

THE BOOK OF
ACTS



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ACTS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

AUTHOR	Acts is written by the apostle Luke—a doctor who travels with Paul. In many ways, Acts is a continuation of Luke's Gospel.
DATE	Scholars believe Acts was written around 62 AD.
SETTING	Acts showcases the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome.
KEY EVENTS	MAJOR THEMES
Jesus' Final Words and Ascension	Power of the Holy Spirit
Pentecost	Birth and Spread of the Church
Stoning of Stephen	Persecution and Growth
Conversion of Saul (Paul)	Faithfulness to King Jesus
Paul's Missionary Journeys	
Paul Arrested and Imprisoned	

OLD TESTAMENT



CREATION



Patriarchs



Exodus



Law



Conquest



Judges



Kingdom



Exile



Return



Silence



Jesus



Church on Mission



New Heaven & New Earth

NEW TESTAMENT



WHERE
ACTS STARTS

YOU ARE
HERE

TIMELINE OF ACTS

Jesus' Ascension

Receiving the Holy Spirit

Early Church Begins

Persecution of the Church

Saul Encounters Jesus on the Road to Damascus

The Church Expands to the Gentiles

James Killed, Peter Rescued

Paul's 1st Journey

Paul's 2nd Journey

Paul's 3rd Journey

Paul Arrested

Paul on Trial

Paul's Journey to Rome

ACTS 1

In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.

Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”

He replied, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a distance of half a mile. When they arrived, they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying.

Here are the names of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the zealot), and Judas (son of James). They all met together and were constantly united in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus.

During this time, when about 120 believers were together in one place, Peter stood up and addressed them. “Brothers,” he said, “the Scriptures had to be fulfilled concerning Judas, who guided those who arrested Jesus. This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David. Judas was one of us and shared in the ministry with us.”

(Judas had bought a field with the money he received for his treachery. Falling headfirst there, his body split open, spilling out all his intestines. The news of his death spread to all the people of Jerusalem, and they gave the place the Aramaic name Akeldama, which means “Field of Blood.”)

Peter continued, “This was written in the book of Psalms, where it says, ‘Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it.’ It also says, ‘Let someone else take his position.’

“So now we must choose a replacement for Judas from among the men who were with us the entire time we were traveling with the Lord Jesus—from the time he was baptized by John until the day he was taken from us. Whoever is chosen will join us as a witness of Jesus’ resurrection.”

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they all prayed, “O Lord, you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen as an apostle to replace Judas in this ministry, for he has deserted us and gone where he belongs.” Then they cast lots, and Matthias was selected to become an apostle with the other eleven.

PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The first chapter of Acts sets the tone for the entire book by building excitement and possibility around Jesus' mission for his followers. Luke, the author, writes an account of Jesus' life post-resurrection. Jesus spends 40 days teaching his followers about the Kingdom of God. Then, at the end of chapter 1, he ascends into Heaven but promises to send the Holy Spirit who will empower them to go and share the gospel to the ends of the earth. What's exciting about this is that believers today share this same power through the Holy Spirit so that we too can participate in the same calling to bring God's Kingdom here on earth.

Reflect:

Like the disciples, it is easy for us to want answers to all our questions. We can get stuck because we want to know exactly what we need to do or how to get something done. **What is an area of your life where you know God is calling you to move and you have been hesitant because you don't have full clarity around it?**

Up to this point, the Holy Spirit has just been promised. Jesus is clear to the disciples that they cannot leave Jerusalem to start spreading the gospel until they have received the gift from God, the Holy Spirit. **Read John 14:26, Why was it important for them to wait to receive the Holy Spirit?**



ACTS 2

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.

They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other.

But others in the crowd ridiculed them, saying, "They're just drunk, that's all!"

Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o'clock in the morning is much too early for that. No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel:

'In the last days,' God says,
'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.'

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Your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.
In those days I will pour out my Spirit
even on my servants—men and women alike—
and they will prophesy.
And I will cause wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below—
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.
The sun will become dark,
and the moon will turn blood red
before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives.
But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.'

"People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip. King David said this about him:

'I see that the Lord is always with me.
I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.
No wonder my heart is glad,
and my tongue shouts his praises!
My body rests in hope.
For you will not leave my soul among the dead
or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.
You have shown me the way of life,
and you will fill me with the joy of your presence.'

"Dear brothers, think about this! You can be sure that the patriarch David wasn't referring to himself, for he died and was buried, and his tomb is still here among us. But he was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David's own descendants would sit on his throne. David was looking into the future and speaking of the Messiah's resurrection. He was saying that God would not leave him among the dead or allow his body to rot in the grave.

“God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God’s right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit in the place of honor at my right hand
until I humble your enemies,
making them a footstool under your feet.”’

“So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”

Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.” Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!”

Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

PENTECOST

The second chapter of Acts is about the birth of the Church and the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes, he fills the believers with power to preach the gospel so that men and women of all languages hear and understand the message about Jesus. As bypassers see this happen, Peter gives clarity to the moment by quoting Joel's prophecy about this event (Joel 2:28-32). The Holy Spirit empowers Peter to preach the gospel in that moment to the people who crucified Jesus just months prior. On the day of the Holy Spirit's coming, thousands of people repent of their sins, get baptized, and are also filled with the Holy Spirit. The chapter ends with the early Church doing life together—teaching, praying, taking communion, worshiping, and caring for one another.

Reflect:

According to Acts chapter 2, **who is the Holy Spirit? How does he empower believers?**

At the end of the chapter, the Church is born. These believers were doing life together and were interdependent on one another. It's easy to want the people we do life with to be just like us, to affirm us, and to make us feel comfortable. **How does Acts 2 challenge that way of thinking? What should biblical community actually look like?**

ACTS 3

Peter and John went to the Temple one afternoon to take part in the three o'clock prayer service. As they approached the Temple, a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate, the one called the Beautiful Gate, so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for some money.

Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!"

Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them.

All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! They all rushed out in amazement to Solomon's Colonnade, where the man was holding tightly to Peter and John.

Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd. "People of Israel," he said, "what is so surprising about this? And why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness? For it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of all our ancestors—who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this. This is the same Jesus whom you handed over and rejected before Pilate, despite Pilate's decision to release him. You rejected this holy, righteous one and instead demanded the release of a murderer. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. And we are witnesses of this fact!"

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“Through faith in the name of Jesus, this man was healed—and you know how crippled he was before. Faith in Jesus’ name has healed him before your very eyes.

“Friends, I realize that what you and your leaders did to Jesus was done in ignorance. But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah—that he must suffer these things. Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah. For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.’ Then Moses said, ‘Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be completely cut off from God’s people.’

“Starting with Samuel, every prophet spoke about what is happening today. You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, ‘Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, Jesus, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways.”

PETER'S MINISTRY

Now that the Holy Spirit has come and the early Church has been established, believers are doing daily life together. In the beginning of chapter 3, Peter and John go to the temple for the hour of prayer. This indicates that the early Church made prayer and worship a regular rhythm. When stopped by a man who could not walk, Peter boldly speaks healing over the man in the name of Jesus. This moment creates an opportunity for Peter to once again share the gospel with the crowds around them. Just like in chapter 2, Peter speaks to a group of people who rejected, denied, and ultimately murdered Jesus. Instead of being hateful to them, Peter extends another invitation to them to repent of their sins and turn to God. Jesus, in his great mercy, is not only willing to forgive the wicked but also promises to transform us and gives us hope for the future.

Reflect:

As believers, our lives should be set apart from the world. We should live our lives in such a way that it raises questions for those around us. **How does your life need to change so that you create opportunities for others' lives to change by telling them about who God is and what he is doing?**

Repentance is not just a one-time thing; it's something that should be a regular rhythm in the lives of believers. **When was the last time you repented of sin? Is there something that the Holy Spirit is convicting you of now that you need to repent of?**

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ACTS 4

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were confronted by the priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees. These leaders were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching the people that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead. They arrested them and, since it was already evening, put them in jail until morning. But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of men who believed now totaled about 5,000.

The next day the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, along with Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other relatives of the high priest. They brought in the two disciples and demanded, “By what power, or in whose name, have you done this?”

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of our people, are we being questioned today because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says,

‘The stone that you builders rejected
has now become the cornerstone.’

There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing right there among them, there was nothing the council could say. So they ordered Peter and John out of the council chamber and conferred among themselves.

“What should we do with these men?” they asked each other. “We can’t deny that they have performed a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it. But to keep them from spreading their propaganda any further, we must warn them not to speak to anyone in Jesus’ name again.” So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John replied, “Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard.”

The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn’t know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God for this miraculous sign—the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years.

As soon as they were freed, Peter and John returned to the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. When they heard the report, all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: “O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying,

‘Why were the nations so angry?

Why did they waste their time with futile plans?

The kings of the earth prepared for battle;

the rulers gathered together

against the Lord

and against his Messiah.’

“In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.

For instance, there was Joseph, the one the apostles nicknamed Barnabas (which means "Son of Encouragement"). He was from the tribe of Levi and came from the island of Cyprus. He sold a field he owned and brought the money to the apostles.

PETER AND JOHN ARRESTED

The Holy Spirit is at work in the early Church. But, as Peter is teaching, religious leaders arrest him for preaching about Jesus. Even after Jesus is gone, the religious leaders still feel threatened by him. From the very beginning of the Church, there are seasons of celebration and there are seasons of suffering, and sometimes, both happen at the same time. For Peter and John, the threats against them are not enough to stop them from spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth like they were commanded to do by Jesus. As they pray boldly to God, it is clear that they do not plan to stop the mission, but pray that they continue in courage and that the Lord's name will be made known.

Reflect:

Peter and John experience persecution as they are seeking to advance the Kingdom of God. **Describe a time when you were living boldly for the Lord and received persecution from people around you.**

When God's people put themselves in vulnerable situations in order to further his mission, God's power, strength, and wisdom flow through them to accomplish it. **Can you think of a time when you have experienced this? How did it affect you?**

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ACTS 5

But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God!"

