church proceeded according to the word of God. Barnabas and Saul left to spread the Gospel to all nations.

When Saul started his mission, the people began to call him Paul. Already from the beginning, the miracles accompanied Paul and Barnabas confirmed God's proclaimed Gospel. A magician named Elymas, who opposed Paul's teaching, had lost his sight for some time. A certain Roman dignitary accepted to believe in Jesus after witnessing the power of God which accompanied Paul.

Barnabas and Paul visited city after city preaching the Gospel. They entered into Jewish Synagogues, markets, town squares, and people's homes

who welcomed them announcing the Gospel. Once, they healed a person who never walked in his life. This person stood up on his feet and began to walk. The witnesses to this event wanted to honor Barnabas and Paul by declaring them gods, but they would not allow them to do so. In many cities, God's servants experienced many rigorous persecutions. Once, Paul himself had been stoned. His enemies believed he was dead and let him be. However, he stood up, brushed himself off, and left to the next town to continue preaching about Jesus.





Following the footsteps of Paul and Barnabas, other people proclaimed different teachings. They announced to those who had just converted, “You need to follow the law of Moses given to the Jews. Otherwise, you will not be saved.” In place of the initial joy of the young Christians, suddenly fear and disarray crept in. Fortunately, Paul had returned and spoke out courageously against these people.

“I too am a Jew,” Paul said. He continued by saying, “From my childhood I obeyed zealously the laws of Moses. Even my enemies cannot object me regarding this. I believe that the Law of Moses leads to Jesus. Those who found the Savior do not need protection from these laws.”

“You’re mistaken Paul,” replied the people. They said, “People who followed Moses’ faith, have to become Jews, like us. They need to obey Moses’ Laws.”

The dispute was very involved. In order to resolve it, a council of church leaders, a special assembly came together in Jerusalem. They decided that Christians are not Jews. They don’t have to follow all the Laws of Moses, only several essential laws. Paul was pleased with this outcome. He took with him a man named Silas, and returned to his work.

One time, God sent Paul a vision in his dream. The Apostle saw how a certain Macedonian begged him, “Come to Macedonia and help us.” Paul managed to leave immediate-

ly for a Macedonian city of Philippi. That is how the Gospel reached Europe.

Once in Philippi, Paul and Silas went by a river and spoke about God to the gathered women. One of the women, Lydia, invited them into her home. Through this way, the Christian Church was born in that city.

There was a girl with an evil spirit who prevented Paul and Saul from their mission. She followed them and yelled, “These people are the servants of the Most High God and are showing you the road to salvation!” This was true, but the woman’s shouting annoyed Paul. Paul commanded the evil spirit to leave the girl, and spirit left immediately.

The ill minded people were not happy that Paul and Silas were praising Jesus. They threw them into a prison. However, the servants of God were not discouraged. They



sang hymns in prison and praised God whole heartedly. Around midnight, a violent earthquake emerged. The foundations of the prison were shaken, and all the doors flew open. The prison guard was frightened. He thought, "The prisoners have escaped! Now I'll be harshly punished." However, Paul told him, "Don't be frightened. We are all here." The trembling guard then asked, "Men, what should I do to be saved?"

"Believe in Jesus," answered Paul and Silas. "You and your household will be saved." Just as the prison guard accepted the Word of God, so did his entire household. They were all baptized and became Christians.

Paul and Silas left Philippi and went on to the following cities: Thessalonica, Berea and Athens. Next, Paul arrived in Corinth where he converted many Gentiles. Then he went on to Ephesus where he preached for the next two years. In Ephesus, God performed many unusual miracles through Paul's hands. Even the handkerchiefs that he touched were brought to the sick, who became immediately healed.

After everything, Paul decided to return to Jerusalem. Before his journey, he gathered the eldest of the Church which he founded in Ephesus, and said, "Take care of God's sheep, among whom the Holy Spirit appointed you bishops. Remain good shepherds of the church."

"Until next time," the church's elders responded. Paul shook his head and said, "You will never see me again. The next time we'll see each other only in Heaven."

In Jerusalem, Paul was attacked by his enemies. If it was not for the Roman soldiers, he would probably not have escaped with his life. They imprisoned him and brought before certain assemblies, as well as the governor and the king. Paul proclaimed the truth about Jesus to all of these people. Finally, he stated that he wanted to present himself in front of Caesar to defend his case. However, Caesar remained in Rome, far away from Jerusalem. In order to get there, Paul would need to travel a long, dangerous journey

across the Mediterranean Sea/Adriatic Sea.

Paul was placed on the ship transporting prisoners. The boat sailed for many days, until they came across some bad weather. The Apostle warned the guard commander and the captain, the rest of the journey would be dangerous. They did not listen.

"Who do you think you are to give us advice?" they chuckled. "We work in our profession for years and we know sea sailing," they proclaimed.

"I am a servant of God," Paul answered.

"Listen to my warning and you will be safe," he added.

The guard commander and the captain decided to stay on course. Paul being a prisoner could do nothing else. He could not abandon ship even though he felt a catastrophe was approaching.

Soon after sailing into the sea, a violent storm began. The hurricane strength winds tossed the ship and gigantic waves rocked the boat like a peanut shell. The storm lasted for several days. During this whole time, the sun nor stars were visible in the sky. The sailors, the guard commander and the captain lost all faith and were waiting the sinking of the ship. Then, Paul showed up on the deck smiling and full of hope.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "During the night an angel visited me and told me that you all were entrusted to me. I trust God that no one will perish.

“We’ll lose the ship only, but we’ll end up on some island,” he concluded.

Really, that’s what happened. The ship ran aground on a sandbar, and the people were able to abandon ship and swim up to the island. Once they were safe, the storm shattered the ship into pieces.

The island was called Malta. The survivors began gathering dry twigs in order to spark a fire. When Paul threw the branches into the fire, a snake appeared and bit him. The

Apostle brushed it off into the fire and proceeded with his duties. Once the inhabitants of the island saw this, they believed Paul was punished by God and soon would die from the snake’s venom. However, this did not happen. Paul not only survived, but he healed many island inhabitants during his stay on Malta. After several months, Paul boarded the ship and left for Rome. He preached about the kingdom of God and taught about Jesus without any obstacles.