As soon as Ananias heard these words, he fell to the floor and died. Everyone who heard about it was terrified. Then some young men got up, wrapped him in a sheet, and took him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Was this the price you and your husband received for your land?"

"Yes," she replied, "that was the price."

And Peter said, "How could the two of you even think of conspiring to test the Spirit of the Lord like this? The young men who buried your husband are just outside the door, and they will carry you out, too."

Instantly, she fell to the floor and died. When the young men came in and saw that she was dead, they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened.

The apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers were meeting regularly at the Temple in the area known as Solomon's Colonnade. But no one else dared to join them, even though all the people had high regard for them. Yet more and more

people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women. As a result of the apostles' work, sick people were brought out into the streets on beds and mats so that Peter's shadow might fall across some of them as he went by. Crowds came from the villages around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those possessed by evil spirits, and they were all healed.

The high priest and his officials, who were Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But an angel of the Lord came at night, opened the gates of the jail, and brought them out. Then he told them, "Go to the Temple and give the people this message of life!"

So at daybreak the apostles entered the Temple, as they were told, and immediately began teaching.

When the high priest and his officials arrived, they convened the high council—the full assembly of the elders of Israel. Then they sent for the apostles to be brought from the jail for trial. But when the Temple guards went to the jail, the men were gone. So they returned to the council and reported, "The jail was securely locked, with the guards standing outside, but when we opened the gates, no one was there!"

When the captain of the Temple guard and the leading priests heard this, they were perplexed, wondering where it would all end. Then someone arrived with startling news: "The men you put in jail are standing in the Temple, teaching the people!"

The captain went with his Temple guards and arrested the apostles, but without violence, for they were afraid the people would stone them. Then they brought the apostles before the high council, where the high priest confronted them. "We gave you strict orders never again to teach in this man's name!" he said. "Instead, you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about him, and you want to make us responsible for his death!"

But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead after you killed him by hanging him on a cross. Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as Prince and Savior. He did this so the people

of Israel would repent of their sins and be forgiven. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey him."

When they heard this, the high council was furious and decided to kill them. But one member, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, who was an expert in religious law and respected by all the people, stood up and ordered that the men be sent outside the council chamber for a while. Then he said to his colleagues, "Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men! Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About 400 others joined him, but he was killed, and all his followers went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered.

"So my advice is, leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God!"

The others accepted his advice. They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go.

The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: "Jesus is the Messiah."

THE EARLY CHURCH INCREASES

Chapter 5 of Acts is focused on the growth of the early Church despite the opposition it receives from the outside as well as the inside. The chapter begins with a story of a couple who lies in order to be perceived a certain way—they want a reputation of generosity without the sacrifice that is required. As Peter fights to protect the purity of the early Church, he calls them out on their fault, and they both die on the spot. Although that seems harsh, it is important for believers to take their pursuit of holiness seriously and as the chapter goes on, God blesses them. Later, the apostles are arrested and eventually ordered beaten by the religious leaders. Some may think this would discourage them, but instead, they leave rejoicing because they are suffering for what they believe in. Opposition is all around them, yet the number of people being added to the Lord increases daily.

Reflect:

Ananias and Sapphira lie because they fear the opinions of those around them. They want others to praise them for being generous, but they don't actually want to give everything away. **Has there been a time when you have lied about something or about who you really are because you feared the way people would see you?**

Read 1 Peter 4:12–19. Why is suffering as a believer something that we should rejoice in as the apostles did at the end of Acts 5?

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But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, “We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word.”

Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, “We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God.” This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

The lying witnesses said, “This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

GROWTH OF LEADERSHIP

As the Church grows, more people will create more work for the local church leaders. Division begins to occur within the congregation, which creates disunity among the believers. To resolve this, the 12 disciples decide to grow the body of leaders to continue the work of teaching and evangelizing as well as taking care of those within the body. One of those new leaders is Stephen. Stephen comes on the scene, filled with the Holy Spirit, teaching and doing great wonders among the people, and he immediately draws the attention of the religious leaders. Tension has been rising for a few chapters now, and we officially get a glimpse into the evil intent of the religious council. They are willing to lie and manipulate to shut down the church leadership. As opposition increases, the Lord remains present and faithful for those fighting to spread the gospel.

Reflect:

The early Church experienced division because they allowed worldly distinctions to become greater than God's distinctions. The Greek speaking vs Hebrew speaking members were not getting along, causing the body to become disunified. **Have you ever seen this happen in your local church? What about in your small group? How can you grow in being unified with the community the Lord has given you?**

In Exodus 34:29-33, Moses' face is also described as being like an angel after being in the presence of the Lord. These religious leaders would have known that meant God's presence was with Stephen, and yet, they did not back off. **What does this say about the state of their hearts?**

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ACTS 7

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these accusations true?”

This was Stephen’s reply: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran. God told him, ‘Leave your native land and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ So Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran until his father died. Then God brought him here to the land where you now live.

“But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet. God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. ‘But I will punish the nation that enslaves them,’ God said, ‘and in the end they will come out and worship me here in this place.’

“God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at that time. So when Abraham became the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day. And the practice was continued when Isaac became the father of Jacob, and when Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Israelite nation.

“These patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. And God gave him favor before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom, so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.

“But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery, and our ancestors ran out of food. Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons—our

ancestors—to buy some. The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they were introduced to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent for his father, Jacob, and all his relatives to come to Egypt, seventy-five persons in all. So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did our ancestors. Their bodies were taken to Shechem and buried in the tomb Abraham had bought for a certain price from Hamor's sons in Shechem.

"As the time drew near when God would fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. This king exploited our people and oppressed them, forcing parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die.

"At that time Moses was born—a beautiful child in God's eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. When they had to abandon him, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and raised him as her own son. Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action.

"One day when Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. So Moses came to the man's defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn't.

"The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. 'Men,' he said, 'you are brothers. Why are you fighting each other?'

"But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside. 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' he asked. 'Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?' When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian. There his two sons were born.

"Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he went to take a closer look, the voice of the Lord called out to him, 'I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Moses shook with terror and did not dare to look.

“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now go, for I am sending you back to Egypt.’

“So God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected when they demanded, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their ruler and savior. And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years.

“Moses himself told the people of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people.’ Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God’s people in the wilderness, when the angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us.

“But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don’t know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt.’ So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and celebrated over this thing they had made. Then God turned away from them and abandoned them to serve the stars of heaven as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written,

‘Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings
during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?’

No, you carried your pagan gods—
the shrine of Molech,
the star of your god Rephan,
and the images you made to worship them.

So I will send you into exile
as far away as Babylon.’

“Our ancestors carried the Tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses. Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors in battle against the nations that God drove out of this land, the Tabernacle was taken with them into their new territory. And it stayed there until the time of King David.

“David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who actually built it. However, the Most High doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says,

‘Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Could you build me a temple as good as that?’
asks the Lord.
‘Could you build me such a resting place?
Didn’t my hands make both heaven and earth?’

“You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That’s what your ancestors did, and so do you! Name one prophet your ancestors didn’t persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. You deliberately disobeyed God’s law, even though you received it from the hands of angels.”

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen’s accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand. And he told them, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God’s right hand!”

Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He fell to his knees, shouting, “Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!” And with that, he died.

STONING OF STEPHEN

As tension grows, Stephen seizes the chance to give this group of people one more chance to repent of their sins and turn back to the Lord. What seems to be an aggressive speech from Stephen ending with very pointed accusations, is actually a gesture of love. He puts them in a crossroads moment where they have to make a decision. They either repent or they reject, and unfortunately, their rejection leads to them killing Stephen. It would be easy for us to feel disheartened for the suffering that Stephen experienced, but even in his death, the Lord still receives the glory. In life and in death, Stephen entrusts himself to God, and instead of being bitter at the men taking his life, he prays that God would not hold their sins against them. That is so powerful! In a few chapters, we will actually get to see God answer his prayer when Saul, a young man present at the stoning, gets saved on the road to Damascus.

Reflect:

The Jewish leaders are offended by Stephen's message, but telling them the truth is the most loving thing he could do for them. **Who in your life needs to hear the gospel? Are you willing to speak it to them verbally? If this idea is challenging to you, what makes you hesitate? What does that reveal about what is most important to you?**

Jesus could have saved Stephen from being stoned, and he chooses not to. Reflect on the idea that we are called to worship a God who allows us to experience difficult moments when we serve him. **What is your response to this idea? How do you struggle with it?**

ACTS 8

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.

But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. Philip, for example, went to the city of Samaria and told the people there about the Messiah. Crowds listened intently to Philip because they were eager to hear his message and see the miraculous signs he did. Many evil spirits were cast out, screaming as they left their victims. And many who had been paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as “the Great One—the Power of God.” They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

But now the people believed Philip’s message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there. As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these

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new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!”

But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought! You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God. Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin.”

“Pray to the Lord for me,” Simon exclaimed, “that these terrible things you’ve said won’t happen to me!”

After testifying and preaching the word of the Lord in Samaria, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. And they stopped in many Samaritan villages along the way to preach the Good News.

As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.”

Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter.
And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.
He was humiliated and received no justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?” He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the town of Azotus. He preached the Good News there and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea.

OBEDIENCE THROUGH BAPTISM

The stoning of Stephen is just the beginning of persecution for the early Church. However, God is still at work. Remember, Jesus told the disciples to spread the gospel throughout Jerusalem as well as to the other nations. It is not just about one nation and one people group anymore. The second half of chapter eight tells two stories about the gospel reaching two very different men from outside nations—one who would completely misunderstand what it meant to follow Jesus and another who would take immediate steps of obedience and be baptized. In the end, a wealthy Ethiopian eunuch identifies with Jesus through baptism, and it is just another moment where the Lord is blessing the work of these early believers in spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. Their obedience is being blessed, and the body of believers is multiplying rapidly. What starts out as a dark day for believers, ends in victory for the Kingdom of God.

Reflect:

God is able to use Philip because he is in step with the Holy Spirit. If we want to be used by God, we also must be captivated by his mission so we can respond when the Spirit prompts us. **What captures your imagination now (a relationship, friendships, school, social media, sports, the clothes/shoes you wear, etc.)?**

Once the Ethiopian eunuch hears and believes the gospel, he immediately obeys and identifies with Jesus through baptism. **If you are a believer who has not been baptized, what is keeping you from taking that step?**
*Take time to talk to your small group leader, Students staff, or parent about baptism and if this is the right step for you yet.

ACTS 9

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, lord?” Saul asked.

And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord!” he replied.

The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”

“But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in

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Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name."

But the Lord said, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake."

So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength.

Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"

All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?"

Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. After a while some of the Jews plotted together to kill him. They were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him, but Saul was told about their plot. So during the night, some of the other believers lowered him in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They did not believe he had truly become a believer! Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus and how the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them that Saul had preached boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

So Saul stayed with the apostles and went all around Jerusalem with them, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they tried to murder him. When the believers heard

about this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus, his hometown.

The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers.

Meanwhile, Peter traveled from place to place, and he came down to visit the believers in the town of Lydda. There he met a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you! Get up, and roll up your sleeping mat!” And he was healed instantly. Then the whole population of Lydda and Sharon saw Aeneas walking around, and they turned to the Lord.

There was a believer in Joppa named Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas). She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. About this time she became ill and died. Her body was washed for burial and laid in an upstairs room. But the believers had heard that Peter was nearby at Lydda, so they sent two men to beg him, “Please come as soon as possible!”

So Peter returned with them; and as soon as he arrived, they took him to the upstairs room. The room was filled with widows who were weeping and showing him the coats and other clothes Dorcas had made for them. But Peter asked them all to leave the room; then he knelt and prayed. Turning to the body he said, “Get up, Tabitha.” And she opened her eyes! When she saw Peter, she sat up! He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then he called in the widows and all the believers, and he presented her to them alive.

The news spread through the whole town, and many believed in the Lord. And Peter stayed a long time in Joppa, living with Simon, a tanner of hides.

SAUL'S CONVERSION

In a crazy turn of events, Saul, an intense persecutor of early believers, gets stopped by Jesus himself on the way to Damascus. This interaction is amazing because not only does it show that the Lord loves the worst of sinners, but Jesus is also willing to meet us wherever we are in our brokenness and extends an invitation to turn from our sin. Jesus confronts Saul by asking, “Why are you persecuting me?” When Saul persecutes the Church, he persecutes Jesus. From that moment forward, there’s no turning back for Saul. We don’t know all of the details, but the text is clear Saul believes, his sight is eventually restored, and he immediately steps into obedience through baptism. Now, Saul will become one of the most well-known believers, ever. Saul was once an enemy of God, just like we are once enemies of God. Yet, in his great mercy, God makes a way for us to know him and be in a relationship with him through Jesus. An encounter with Jesus forces you to make a decision—will you reject him and continue living life your way? Or, will you choose to follow him, repent of your sin, and allow him to change your heart?

Reflect:

God asks Ananias to risk his safety for the sake of the gospel, and we also must be willing to risk things in order to advance God’s Kingdom. **Can you think of a time when you risked something for God (your reputation, a friendship, followers on social media, etc)? What might God be calling you to risk for him now?**

After his conversion, Saul must deal with the reality of his past sin for the rest of his life. **If you carry guilt from past sin, what steps can you take to find freedom and forgiveness in Christ?**

ACTS 10

In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said.

Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel.

And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore."

As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.

The next day as Cornelius's messengers were nearing the town, Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them."

"No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean."

But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

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Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean? Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there.

Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them."

So Peter went down and said, "I'm the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

They said, "We were sent by Cornelius, a Roman officer. He is a devout and God-fearing man, well respected by all the Jews. A holy angel instructed him to summon you to his house so that he can hear your message." So Peter invited the men to stay for the night. The next day he went with them, accompanied by some of the brothers from Joppa.

They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

Peter told them, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me."

Cornelius replied, "Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.' So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you."

Then Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is

the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

“And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”

Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

SALVATION FOR THE GENTILES

Chapter 10 highlights Peter and Cornelius, two very different men. One of Jesus' disciples, Peter is Jewish and has spent years teaching and spreading the gospel. Cornelius is a Gentile, new to the faith, and is trying to figure out what it means to live obediently and walk with the Lord. These men are in different seasons of their walk with God. Both encounter angels and act in obedience to what the Lord asks of them, and once again, God blesses them. This chapter also tells how the Holy Spirit is now poured out on even the Gentiles. The gospel of Jesus is not meant to be contained to the Jews, and neither is the power of the Holy Spirit. What an encouragement to us! Thousands of years later, we benefit from the work of the early believers who were willing to fight and sacrifice their lives for the sake of the gospel reaching all nations. God's mercy is wide, and he desires for all of us to repent. He is willing to save people whom we would have seen as outsiders.

Reflect:

God does not answer all our questions. God gave Cornelius limited information, but that did not stop him from immediately obeying. **Do you struggle to move in faith when you have limited information? Is there an area of your life where you feel God is prompting you to move, but you are fearful? How can you take a step towards obedience?**

We must adopt a posture of openness and humility in order to be used by God. Peter was not willing to do what God told him to do because of religious customs he had lived under his whole life. **When was the last time you realized your thinking was wrong about something? Are you open to the idea that, like Peter, your knowledge is limited and could actually be an obstacle to God moving in and through you?**

ACTS 11

Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. “You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!” they said.

Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. “I was in the town of Joppa,” he said, “and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. And I heard a voice say, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.’

“No, Lord,” I replied. ‘I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.’

“But the voice from heaven spoke again: ‘Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.’ This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven.

“Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, ‘Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!'

“As I began to speak,” Peter continued, “the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. Then I thought of the Lord’s words when he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ And since God gave

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these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?"

When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, "We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life."

Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

THE EARLY CHURCH EXPANDS

In the first half of chapter 11, Peter recounts to the local church in Jerusalem what is happening in the surrounding nations as more Gentiles are coming to know God. This gives the church at Jerusalem something to praise and thank God for. The scattering of believers due to persecution is actually catalytic in the early Church's expansion. Stephen's death, while it may have seemed like a loss, turned out to be the beginning of the gospel being taught to the ends of the earth. The second half of chapter 11 gives us a look into the responsibilities that the members of the local church had—teaching, baptizing, caring for each other. We also get a glimpse into some movement by the leaders of the local church due to the hostility happening in Jerusalem. The hub of Christianity is shifting towards Antioch, a few hundred miles outside of Jerusalem.

Reflect:

The early Church grew rapidly and has expanded outside of the Jewish laws and traditions that the original disciples were accustomed to. Outsiders were invited and welcomed into the body without having to follow the Jewish way of life. This would have been complicated for the original group and a big transition for them to do life with people so very different from themselves. **What would it look like for you to pursue people who are different from you? Have you ever been in a community with people who are different from you? What was it like?**

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About that time King Herod Agrippa began to persecute some believers in the church. He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword. When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish people, he also arrested Peter. (This took place during the Passover celebration.) Then he imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.

The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate. Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, "Quick! Get up!" And the chains fell off his wrists. Then the angel told him, "Get dressed and put on your sandals." And he did. "Now put on your coat and follow me," the angel ordered.

So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize it was actually happening. They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate leading to the city, and this opened for them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him.

Peter finally came to his senses. "It's really true!" he said. "The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!"

When he realized this, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer. He knocked at the door in the gate, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to open it. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed that, instead of opening the door, she ran back inside and told everyone, "Peter is standing at the door!"

“You’re out of your mind!” they said. When she insisted, they decided, “It must be his angel.”

Meanwhile, Peter continued knocking. When they finally opened the door and saw him, they were amazed. He motioned for them to quiet down and told them how the Lord had led him out of prison. “Tell James and the other brothers what happened,” he said. And then he went to another place.

At dawn there was a great commotion among the soldiers about what had happened to Peter. Herod Agrippa ordered a thorough search for him. When he couldn’t be found, Herod interrogated the guards and sentenced them to death. Afterward Herod left Judea to stay in Caesarea for a while.

Now Herod was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they sent a delegation to make peace with him because their cities were dependent upon Herod’s country for food. The delegates won the support of Blastus, Herod’s personal assistant, and an appointment with Herod was granted. When the day arrived, Herod put on his royal robes, sat on his throne, and made a speech to them. The people gave him a great ovation, shouting, “It’s the voice of a god, not of a man!”

Instantly, an angel of the Lord struck Herod with a sickness, because he accepted the people’s worship instead of giving the glory to God. So he was consumed with worms and died.

Meanwhile, the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers.

When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission to Jerusalem, they returned, taking John Mark with them.

JAMES KILLED

In this chapter, Jesus' disciple James is killed. Luke even tells us that the Jews are pleased with the persecution of the Church and its leaders. So, to keep them happy, Herod arrests Peter too. While Peter is imprisoned, the believers pray for the Lord to intervene in a way that they cannot. As readers, we cannot separate the fact that Peter's deliverance from prison comes while the Church is depending on God. You may be thinking—why is Peter saved, yet James and Stephen die? God could have saved any of them, so why not all of them? Here's a key truth about God—we cannot understand his ways, and we will never be able to explain his purposes, which are much bigger than any one individual. At the end of the chapter, Herod is also struck down by God for trying to be god himself. Again, not all evil and injustice is immediately dealt with, even when we want it to be. Yet, the passage says that "the word of God increased and multiplied." God is clearly doing something, and our limited knowledge makes it difficult for us to understand. The early Church mourns the loss of a brother while also celebrating Peter's deliverance and the death of a persecutor. Suffering and celebration happen side by side for these believers, and in the end, the Word of God continues to grow in the face of opposition.

Reflect:

When Peter is imprisoned, believers gather and express their dependence on God through prayer. **Instead of viewing prayer as something on your to-do list, what steps do you need to take to have more dependence on God? Where do you struggle to express your need for God?**

Consider the idea that God is inscrutable—we cannot fully understand him and his ways. **What questions does it raise for you? What does your response reveal about your willingness to accept God on his terms?**

ACTS 13

Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.” So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

So Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus. There, in the town of Salamis, they went to the Jewish synagogues and preached the word of God. John Mark went with them as their assistant.

Afterward they traveled from town to town across the entire island until finally they reached Paphos, where they met a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He had attached himself to the governor, Sergius Paulus, who was an intelligent man. The governor invited Barnabas and Saul to visit him, for he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas, the sorcerer (as his name means in Greek), interfered and urged the governor to pay no attention to what Barnabas and Saul said. He was trying to keep the governor from believing.

Saul, also known as Paul, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he looked the sorcerer in the eye. Then he said, “You son of the devil, full of every sort of deceit and fraud, and enemy of all that is good! Will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord? Watch now, for the Lord has laid his hand of punishment upon you, and you will be struck blind. You will not see the sunlight for some time.” Instantly mist and darkness came over the man’s eyes, and he began groping around begging for someone to take his hand and lead him.

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When the governor saw what had happened, he became a believer, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.

Paul and his companions then left Paphos by ship for Pamphylia, landing at the port town of Perga. There John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. But Paul and Barnabas traveled inland to Antioch of Pisidia.

On the Sabbath they went to the synagogue for the services. After the usual readings from the books of Moses and the prophets, those in charge of the service sent them this message: “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, come and give it.”

So Paul stood, lifted his hand to quiet them, and started speaking. “Men of Israel,” he said, “and you God-fearing Gentiles, listen to me.

“The God of this nation of Israel chose our ancestors and made them multiply and grow strong during their stay in Egypt. Then with a powerful arm he led them out of their slavery. He put up with them through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Then he destroyed seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to Israel as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

“After that, God gave them judges to rule until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people begged for a king, and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. But God removed Saul and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart. He will do everything I want him to do.’

“And it is one of King David’s descendants, Jesus, who is God’s promised Savior of Israel! Before he came, John the Baptist preached that all the people of Israel needed to repent of their sins and turn to God and be baptized. As John was finishing his ministry he asked, ‘Do you think I am the Messiah? No, I am not! But he is coming soon—and I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the sandals on his feet.’

“Brothers—you sons of Abraham, and also you God-fearing Gentiles—this message of salvation has been sent to us! The people in Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize Jesus as the one the prophets had spoken

about. Instead, they condemned him, and in doing this they fulfilled the prophets' words that are read every Sabbath. They found no legal reason to execute him, but they asked Pilate to have him killed anyway.

"When they had done all that the prophecies said about him, they took him down from the cross and placed him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead! And over a period of many days he appeared to those who had gone with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to the people of Israel.

"And now we are here to bring you this Good News. The promise was made to our ancestors, and God has now fulfilled it for us, their descendants, by raising Jesus. This is what the second psalm says about Jesus:

'You are my Son.

Today I have become your Father.'

For God had promised to raise him from the dead, not leaving him to rot in the grave. He said, 'I will give you the sacred blessings I promised to David.' Another psalm explains it more fully: 'You will not allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.' This is not a reference to David, for after David had done the will of God in his own generation, he died and was buried with his ancestors, and his body decayed. No, it was a reference to someone else—someone whom God raised and whose body did not decay.

"Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is made right in God's sight—something the law of Moses could never do. Be careful! Don't let the prophets' words apply to you. For they said,

'Look, you mockers,

be amazed and die!

For I am doing something in your own day,

something you wouldn't believe

even if someone told you about it."

As Paul and Barnabas left the synagogue that day, the people begged them to speak about these things again the next week. Many Jews and devout

converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, and the two men urged them to continue to rely on the grace of God.

The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord. But when some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said.

Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, “It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles. For the Lord gave us this command when he said,

‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles,
to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.’”

When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers. So the Lord’s message spread throughout that region.

Then the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. So they shook the dust from their feet as a sign of rejection and went to the town of Iconium. And the believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY



THE BEGINNING OF PAUL'S MINISTRY

In chapter 13, the shift from the gospel spreading among Jews to Gentiles/other nations marks a significant transition. Luke follows the story of Paul's journey instead of the original disciples, and there is a continual push to be outside the city of Jerusalem. Persecution continues, but so does the spread of God's Word. This chapter is the first time we get to witness one of Paul's teachings, which follow the same structure and story-telling that Peter and Stephen's sermons had. As readers, we know Paul is now preaching the exact message he once tried to stamp out. Paul says, "through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." This is the message Paul heard, persecuted believers for, but by the grace of God, is now changed by. The Jews continue to reject Jesus, so Paul turns his attention to the Gentiles, to take the gospel to ends of the earth. It's important to note that the Jewish leaders were the closest to the truth, and they missed it. Growing up in religious traditions or holding tightly to good behaviors is not enough. What you believe about and how you respond to Jesus is everything.

Reflect:

Chapter 13 begins with the local church worshiping, praying, and fasting. Because of this, they are paying attention to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. **What spiritual disciplines do you need to strengthen so that you are relying on the Lord to give you direction for your life?**

ACTS 14

The same thing happened in Iconium. Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue and preached with such power that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. Some of the Jews, however, spurned God's message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. But the apostles stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders. But the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.

Then a mob of Gentiles and Jews, along with their leaders, decided to attack and stone them. When the apostles learned of it, they fled to the region of Lycaonia—to the towns of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding area. And there they preached the Good News.

While they were at Lystra, Paul and Barnabas came upon a man with crippled feet. He had been that way from birth, so he had never walked. He was sitting and listening as Paul preached. Looking straight at him, Paul realized he had faith to be healed. So Paul called to him in a loud voice, "Stand up!" And the man jumped to his feet and started walking.

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their local dialect, "These men are gods in human form!" They decided that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and that Paul was Hermes, since he was the chief speaker. Now the temple of Zeus was located just outside the town. So the priest of the temple and the crowd brought bulls and wreaths of flowers to the town gates, and they prepared to offer sacrifices to the apostles.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard what was happening, they tore their clothing in dismay and ran out

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among the people, shouting, “Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. In the past he permitted all the nations to go their own ways, but he never left them without evidence of himself and his goodness. For instance, he sends you rain and good crops and gives you food and joyful hearts.” But even with these words, Paul and Barnabas could scarcely restrain the people from sacrificing to them.

Then some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowds to their side. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of town, thinking he was dead. But as the believers gathered around him, he got up and went back into the town. The next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, where they strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God. Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church. With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. Then they traveled back through Pisidia to Pamphylia. They preached the word in Perga, then went down to Attalia.

Finally, they returned by ship to Antioch of Syria, where their journey had begun. The believers there had entrusted them to the grace of God to do the work they had now completed. Upon arriving in Antioch, they called the church together and reported everything God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too. And they stayed there with the believers for a long time.

PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

In chapter 14, we turn towards Paul's missionary journeys. As he preaches from town to town, he experiences different kinds of cultures that have no context for what Jesus did on earth. As the gospel is being preached, some crowds reject while other crowds accept the truth. While lives are being changed, persecution continues. In the second half of the chapter, Paul is sought out by Jews coming from other towns. They find him in Lystra, stone him, and drag his body out of the city, thinking they have done away with him. But, God is not finished with him yet. Paul gets up and goes right back into the fight. As long as he is still breathing, there is work to be accomplished. Scriptures say that he continued strengthening the disciples, encouraging them, and helping them press on towards the Kingdom of God. Persecution does not stop the Church from growing. God's plan for the nations to know his name is unfolding through the believers of the early Church.

Reflect:

In order for others to hear and believe the gospel, we have to verbally tell them about Jesus and what he has done in our lives. **In what ways is this difficult for you? What keeps you from speaking to others about Jesus?**

As believers, we are called to be a part of the local church and to give our lives away for the sake of the Lord's name being known. **In what ways are you participating in the local church? What are ways that you need to step into obedience when it comes to serving?**

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ACTS 15

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

When they had finished, James stood and said, "Brothers, listen to me. Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

'Afterward I will return
 and restore the fallen house of David.
I will rebuild its ruins
 and restore it,
so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord,
 including the Gentiles—
 all those I have called to be mine.
The Lord has spoken—
 he who made these things known so long ago.'

"And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."

Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. This is the letter they took with them:

"This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

"We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch. They and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord there.

After some time Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing.” Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul chose Silas, and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord’s gracious care. Then he traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there.

KNOWING GOD VS JEWISH TRADITIONS

From the Old Testament onward, the Jews are God's chosen people. As such, they have responsibilities and a way of life that sets them apart from the rest of the world. The way they dress, the food they eat, the people they are around, the way they view their sexuality—all of that matters in their relationship with God. Now, Jesus has come and died for their sins, giving them right standing with God forever, so their customs and traditions are not what distinguishes their connection to God. This is complicated for the Jews, and it comes to a head in chapter 15. As Gentiles are being saved and becoming a part of the Church, the question arises—do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to be a part of the Church and be considered believers? Ultimately, the answer is no, but the leaders and elders of the local church in Jerusalem have to sit down and hash it all out to come to that conclusion. We must consider this question: what are your actions communicating to others about what you believe? Do your actions and way of life hurt your credibility? In this context, the Gentiles need to reject their sinful desires and turn to the Lord to be transformed by his grace alone. The Jews are also sinning because they are relying on their rules and customs as their identity and even their salvation. Both sides need Jesus, for only he can make us right before God.

Reflect:

The Jews had to humble themselves in order to do life with people who were different than them. **In what ways do you need to pursue humility in order to love others who are different from you?**

The Gentiles had to humble themselves and change behaviors in their life in order to gain more credibility in the way they lived. **What does that look like in your own life? Where might you be losing credibility with people around you?**

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ACTS 16

Paul went first to Derbe and then to Lystra, where there was a young disciple named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was a Greek. Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium, so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek. Then they went from town to town, instructing the believers to follow the decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew larger every day.

Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time. Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there. So instead, they went on through Mysia to the seaport of Troas.

That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.

We boarded a boat at Troas and sailed straight across to the island of Samothrace, and the next day we landed at Neapolis. From there we reached Philippi, a major city of that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a

merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. She and her household were baptized, and she asked us to be her guests.

"If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." And she urged us until we agreed.

One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved."

This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And instantly it left her.

Her masters' hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. "The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!" they shouted to the city officials. "They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice."

A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn't escape. So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks.

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.

The next morning the city officials sent the police to tell the jailer, “Let those men go!” So the jailer told Paul, “The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace.”

But Paul replied, “They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!”

When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. So they came to the jail and apologized to them. Then they brought them out and begged them to leave the city. When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the believers and encouraged them once more. Then they left town.

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY



GROWTH IN THE MIDST OF OPPOSITION

In chapter 16, Lydia comes to believe and is baptized, a slave girl has demons cast out of her, Paul and the others with him are thrown into prison, and then the jailer becomes a believer and ends up getting baptized too. Yes, it's a little chaotic and things are happening fast, but let's look at how God is working in all of these moments. First, lives are still being changed by the gospel through Paul, Silas, and Timothy. As they encounter people who want to give their life to Jesus, they are immediately baptizing them. This is the first step of obedience when deciding to become a believer. After getting baptized, new believers begin their own ministry work. Secondly, the jailer decides to become a believer and then, in turn, his entire family is saved and baptized as well. What a cool moment where one man decides to change his life forever and his entire family is impacted because of that. The main theme of Acts is that the Church grows despite opposition, and the events of this chapter highlight that truth. The Good News about Jesus is being preached and changing lives, even in the midst of imprisonments, opposition, and suffering.

Reflect:

The Philippian jailer believes there is no hope for him; however, Paul immediately convinces him that that is not true. **If you have ever experienced this kind of despair, what helped you walk through it? What truths about God's character should you remind yourself of during those times?**

We all learn about Jesus through or because of someone else. **Who are people in your life that you can thank for sharing Jesus with you?**

If you are a believer but have not been baptized, what holds you back from taking that step of obedience? Is there someone you can talk to about taking that step in your faith?

ACTS 17

Paul and Silas then traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he used the Scriptures to reason with the people. He explained the prophecies and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. He said, "This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah." Some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with many God-fearing Greek men and quite a few prominent women.

But some of the Jews were jealous, so they gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world," they shouted, "and now they are here disturbing our city, too. And Jason has welcomed them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus."

The people of the city, as well as the city council, were thrown into turmoil by these reports. So the officials forced Jason and the other believers to post bond, and then they released them.

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men.

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But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those escorting Paul went with him all the way to Athens; then they returned to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?” Others said, “He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.”

Then they took him to the high council of the city. “Come and tell us about this new teaching,” they said. “You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about.

“He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

“His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

“God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” That ended Paul’s discussion with them, but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

THE ONE AND ONLY GOD

Paul's travels begin in Thessalonica, where many outsiders (women and non-Jews) believe and are baptized. He then goes to Berea, where Jews are receiving the gospel but unrest is still rising. Eventually, Paul ends up in Athens, a large, flourishing city that housed a university. The city is full of idols, but it's also full of Jews and Gentiles who want to hear what Paul is teaching. The idea of worship is not new to this culture. They worship several different gods already—their city is named after the goddess, Athena. When Paul enters this culture, he doesn't have to convince them to worship something; he has to convince them that God is the one and only true God worthy of all of their praise. This is why Paul argues that God is not an idol made by human hands and is not confined to one place, but instead lives in believers. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He is our Creator, and he needs absolutely nothing from us. Instead, he requires us to give up the worship of all other idols/gods in order to give him our full, undivided affections. This kind of message was radical to these listeners, and as always, some mocked it and others chose to believe it.

Reflect:

God wants all of us and commands us to give up other idols in our lives—this is something we all struggle with. **What are you tempted to make an idol of in your life? Consider the ways you spend your time, your money, and what you think about most often.**

Idols leave us empty and can never fully satisfy our desires and longings the way that God can. **Has there ever been a time that you experienced this? Think about the idols that you listed above and write down ways that those idols have failed you in the past.**

ACTS 18

Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.

Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent all his time preaching the word. He testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said, “Your blood is upon your own heads—I am innocent. From now on I will go preach to the Gentiles.”

Then he left and went to the home of Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and everyone in his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also heard Paul, became believers, and were baptized.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t be silent! For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me.” So Paul stayed there for the next year and a half, teaching the word of God.

But when Gallio became governor of Achaia, some Jews rose up together against Paul and brought him before the governor for judgment. They accused Paul of “persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to our law.”

But just as Paul started to make his defense, Gallio turned to Paul’s accusers and said, “Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would have a reason to accept your case. But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish law, take care

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of it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters." And he threw them out of the courtroom.

The crowd then grabbed Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and beat him right there in the courtroom. But Gallio paid no attention.

Paul stayed in Corinth for some time after that, then said good-bye to the brothers and sisters and went to nearby Cenchrea. There he shaved his head according to Jewish custom, marking the end of a vow. Then he set sail for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him.

They stopped first at the port of Ephesus, where Paul left the others behind. While he was there, he went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews. They asked him to stay longer, but he declined. As he left, however, he said, "I will come back later, God willing." Then he set sail from Ephesus. The next stop was at the port of Caesarea. From there he went up and visited the church at Jerusalem and then went back to Antioch.

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul went back through Galatia and Phrygia, visiting and strengthening all the believers.

Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately.

Apollos had been thinking about going to Achaia, and the brothers and sisters in Ephesus encouraged him to go. They wrote to the believers in Achaia, asking them to welcome him. When he arrived there, he proved to be of great benefit to those who, by God's grace, had believed. He refuted the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them that Jesus was the Messiah.

"I AM WITH YOU"

At the end of Paul's second missionary journey, we learn that Paul is working during his time on the mission field. So during work hours, he is making tents, and at any other free time, he is teaching in the synagogues. During Paul's time in Corinth, a leader of the synagogue believes and is baptized. This is a huge deal because in most cities, the leaders are the ones causing trouble for Paul. The Lord also appears in a vision, telling Paul not to be afraid and that God will protect him. God doesn't promise to keep opposition from coming, but to keep it from harming him. From that point, Paul's time in Corinth is pretty smooth, and he ends up staying there until it is time to leave—making Corinth one of the first cities Paul is not forced to leave because of danger. The Lord's promise to Paul brought comfort and allowed him the time to continue in doing the work God called him to.

Reflect:

The Lord appearing to Paul in a vision and promising safety indicates to us that Paul is likely struggling with some fear or anxiety around being hurt. The vision gives Paul courage to carry on in his ministry and seems to be the exact assurance he needs. **In what ways have you seen the Lord provide for you in a way that seemed very specific to your current circumstances?**

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ACTS 19

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions until he reached Ephesus, on the coast, where he found several believers. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” he asked them.

“No,” they replied, “we haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

“Then what baptism did you experience?” he asked.

And they replied, “The baptism of John.”

Paul said, “John’s baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus.”

As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

Then Paul went to the synagogue and preached boldly for the next three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God. But some became stubborn, rejecting his message and publicly speaking against the Way. So Paul left the synagogue and took the believers with him. Then he held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for the next two years, so that people throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the word of the Lord.

God gave Paul the power to perform unusual miracles. When handkerchiefs or aprons that had merely touched his skin were placed on sick people, they were healed of their diseases, and evil spirits were expelled.

A group of Jews was traveling from town to town casting out evil spirits. They tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus in their incantation, saying, “I command you in the name of Jesus,

whom Paul preaches, to come out!" Seven sons of Sceva, a leading priest, were doing this. But one time when they tried it, the evil spirit replied, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, overpowered them, and attacked them with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and battered.

The story of what happened spread quickly all through Ephesus, to Jews and Greeks alike. A solemn fear descended on the city, and the name of the Lord Jesus was greatly honored. Many who became believers confessed their sinful practices. A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars. So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect.

Afterward Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. "And after that," he said, "I must go on to Rome!" He sent his two assistants, Timothy and Erastus, ahead to Macedonia while he stayed awhile longer in the province of Asia.

About that time, serious trouble developed in Ephesus concerning the Way. It began with Demetrius, a silversmith who had a large business manufacturing silver shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis. He kept many craftsmen busy. He called them together, along with others employed in similar trades, and addressed them as follows:

"Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business. But as you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren't really gods at all. And he's done this not only here in Ephesus but throughout the entire province! Of course, I'm not just talking about the loss of public respect for our business. I'm also concerned that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis—this magnificent goddess worshiped throughout the province of Asia and all around the world—will be robbed of her great prestige!"

At this their anger boiled, and they began shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was filled with confusion. Everyone rushed to the amphitheater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, who were Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. Paul wanted to go in,

too, but the believers wouldn't let him. Some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, also sent a message to him, begging him not to risk his life by entering the amphitheater.

Inside, the people were all shouting, some one thing and some another. Everything was in confusion. In fact, most of them didn't even know why they were there. The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander forward and told him to explain the situation. He motioned for silence and tried to speak. But when the crowd realized he was a Jew, they started shouting again and kept it up for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

At last the mayor was able to quiet them down enough to speak. "Citizens of Ephesus," he said. "Everyone knows that Ephesus is the official guardian of the temple of the great Artemis, whose image fell down to us from heaven. Since this is an undeniable fact, you should stay calm and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, but they have stolen nothing from the temple and have not spoken against our goddess."

"If Demetrius and the craftsmen have a case against them, the courts are in session and the officials can hear the case at once. Let them make formal charges. And if there are complaints about other matters, they can be settled in a legal assembly. I am afraid we are in danger of being charged with rioting by the Roman government, since there is no cause for all this commotion. And if Rome demands an explanation, we won't know what to say." Then he dismissed them, and they dispersed.

PAUL'S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY



BEGINNING OF PAUL'S THIRD JOURNEY

In this chapter, demons are cast out, extraordinary miracles are performed, and riots break out. It would be easy to get swept up in those stories and let the chaos cloud out what is really happening here. Luke is telling his audience that the gospel—the message of God being the one true God and Jesus coming to die for our salvation—is disruptive to the Ephesians’ way of life. Even today, the gospel requires us to reject our old way of living and pursue no other gods but the one true God, and this often makes us different from the culture around us. In the beginning of the chapter, an evil spirit opposes the work that Paul and the other believers were doing. Later, the opposition comes from the town businessmen who are losing money because the people have stopped buying their man-made idols. The gospel is threatening their way of life, causing tension and division. Some people will believe and some will not, and that causes two groups of people to be at odds with one another. You cannot be neutral when it comes to the gospel—you are either in or you are not.

Reflect:

In what ways has following Jesus caused disruption in your life?

What would it look like for you to give your life fully to Jesus? What things do you need to change or maybe even give up in order for you to be “all in”?

ACTS 20

When the uproar was over, Paul sent for the believers and encouraged them. Then he said good-bye and left for Macedonia. While there, he encouraged the believers in all the towns he passed through. Then he traveled down to Greece, where he stayed for three months. He was preparing to sail back to Syria when he discovered a plot by some Jews against his life, so he decided to return through Macedonia.

Several men were traveling with him. They were Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea; Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica; Gaius from Derbe; Timothy; and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. They went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. After the Passover ended, we boarded a ship at Philippi in Macedonia and five days later joined them in Troas, where we stayed a week.

On the first day of the week, we gathered with the local believers to share in the Lord's Supper. Paul was preaching to them, and since he was leaving the next day, he kept talking until midnight. The upstairs room where we met was lighted with many flickering lamps. As Paul spoke on and on, a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the windowsill, became very drowsy. Finally, he fell sound asleep and dropped three stories to his death below. Paul went down, bent over him, and took him into his arms. "Don't worry," he said, "he's alive!" Then they all went back upstairs, shared in the Lord's Supper, and ate together. Paul continued talking to them until dawn, and then he left. Meanwhile, the young man was taken home alive and well, and everyone was greatly relieved.

Paul went by land to Assos, where he had arranged for us to join him, while we traveled by ship. He joined us there, and we sailed together to Mitylene. The next day we sailed past the island of Kios. The following day we crossed to the island of Samos, and a day later we arrived at Miletus.

Paul had decided to sail on past Ephesus, for he didn't want to spend any more time in the province of Asia. He was hurrying to get to Jerusalem, if possible, in time for the Festival of

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Pentecost. But when we landed at Miletus, he sent a message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, asking them to come and meet him.

When they arrived he declared, “You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

“And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

“And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

“So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

“And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

“I have never coveted anyone’s silver or gold or fine clothes. You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. They all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye. They were sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they escorted him down to the ship.

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Paul's missionary journey continues as he goes from town to town, ultimately looking forward to being in Jerusalem for Pentecost. On the way there, he calls for the elders in Ephesus to come meet with him. He takes a moment to encourage and challenge these leaders. There are several lessons we can learn here. First, Paul says that in his serving, he never shrank back despite the suffering he faced. He persevered, continuing to teach the Jews and the Gentiles about repentance and faith in the Lord. There is fear coupled with encouragement as he heads back to Jerusalem—not knowing what's before him but sure that the Holy Spirit is with him. Next, Paul tells the leaders to protect the believers within their local church. There will be attacks from the inside and outside of the church, and the elders and leaders should protect, teach, and care for the members. Lastly, Paul claims to have given them everything that they need. He taught the gospel, lived above reproach, and worked hard. What they do with the knowledge they have received is completely up to them.

Reflect:

Consider the idea of spiritual authority. People like your parents, small group leaders, church leaders, and staff all are in positions of spiritual authority. **Can you think of a time when you submitted to spiritual authority even when you wanted to make a different choice?**

Paul lived in such a way that the only thing that made sense of his life was heaven. **How can you sacrifice for others and carry weight for God's purposes so that the trajectory of your life points towards heaven?**

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ACTS 21

After saying farewell to the Ephesian elders, we sailed straight to the island of Cos. The next day we reached Rhodes and then went to Patara. There we boarded a ship sailing for Phoenicia. We sighted the island of Cyprus, passed it on our left, and landed at the harbor of Tyre, in Syria, where the ship was to unload its cargo.

We went ashore, found the local believers, and stayed with them a week. These believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. When we returned to the ship at the end of the week, the entire congregation, including women and children, left the city and came down to the shore with us. There we knelt, prayed, and said our farewells. Then we went aboard, and they returned home.

The next stop after leaving Tyre was Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed for one day. The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

Several days later a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

But he said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus." When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

After this we packed our things and left for Jerusalem. Some believers from Caesarea accompanied us, and they took us to the home of Mnason, a man originally from Cyprus and one of the early believers. When we arrived, the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us warmly.

The next day Paul went with us to meet with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. After greeting them, Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry.

After hearing this, they praised God. And then they said, “You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and they all follow the law of Moses very seriously. But the Jewish believers here in Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They’ve heard that you teach them not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. What should we do? They will certainly hear that you have come.

“Here’s what we want you to do. We have four men here who have completed their vow. Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, paying for them to have their heads ritually shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws.

“As for the Gentile believers, they should do what we already told them in a letter: They should abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.”

So Paul went to the Temple the next day with the other men. They had already started the purification ritual, so he publicly announced the date when their vows would end and sacrifices would be offered for each of them.

The seven days were almost ended when some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the Temple and roused a mob against him. They grabbed him, yelling, “Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles.” (For earlier that day they had seen him in the city with

Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple.)

The whole city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul.

Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. He asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. Some shouted one thing and some another. Since he couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion, he ordered that Paul be taken to the fortress. As Paul reached the stairs, the mob grew so violent the soldiers had to lift him to their shoulders to protect him. And the crowd followed behind, shouting, "Kill him, kill him!"

As Paul was about to be taken inside, he said to the commander, "May I have a word with you?"

"Do you know Greek?" the commander asked, surprised. "Aren't you the Egyptian who led a rebellion some time ago and took 4,000 members of the Assassins out into the desert?"

"No," Paul replied, "I am a Jew and a citizen of Tarsus in Cilicia, which is an important city. Please, let me talk to these people." The commander agreed, so Paul stood on the stairs and motioned to the people to be quiet. Soon a deep silence enveloped the crowd, and he addressed them in their own language, Aramaic.

PAUL ARRESTED

As Paul makes his way back to Jerusalem, the disciples beg him not to go, knowing that the people there only want bad things for Paul. Even though he may be killed, Paul still returns. What does this tell us about Paul? Paul is committed to the gospel—he has a burden for others to know and believe in Jesus' death and resurrection and the salvation he offers to those who believe. Even though the Jews reject him and threaten to have him killed, he still wants his people to have another chance to repent. Once in Jerusalem, James asked Paul to humble himself and be willing to participate in a Jewish purification ceremony in order to win back the credibility of the Jewish people. Although it still leads to suffering, Paul is willing to humble himself and become vulnerable. Over and over, Paul is willing to lay himself out for the sake of the gospel, and suffering will always follow.

Reflect:

Paul is committed to sharing the gospel to the Jews because he feels a deep sense of responsibility to them. **Who in your life do you feel responsible for sharing the gospel with? What does it look like for you to take steps of obedience in this?**

When we humble ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable to others, this opens us up to real risk or hurt. However, it also puts us in a position to see God act on our behalf. **How have you seen this truth play out in your life? What are your greatest obstacles to being vulnerable with others?**

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ACTS 22

“Brothers and esteemed fathers,” Paul said, “listen to me as I offer my defense.” When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater.

Then Paul said, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished.

“As I was on the road, approaching Damascus about noon, a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone down around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’

“Who are you, lord?” I asked.

“And the voice replied, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, the one you are persecuting.’ The people with me saw the light but didn’t understand the voice speaking to me.

“I asked, ‘What should I do, Lord?’

“And the Lord told me, ‘Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything you are to do.’

“I was blinded by the intense light and had to be led by the hand to Damascus by my companions. A man named Ananias lived there. He was a godly man, deeply devoted to the law, and well regarded by all the Jews of Damascus. He came and stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight.’ And that very moment I could see him!

“Then he told me, ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and hear him

speak. For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard. What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord.'

"After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me.'

"But Lord,' I argued, 'they certainly know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him.'

"But the Lord said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'"

The crowd listened until Paul said that word. Then they all began to shout, "Away with such a fellow! He isn't fit to live!" They yelled, threw off their coats, and tossed handfuls of dust into the air.

The commander brought Paul inside and ordered him lashed with whips to make him confess his crime. He wanted to find out why the crowd had become so furious. When they tied Paul down to lash him, Paul said to the officer standing there, "Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn't even been tried?"

When the officer heard this, he went to the commander and asked, "What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!"

So the commander went over and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"

"Yes, I certainly am," Paul replied.

"I am, too," the commander muttered, "and it cost me plenty!"

Paul answered, "But I am a citizen by birth!"

The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped.

The next day the commander ordered the leading priests into session with the Jewish high council. He wanted to find out what the trouble was all about, so he released Paul to have him stand before them.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY TO THE JEWS

In a unique moment in Paul's ministry, Acts 22 is the first recorded time where Paul recounts his conversion. He will do it again in chapter 26, but this first time is special because he is talking to his people, the Jews. Paul makes the connection for them that at one point, he was just like them. They are trying to kill him, but he had, at one time, killed many. Paul speaks in a direct, honest, but longing way for his people to know, believe, and repent of their sins. They allow him to speak and listen all the way up to the moment when Paul says that Jesus instructed him to go tell the Gentiles about the gospel as well. Then, they want nothing more to do with Paul. The Jews are so against the Gentiles being a part of their religion and worship of their God, that they cannot stand to know or understand who Jesus is and how he has changed everything for them. Tragically, the Jews are so close to God, and yet they completely miss him.

Reflect:

Although Paul's past is difficult, he uses it to advance the gospel. **Do you ever struggle with letting your past define you? If so, how can the gospel provide freedom and hope?**

The Jews don't want the Gentiles to be included because they are different. **Is there anyone you would struggle to share the gospel with because they are so different from you? Or maybe you don't agree with their life choices?**

ACTS 23

Gazing intently at the high council, Paul began: “Brothers, I have always lived before God with a clear conscience!”

Instantly Ananias the high priest commanded those close to Paul to slap him on the mouth. But Paul said to him, “God will slap you, you corrupt hypocrite! What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?”

Those standing near Paul said to him, “Do you dare to insult God’s high priest?”

“I’m sorry, brothers. I didn’t realize he was the high priest,” Paul replied, “for the Scriptures say, ‘You must not speak evil of any of your rulers.’”

Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!”

This divided the council—the Pharisees against the Sadducees—for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. So there was a great uproar. Some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees jumped up and began to argue forcefully. “We see nothing wrong with him,” they shouted. “Perhaps a spirit or an angel spoke to him.” As the conflict grew more violent, the commander was afraid they would tear Paul apart. So he ordered his soldiers to go and rescue him by force and take him back to the fortress.

That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.”

The next morning a group of Jews got together and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed

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Paul. There were more than forty of them in the conspiracy. They went to the leading priests and elders and told them, “We have bound ourselves with an oath to eat nothing until we have killed Paul. So you and the high council should ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way.”

But Paul’s nephew—his sister’s son—heard of their plan and went to the fortress and told Paul. Paul called for one of the Roman officers and said, “Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him.”

So the officer did, explaining, “Paul, the prisoner, called me over and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.”

The commander took his hand, led him aside, and asked, “What is it you want to tell me?”

Paul’s nephew told him, “Some Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the high council tomorrow, pretending they want to get some more information. But don’t do it! There are more than forty men hiding along the way ready to ambush him. They have vowed not to eat or drink anything until they have killed him. They are ready now, just waiting for your consent.”

“Don’t let anyone know you told me this,” the commander warned the young man.

Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, “Get 200 soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o’clock tonight. Also take 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix.” Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

“From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings!

“This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. Then I took him to their high council to try to learn the basis of the accusations against him. I soon discovered the charge was something regarding their religious law—certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. But when I was informed of a plot to kill him,

I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you.”

So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the mounted troops took him on to Caesarea. When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix. He read it and then asked Paul what province he was from. “Cilicia,” Paul answered.

“I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive,” the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod’s headquarters.

CONFIDENCE IN THE CHAOS

It feels as though chaos has erupted as we enter chapter 23. It begins with a trial before the chief priest and other religious leaders. We learn that they are a divided group, some Sadducees and others Pharisees. Once Paul identifies himself with the Pharisees, the group goes into an uproar, completely distracting them from their original purpose. This violent disagreement leads to Paul being swept away and taken to jail. That night, the Lord comes to Paul and tells him how well he is doing. Can you even imagine? The Creator of the Universe standing before you, telling you that you have done a good job and that there is still work to be done? What an encouragement this must have been for Paul! It is an assurance that he is on track and a promise that he will see another day because he is going to continue his work in Rome. From there, we see that God will protect Paul in his journey to Rome, even when it takes several years to get there. In a crazy series of events, Paul is able to escape the angry Jews who want to kill him because the Roman soldiers and officials are willing to get him to Caesarea alive.

Reflect:

Jesus comes and tells Paul that he is doing a good job telling the Jews about the gospel and continuing to tell his testimony. **Do you feel confident and prepared to share your testimony and the gospel when the moment presents itself?** Try writing down what you would say if you were given three minutes to tell someone about God.

ACTS 24

Five days later Ananias, the high priest, arrived with some of the Jewish elders and the lawyer Tertullus, to present their case against Paul to the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented the charges against Paul in the following address to the governor:

"You have provided a long period of peace for us Jews and with foresight have enacted reforms for us. For all of this, Your Excellency, we are very grateful to you. But I don't want to bore you, so please give me your attention for only a moment. We have found this man to be a troublemaker who is constantly stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the cult known as the Nazarenes. Furthermore, he was trying to desecrate the Temple when we arrested him. You can find out the truth of our accusations by examining him yourself." Then the other Jews chimed in, declaring that everything Tertullus said was true.

The governor then motioned for Paul to speak. Paul said, "I know, sir, that you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, so I gladly present my defense before you. You can quickly discover that I arrived in Jerusalem no more than twelve days ago to worship at the Temple. My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing.

"But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets. I have the same hope in God that these men have, that he will raise both the righteous and the unrighteous. Because of this, I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and all people.

"After several years away, I returned to Jerusalem with money to aid my people and to offer sacrifices to God. My accusers

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saw me in the Temple as I was completing a purification ceremony. There was no crowd around me and no rioting. But some Jews from the province of Asia were there—and they ought to be here to bring charges if they have anything against me! Ask these men here what crime the Jewish high council found me guilty of, except for the one time I shouted out, ‘I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!’”

At that point Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, “Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case.” He ordered an officer to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. “Go away for now,” he replied. “When it is more convenient, I’ll call for you again.” He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison.

PAUL ON TRIAL

Paul is now in Caesarea and given the opportunity to make his case, he revisits the events that led to this current moment on trial. Felix, the governor of this area, is in charge of Paul's fate. He sends Paul to jail, and five days later goes to visit Paul, along with his wife Drusilla. Remember, this man is in charge of Paul's fate right now, trying to make a decision about what he should do with this man whom the Jews want dead. Paul seizes this opportunity to teach about God, giving more people the opportunity to repent of their sins and believe in the one true God. Scripture says that Paul tells of righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. Paul is very direct that God is the one true God, we are broken and sinful in need of saving, and God sent his only Son, Jesus, to die for us and conquer death. One day, we will stand before him and be judged based on whether or not we repented and obeyed. Given the chance, Paul never holds back the truth, even if the people before him could end his life.

Reflect:

The gospel message is often offensive. It requires you to admit that you are sinful and need a Savior. It requires humility. **What are ways that you need to grow in humility?**

How can you focus more on God's mission? To whom do you need to tell your story, and how do you need to serve others?

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Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities, he left for Jerusalem, where the leading priests and other Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. They asked Festus as a favor to transfer Paul to Jerusalem (planning to ambush and kill him on the way). But Festus replied that Paul was at Caesarea and he himself would be returning there soon. So he said, “Those of you in authority can return with me. If Paul has done anything wrong, you can make your accusations.”

About eight or ten days later Festus returned to Caesarea, and on the following day he took his seat in court and ordered that Paul be brought in. When Paul arrived, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn’t prove.

Paul denied the charges. “I am not guilty of any crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government,” he said.

Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, “Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there?”

But Paul replied, “No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty of harming the Jews. If I have done something worthy of death, I don’t refuse to die. But if I am innocent, no one has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!”

Festus conferred with his advisers and then replied, “Very well! You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you will go!”

A few days later King Agrippa arrived with his sister, Bernice, to pay their respects to Festus. During their stay of several days, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. “There is a prisoner here,” he told him, “whose case was left for me by Felix. When I was in Jerusalem, the leading priests and Jewish elders pressed charges against him and asked me to condemn

him. I pointed out to them that Roman law does not convict people without a trial. They must be given an opportunity to confront their accusers and defend themselves.

“When his accusers came here for the trial, I didn’t delay. I called the case the very next day and ordered Paul brought in. But the accusations made against him weren’t any of the crimes I expected. Instead, it was something about their religion and a dead man named Jesus, who Paul insists is alive. I was at a loss to know how to investigate these things, so I asked him whether he would be willing to stand trial on these charges in Jerusalem. But Paul appealed to have his case decided by the emperor. So I ordered that he be held in custody until I could arrange to send him to Caesar.”

“I’d like to hear the man myself,” Agrippa said.

And Festus replied, “You will—tomorrow!”

So the next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. Then Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are here, this is the man whose death is demanded by all the Jews, both here and in Jerusalem. But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However, since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome.

“But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no clear charge against him. So I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa, so that after we examine him, I might have something to write. For it makes no sense to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!”

GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES

Chapter 25 can be summed up in one theme—no one knows what to do with Paul. He's innocent, and yet, a large group of people all want him dead. Twenty-five years ago, a similar trial had the same issue. That trial was for Jesus, and now, here we are 25 years later, seeing the same tension play out. The Roman government doesn't want innocent blood on their hands, and they also don't want any unrest among the people. Seemingly, you cannot have both. Therefore, Paul tries to persuade them to send him to Rome (remember, Jesus came to him in a vision and said that Paul would get the chance to teach the same message to the Gentiles in Rome). Once again, chaos is happening among the people, but God's plan for Paul is still moving forward.

Reflect:

Even though today's reading seems chaotic, how is God's will still playing out? What does today's reading teach you about the will of God?

ACTS 26

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You may speak in your defense.”

So Paul, gesturing with his hand, started his defense: “I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defense today against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, for I know you are an expert on all Jewish customs and controversies. Now please listen to me patiently!

“As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. Now I am on trial because of my hope in the fulfillment of God’s promise made to our ancestors. In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel zealously worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, Your Majesty, they accuse me for having this hope! Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?

“I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus the Nazarene. Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem. Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.

“One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. About noon, Your Majesty, as I was on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.’

“‘Who are you, lord?’ I asked.

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“And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. Tell people that you have seen me, and tell them what I will show you in the future. And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God’s people, who are set apart by faith in me.’

“And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven. I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do. Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. But God has protected me right up to this present time so I can testify to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God’s light to Jews and Gentiles alike.”

Suddenly, Festus shouted, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!”

But Paul replied, “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth. And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—”

Agrippa interrupted him. “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?”

Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.”

Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. As they went out, they talked it over and agreed, “This man hasn’t done anything to deserve death or imprisonment.”

And Agrippa said to Festus, “He could have been set free if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar.”

PAUL'S TESTIMONY TO THE GENTILES

Given the chance to defend his case, Paul once again shares his testimony. Acts chapter 26 is another version of Paul's conversion from his perspective. First, he acknowledges that he was a committed Pharisee, living a strict Jewish lifestyle all of his life. After his conversion, it is made clear to him by God that the Good News of Jesus is not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles too. The audience follows Paul's teaching until he states clearly that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, implying that we also will rise with him one day, both Jewish and Gentile believers. The gospel is for the whole world—every nation. This is difficult for his Jewish audience, who identify as God's chosen people. So, they write Paul off as crazy. He is definitely innocent, but they think he was crazy. Therefore, they send him on to Rome.

Reflect:

It is challenging to share the gospel because it is inherently offensive. **Where does your desire to tell others about Jesus come from? If you lack that desire, why do you think that is the case?**

TIMELINE OF ACTS

Jesus' Ascension

**Receiving the
Holy Spirit**

**Early
Church Begins**

**Persecution of
the Church**

**Saul Encounters
Jesus on
the Road
to Damascus**

**The Church
Expands to
the Gentiles**

**James Killed,
Peter Rescued**

**Paul's
1st Journey**

**Paul's
2nd Journey**

**Paul's
3rd Journey**

Paul Arrested

Paul on Trial

**Paul's Journey
to Rome**

ACTS 27

When the time came, we set sail for Italy. Paul and several other prisoners were placed in the custody of a Roman officer named Julius, a captain of the Imperial Regiment. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was also with us. We left on a ship whose home port was Adramyttium on the northwest coast of the province of Asia; it was scheduled to make several stops at ports along the coast of the province.

The next day when we docked at Sidon, Julius was very kind to Paul and let him go ashore to visit with friends so they could provide for his needs. Putting out to sea from there, we encountered strong headwinds that made it difficult to keep the ship on course, so we sailed north of Cyprus between the island and the mainland. Keeping to the open sea, we passed along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, landing at Myra, in the province of Lycia. There the commanding officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria that was bound for Italy, and he put us on board.

We had several days of slow sailing, and after great difficulty we finally neared Cnidus. But the wind was against us, so we sailed across to Crete and along the sheltered coast of the island, past the cape of Salmone. We struggled along the coast with great difficulty and finally arrived at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for sea travel because it was so late in the fall, and Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it.

"Men," he said, "I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on—shipwreck, loss of cargo, and danger to our lives as well." But the officer in charge of the prisoners listened more to the ship's captain and the owner than to Paul. And since Fair Havens was an exposed harbor—a poor place to spend the winter—most of the crew wanted to go on to Phoenix, farther up the coast of Crete, and spend the winter there. Phoenix was a good harbor with only a southwest and northwest exposure.

When a light wind began blowing from the south, the sailors thought they could make it. So they pulled up anchor and sailed close to the shore of Crete. But the weather changed abruptly, and a wind of typhoon strength (called a “northeaster”) burst across the island and blew us out to sea. The sailors couldn’t turn the ship into the wind, so they gave up and let it run before the gale.

We sailed along the sheltered side of a small island named Cauda, where with great difficulty we hoisted aboard the lifeboat being towed behind us. Then the sailors bound ropes around the hull of the ship to strengthen it. They were afraid of being driven across to the sandbars of Syrtis off the African coast, so they lowered the sea anchor to slow the ship and were driven before the wind.

The next day, as gale-force winds continued to batter the ship, the crew began throwing the cargo overboard. The following day they even took some of the ship’s gear and threw it overboard. The terrible storm raged for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone.

No one had eaten for a long time. Finally, Paul called the crew together and said, “Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Crete. You would have avoided all this damage and loss. But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, and he said, ‘Don’t be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What’s more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.’ So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said. But we will be shipwrecked on an island.”

About midnight on the fourteenth night of the storm, as we were being driven across the Sea of Adria, the sailors sensed land was near. They dropped a weighted line and found that the water was 120 feet deep. But a little later they measured again and found it was only 90 feet deep. At this rate they were afraid we would soon be driven against the rocks along the shore, so they threw out four anchors from the back of the ship and prayed for daylight.

Then the sailors tried to abandon the ship; they lowered the lifeboat as though they were going to put out anchors from the front of the ship. But Paul said to the commanding officer and the soldiers, “You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard.” So the soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat and let it drift away.

Just as day was dawning, Paul urged everyone to eat. “You have been so worried that you haven’t touched food for two weeks,” he said. “Please eat something now for your own good. For not a hair of your heads will perish.” Then he took some bread, gave thanks to God before them all, and broke off a piece and ate it. Then everyone was encouraged and began to eat—all 276 of us who were on board. After eating, the crew lightened the ship further by throwing the cargo of wheat overboard.

When morning dawned, they didn’t recognize the coastline, but they saw a bay with a beach and wondered if they could get to shore by running the ship aground. So they cut off the anchors and left them in the sea. Then they lowered the rudders, raised the foresail, and headed toward shore. But they hit a shoal and ran the ship aground too soon. The bow of the ship stuck fast, while the stern was repeatedly smashed by the force of the waves and began to break apart.

The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners to make sure they didn’t swim ashore and escape. But the commanding officer wanted to spare Paul, so he didn’t let them carry out their plan. Then he ordered all who could swim to jump overboard first and make for land. The others held on to planks or debris from the broken ship. So everyone escaped safely to shore.

PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ROME



PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ROME

Paul sets sail for Rome, weathers a dangerous storm, and is eventually shipwrecked. Whether they lighten the boat or strengthen the ship, they are still in the middle of the storm. The storm is disorienting and scary, but God is present through Paul being there. Because God's favor is upon him, that blessing extends to all who are with him, and all 276 lives are saved. Paul's faithful presence acts as a light, anchor, and source of blessing to those around him. While the people on the ship are disoriented, Paul is discerning and knows that trust in God is the best response.

Reflect:

Even though Paul is in difficult circumstances, God's grace and favor are still at work in his life, and that blessing extends to those around him. **How have you experienced this in your life? When have you been encouraged by another believer's faith in the face of hardship?**

Paul trusted God fully with everything, even his own life. **In what areas do you need to grow in your trust in the Lord? Where are you tempted to believe that you need to hold on to control and not let God handle it for you?**

ACTS 28

Once we were safe on shore, we learned that we were on the island of Malta. The people of the island were very kind to us. It was cold and rainy, so they built a fire on the shore to welcome us.

As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, bit him on the hand. The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand and said to each other, “A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live.” But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw that he wasn’t harmed, they changed their minds and decided he was a god.

Near the shore where we landed was an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us and treated us kindly for three days. As it happened, Publius’s father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him. Then all the other sick people on the island came and were healed. As a result we were showered with honors, and when the time came to sail, people supplied us with everything we would need for the trip.

It was three months after the shipwreck that we set sail on another ship that had wintered at the island—an Alexandrian ship with the twin gods as its figurehead. Our first stop was Syracuse, where we stayed three days. From there we sailed across to Rhegium. A day later a south wind began blowing, so the following day we sailed up the coast to Puteoli. There we found some believers, who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.

Jesus’ Ascension

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to Rome**

The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us at the Forum on the Appian Way. Others joined us at The Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he was encouraged and thanked God.

When we arrived in Rome, Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier.

Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders. He said to them, "Brothers, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Roman government, even though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors. The Romans tried me and wanted to release me, because they found no cause for the death sentence. But when the Jewish leaders protested the decision, I felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no desire to press charges against my own people. I asked you to come here today so we could get acquainted and so I could explain to you that I am bound with this chain because I believe that the hope of Israel—the Messiah—has already come."

They replied, "We have had no letters from Judea or reports against you from anyone who has come here. But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about this movement is that it is denounced everywhere."

So a time was set, and on that day a large number of people came to Paul's lodging. He explained and testified about the Kingdom of God and tried to persuade them about Jesus from the Scriptures. Using the law of Moses and the books of the prophets, he spoke to them from morning until evening. Some were persuaded by the things he said, but others did not believe. And after they had argued back and forth among themselves, they left with this final word from Paul: "The Holy Spirit was right when he said to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet,

'Go and say to this people:
When you hear what I say,
 you will not understand.
When you see what I do,
 you will not comprehend.
For the hearts of these people are hardened,
 and their ears cannot hear,

and they have closed their eyes—
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.'

So I want you to know that this salvation from God has also been offered to the Gentiles, and they will accept it."

For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

At the end of this book, two things happen—Paul makes it to Rome and continues to share the gospel. All along, this is what Jesus wanted. Through the suffering and the chaos of the journey, ultimately God's will plays out and the gospel spreads further and further because of Paul's obedience. It feels like the story ends abruptly, but the story is not about Paul. It's about the world knowing who Jesus is and the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the early believers. We can thank God for the early believers who were willing to sacrifice their lives in order for the gospel to be spread. Because of those people, the news of Jesus spread to the world, and we get to benefit! How crazy is that? The story is still multiplying through the Church, through believers, through us.

OLD TESTAMENT



CREATION



PATRIARCHS



EXODUS



LAW



CONQUEST



JUDGES



KINGDOM



EXILE



RETURN



SILENCE



JESUS



CHURCH ON MISSION & NEW HEAVEN & NEW EARTH

NEW TESTAMENT



Reflect:

Paul was committed to building and expanding the Kingdom of God. **In what ways are you following Paul's example of obedience and participating in God's Kingdom being spread?**

TEACHING NOTES

TEACHING NOTES

TEACHING NOTES

TEACHING NOTES

TEACHING NOTES

TEACHING NOTES

I M M E R S E

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